
ADRIFT AT ARMAGEDDON

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Peter H. Denton. *The ABC of Armageddon: Bertrand Russell on Science, Religion, and the Next War, 1919–1938*. Albany: State U. of New York P., 2001. Pp. xxvi, 174. US\$54.50; pb, \$20.95.

The first few pages of Peter H. Denton's book, *The ABC of Armageddon: Bertrand Russell on Science, Religion, and the Next War, 1919–1938*, make plain the purpose that the book is supposed to accomplish. Bertrand Russell, according to Denton, was like many of his contemporaries profoundly influenced by the horrors of World War I, the "war to end wars." Far from rendering the world a safer and more secure place, this war left Russell and many others with a profound dread of the next war, a war sure to be even more terrible. As a result,

Russell undertook the task of analyzing and writing about what had happened, and what science and technology meant for post-War industrial civilization, in the hope that a popular primer of impending disaster—an ABC of Armageddon—might forestall what seemed, at times, to be an inexorable outcome. (P. xiii)

Russell tried to identify the causes of that First terrible war—causes which, Denton implies, related to science's relationship with modernity—with an eye to preventing future wars. Denton, an Assistant Professor of History, Philosophy, and Religious Studies at the University of Winnipeg, seeks in this book to undertake a critique of Russell's argument, in hopes that the result will be an even stronger analysis. The resulting "ABC of Armageddon" would, if Denton succeeds, provide a better opportunity to prevent future cataclysms than Russell's own "ABC" did (p. ix).

Such was Denton's intention, as far as I was able to discern from the opening pages of his book. It's a very good idea for a book. Understanding science and "waging peace" were both activities that occupied much of Russell's time and energy throughout his life. Moreover, few authors attempt either to fit Russell's various interests together in general or to deal with Russell's political thought in particular. An author who could accomplish both, as Denton would have done had he carried out the task he set for himself, would have completed a worthy

task. Unfortunately, the book accomplishes neither the purpose Denton lays out at the start nor any other discernible purpose, leaving the reader rather adrift.

In attempting to carry out his stated purpose, Denton assumes the role of a political theorist towards Russell's work. That is, he attempts to lay out an argument by Russell and critique it, so as to leave behind a stronger argument in his wake. This role is distinct from the role of a historian, which would involve situating Russell's views in the personal and social context out of which they emerged. The distinction is important, as Denton's book is simply a failure as a work of history. Denton provides the barest minimum of facts about Russell's life; moreover, what facts he does introduce he treats in a manner sure to leave any newcomer to Russell dazed and confused. For example, he thrice mentions Ottoline Morrell without ever stopping to identify her or to explain her relationship with Russell (pp. 43, 47, 102). Dora Russell appears in a footnote, but despite the fact that she was married to Russell throughout most of the interwar period (the time period in Russell's life on which the book focuses), she is never so much as identified as Russell's second wife (p. 136, n. 5). Denton even mentions the Russell Archives in the text without bothering to explain what they are; as valuable as the archives are, one can hardly assume that every literate person who might pick up this book already knows about them (p. 103).¹

Whatever merit this book possesses, it possesses due to the strength of Denton's critique of Russell's "ABC of Armageddon". In order for the critique to make any sense, however, Denton must first clearly identify the argument by Russell at which his critique is directed. Despite the promises made at the start of the book, this argument never really emerges. And no critique makes sense without a clear account of the argument at which it is directed.

Denton attributes to Russell the intention of discovering what modern society must do to avoid repeating the horrors of the Great War. Through Russell, Denton locates the cause of these horrors in what he calls the problem of "the old savage in the new civilization".² This problem came into being

¹ Some complaints can be properly directed against the book regardless of whether it is treated as intellectual history or political theory. Its citations to the Russell studies literature, for example, are highly inadequate. It is understandable that Denton would not be able to cite the second volume of Ray Monk's biography of Russell, *Bertrand Russell: the Ghost of Madness* (2000), which presumably came out while *The ABC of Armageddon* was at press. But it is inexcusable that he fails to cite Philip Ironside's *The Social and Political Thought of Bertrand Russell: the Development of an Aristocratic Liberalism* (New York: Cambridge U. P., 1996) or the recent symposium on Russell's ethics and politics in the journal *Philosophy of the Social Sciences* (26 [June, Sept. 1996]). Moreover, Alan Ryan's *Bertrand Russell: a Political Life* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1988) receives mention only in a single brief footnote. Even a theorist with a completely original constructive project involving Russell should display some knowledge of those who have worked in the same general area before.

² Denton borrows the term, not from Russell, but from the title of a book by Raymond Fosdick

because “moral development had not kept pace with technological progress, thereby putting increasingly dangerous weapons in the hands of the same old savage who had already shown himself incapable of handling them” (p. xx). The modern era, with its extraordinary science and technology, requires a new social ethic, without which humanity will ultimately destroy itself. The ethics of premodern times thus constitute the primary obstacle to the prevention of future wars, on the account Denton attributes to Russell.

So far, so good. Unfortunately, Denton devotes most of his time and attention, not to this claim, but to a completely different claim he also attributes to Russell. “Of all the major factors”, Denton writes, that Russell “identified as contributing to the likelihood of the Next War the most compelling problem for Russell was that presented by the ‘mechanistic outlook’ of contemporary society” (pp. xiii–xiv). The “mechanistic outlook”, the dominant social ethic of modern times, was in fact the product of modern society, not a remnant from humanity’s pre-modern past. Moreover, Denton makes plain that the primary danger Russell saw in the mechanistic outlook was not the fact that it led to war. Institutional changes alone might save humanity, but would be insufficient to negate the evils this outlook produced. “The survival of civilization through socialism and internationalism might be accomplished by the use of sufficient force, but Russell was concerned about the kind of society that would then result” (p. xiv).

Thus, Denton asserts both that Russell wanted to prevent war by helping humanity outgrow its pre-modern ethic, and that Russell’s main concern was saving humanity from totally different dangers posed by a completely modern ethic. Denton does not seem to recognize the contradictory nature of these two claims, as evidenced by the fact that both appear side by side in his introduction. He further confuses the situation by occasionally running the two claims together, as when he writes that Russell “cast the problem of the ‘old savage’ in terms of the struggle between humanity and industrialism, or between the individual and the machine” (p. xiv). If the old savage had a mechanistic outlook, however, he wouldn’t be an old savage any more.

While Denton devotes significant space to both of the (mutually exclusive) claims he attributes to Russell, it is the second claim—that the mechanistic outlook poses serious dangers to civilization apart from the threat of war—that receives the bulk of his attention. This need not prove fatal to the book. Granted, the book’s title doesn’t fit this topic very well; if Russell did write an “ABC” dealing with the mechanistic outlook, it had little to do with Armageddon. Nevertheless, the investigation by Denton of Russell’s argument regarding

this claim might well prove sound. All Denton would have to do in presenting the argument is to explain (using Russell) what the “mechanistic outlook” is and then outline the evils it generates in the modern world. The stage would then be set (again, using Russell) for the constructive project of generating a new social ethic for modernity that would possess none of these defects. Unfortunately, Denton fails to offer anything persuasive with regard to this task.

Denton never clearly defines the “mechanistic outlook” that he asserts Russell hated so much. He comes closest to providing a definition on several occasions when he equates “mechanistic” with “utilitarian” (e.g., pp. 19, 32, 33). Perhaps the modern social ethic he and Russell fear is utilitarianism. But the picture Denton offers of utilitarianism does not even qualify as a caricature of that philosophy; at times, it constitutes a downright falsification. For example, at one point he argues that Russell “felt ‘special measures’ had to be undertaken” to save liberty “from being eradicated entirely by the utilitarian attitude that characterized industrialism.” He then argues as follows:

Russell held that political ideas needed to be expressed in terms of the lives of individuals rather than in terms of the collective group to produce a truly ‘good’ society. Good and bad societies may be evaluated only on the basis of how the individual is treated. What was more, he believed that minority opinions and ideas within a society were actually the source of constructive change and not just of instability, for a tyranny of the majority, whether intellectual or political, led to stagnation and not progress. (P. 32)

The position Denton attributes to Russell here is quite attractive. But there’s one small problem—it’s a completely utilitarian position. Bentham would have been the first to agree that society must dispense with vague nostrums about “the good of society” and spell out good and evil in terms of the consequences for the individuals who make up that society. And the idea that minority voices might serve constructive social purposes comes straight out of Mill’s *On Liberty*. As Mill’s godson, Russell would surely have gotten utilitarianism right, whatever disagreements he may have had with it; Denton, unfortunately, fails to do this, and attributes to Russell the same inability.³

Thus, Denton provides neither a fair definition of the “mechanistic outlook” Russell supposedly feared nor an explanation why Russell or anyone else should regard it as a threat. He is therefore left to hint that Russell was angry at something about the modern era without being able to articulate in a sustained way

³ Russell, to be sure, could be grotesquely unfair to philosophies with which he disagreed, such as pragmatism. Incidentally, Denton only mentions pragmatism once, and then only to repeat without comment Russell’s caricature of that philosophy (pp. 32–3). Pragmatism has long been closely associated with the “modern” age, as Russell clearly recognized. Any analysis of Russell’s views on the modern world view that neglects pragmatism—as Denton’s does—is sure to be incomplete.

what it was. Russell wrote many “ABC”s, and may well have written one on Armageddon or other dangers of the modern era; but Denton never offers a clear picture of any of them.

Denton ends the book by returning to the question of “the old savage in the new civilization” and the threat of war. At the end of Russell’s life, Denton argues, the philosopher found an “operational metaphysic” through his campaigning for nuclear disarmament. This metaphysic provided “a world view that could compel or persuade the old savage to turn away from technological self-destruction.” This world view consisted of “his conviction that living things are intended to live and to reproduce, not merely to die by accident or by design in a nuclear blast” (p. 124). Russell no doubt held this conviction very strongly, but it’s a conviction with such obvious merit it’s unclear why some special “metaphysic” would be needed to back it up. Utilitarianism, for example, provides ample grounding for such a conviction despite Denton’s obvious distaste for it. In this manner, a thoroughly confused book ends on a thoroughly confused note.
