A CLERISY OF EXCEPTIONAL INDIVIDUALS?

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Philip Ironside. *The Social and Political Thought of Bertrand Russell: the Development of an Aristocratic Liberalism.* Cambridge and New York: Cambridge U. P., 1996. Pp. xi + 280. US$49.95.

Ironside's book is based on his PH.D. thesis, "The Development of Bertrand Russell's Social and Political Thought, 1895–1938", which was presented at the University of Sussex in 1987. Although the title of the book does not say anything about time limits, a synopsis of the book on the first page says that it covers the development of Russell's social and political thought between the years 1896 and 1938. The book has an interesting first chapter, "A Young Man of Character", that deals with Russell's family background, his upbringing and education. There is an introduction in which the author declares the aim of this book, which is "to restore Bertrand Russell's social and political thought to its intellectual and cultural context, to trace its often complicated development, and at the same time to provide an explanation of just why he came to hold the views he did" (pp. 3–4). A few lines below he claims that "Russell's political 'progress' is shown to be a reluctant and tortuous process which went against the grain of his essentially aristocratic Liberalism", and he proceeds to define the new label "aristocratic Liberalism". He says that Russell's 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 civilization was largely dependent on the ability of exceptional individuals to function as a clerisy—in other words, to protect, provide, and perpetuate an acceptable culture. A clerisy of exceptional individuals: was that what Russell had in mind? I have devoted most of my time and energy on reading Russell's writings on religion and the philosophy of mathematics, but I'm not totally unfamiliar with his writings on social and political questions, so it came as a surprise to me that this was what Russell had in mind as a solution to the problems that Western society struggled with.

Ironside's approach is that of an intellectual historian and not that of a philosopher or political scientist. This has its disadvantages and its advantages. Ironside does not present a critical reading of Russell's writings on social and political questions, so the philosophical aspects are more or less left aside. The advantage is, according to the author, that

> 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. (P. 7)

This sounds interesting, but can the idea of a clerisy of exceptional individuals be found in Russell's writings? There is no doubt that Russell was concerned about the individual's rights in society, but I have never seen him defend the idea that a group of exceptional individuals should run society.

Russell's writings on social and political questions can be seen in the light of his ideas about the good life. But in order to get to the roots of these ideas, we also have to be acquainted with Russell's ethical and religious views. The author does not say much about the connection between Russell's social and political views and his ethical and religious views. There are different ways of looking at the relationship between Russell's social and political beliefs and his ethical and religious beliefs. One can see these pairings as independent of each other, or dependent on each other, either in the sense that his social and political beliefs were derived from his ethical and religious beliefs, or the other way around. In the case of many pious Victorian politicians, their political beliefs seem to have depended on their religious convictions. This was the case with Gladstone and Russell's grandfather and also his grandmother, whose religious and ethical beliefs had a strong influence on Russell's own personal religion. The problem Russell faced when he preached his own philosophy of life, which emphasized the importance of universal love and brotherhood, was that he sounded like an Evangelical minister, but he wasn't able to encourage belief in a good God that would take care of all the injustices that people suffer here on earth. Russell was as passionate in his defence of the individual's right to form his own opinions as Luther was. Russell held his ethical and religious beliefs with the same kind of religious fervor as Luther did, but whereas Luther could refer to the Holy Scriptures as the basis of his beliefs, Russell could only hope that when he preached his philosophy of the good life, which was to be inspired by love and guided by knowledge, most people shared his norms and values.

Apart from the fact that the author does not succeed in proving his main thesis, there is much to wonder about in what he says. In the introduction he says that Russell first achieved prominence as a mathematician (p. 1). It is a quite common misunderstanding that Russell was a mathematician. He did study three years of mathematics and was well acquainted with the history of mathematics and the philosophical problems related to the concepts of conti-

nuity and infinity, but that doesn't qualify him as a mathematician and he never claimed that he was one. He made important contributions to logic and the philosophy of mathematics, but that is different.

I only mention this because I happen to have some idea about what Russell did in the field of philosophy of mathematics, but I suspect that the author may have committed similar misjudgments concerning things I'm less acquainted with. Frankly speaking, there are many sentences I don't understand, having to do with his use of adjectives like "Millian", "Wellsian", "Gladstonian", etc. For a reader with a good background in English political history it might not be a problem, but when I read that:

> 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. (P. 5)

I can't help asking myself what on earth he is talking about. There are many passages like this that are open to a wide interpretation, since they contain very little factual information. I find this style more literary than scientific. Ironside's comments are mostly of a psychological nature although he does not apply the vocabulary of any well-known psychologists, except when he applies Jung's theory of individuation to Russell's personal development. However, not much comes of it, and he might as well have left it out.

When it comes to the question of evaluating Russell's social and political thought—both with regard to its importance at the time it was formulated and its present relevance—Ironside leaves the reader wondering. His contextual analysis of Russell's social and political thinking ends in 1938 apparently because:

> 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. (P. 6)

Ironside's reasons for ending his investigation in 1938 don't impress me at all, and I suspect that the real motivation has more to do with the fact that his thesis ends in 1938 than with anything else. He has nothing to say about Russell's Reith Lectures, published in 1949 as *Authority and the Individual*, and nothing about *Human Society in Ethics and Politics* of 1954. Although

there may or may not be any big differences between his views in *Power* and his later writings, Russell was certainly not "impervious to new ideas". The fact that Russell became more international and less concerned with the British context, should make Russell more interesting, rather than less so, to an international audience. His campaign against the spread of atomic weapons, his involvement in the Cuban Crisis, his fight against the Vietnam War, etc., I find more interesting and of greater relevance to our present situation than what he wrote and did before the Second World War.

The main criticism I have of this book is that Ironside shows more concern with the context of Russell's ideas rather than the content and relevance of those ideas. Apart from this, I learned a lot about many other things in English intellectual history.[1]

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