

“Science of Social Structure”: Bertrand Russell as Communist and Marxist

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THE FOLLOWING PASSAGE has never before been published in English:¹

SCIENCE OF SOCIAL STRUCTURE.

Before I embark on the detail of this course of lectures, I wish to state in a few words my own position on the questions with which we shall be concerned.

I am a Communist. I believe that Communism, combined with developed industry, is capable of bringing to mankind more happiness and well-being, and a higher development of the arts and sciences, than have ever hitherto existed in the world. I therefore desire to see the whole world become communistic in its economic structure.

I hold also, what was taught by Karl Marx, that there are scientific laws regulating the development of societies, and that any attempt to ignore these laws is bound to end in failure. Marx taught what his nominal disciples have forgotten, that communism was to be the consummation of industrialism, and did not believe it to be possible otherwise. It was in this emphasis upon laws of development that he differed from previous religious and Utopian

¹ I am indebted to the editor for introducing me to this document and for inviting me to comment upon it. [It is here printed from Russell's manuscript which survived in Dora Russell's papers and is now in the Russell Archives. First publication was in Chinese translation as the Preface to [*Five Lectures on Science of Social Structure*] (Peking: Morning Post, 1921).—Ed.]

communists. There have been Christian communists ever since Christianity began, but they have had little effect, because economic structure was not ripe for communism. If, here in China, a government were to decree communism tomorrow, communism would not result from the decree, because there would be resistances and incapacities in the habits of the people, and because the material conditions in the way of machinery etc. do not exist. The power of governments is strictly limited to what is technically and psychologically possible at any moment in a given population. For success in social reconstruction, it is vitally necessary, not merely to understand the ethical purposes at which we should aim, but also to know the scientific laws determining what is possible. Miss Black's lectures (which I shall assume you have all heard) are dealing with these laws as applied to the past; I shall be dealing with them as applied to the present and the near future. Ethics without science is useless; we must know not only what is good, but also what is possible and what are the means for achieving it.

The passage first appeared in Chinese where it served as a Preface to five of the lectures which Russell delivered while he was in China with Dora Black in 1920–21. These lectures were the basis of their joint work, *The Prospects of Industrial Civilization* (1923). The opening words of the second paragraph of this Preface, "I am a Communist", are not too surprising. Until the comparatively recent past independent and original thinkers have been ready enough to identify publicly with Order or Progress: Right or Left: Liberalism or Socialism. After all, John Ruskin proudly announced: "I myself am a Communist of the old school—reddest of the red."² It served to attract attention without leading to the scaffold or to Père Lachaise. Russell spent quite a lot of time deciding where he stood and declaring where that was publicly. Before he announced that he was a Communist he had said that he was finished with Liberalism: that he was a pacifist: that he was a Guild Socialist and that he was for Soviet Power in Britain.³ It must be borne in mind that the term "Communist" could accommodate men and women who were libertarians just as readily as it could accommodate friends of revolutionary discipline and the dictatorship of the proletariat. Thus, Russell's insistence that he wanted to see the whole world become Communist is open to more than one interpretation. However, when he adds that he wants Communism "combined with developed industry" he is evidently moving towards the classic Marxist tradition.

² J. Ruskin, *Fors Clavigera*, Letter VII, p. 2 (1871 ed.).

³ R. Harrison, "Russell: from Liberalism to Socialism?", *Russell*, n.s. 6 (Summer 1986): 5–38.

Russell continues: "I hold also, what was taught by Karl Marx, that there are scientific laws regulating the development of societies and that any attempt to ignore these laws is bound to end in failure." It is this sentence, along with those sentences which directly follow it, which give this Preface its remarkable interest and its exceptional importance. Russell appears to be identifying himself not merely with Communism, but with Marxism. Of course, Marxism is also a problematic concept, but it is neither as vague nor as unsettled in its meaning as is "Communism". Outside this Preface there is little evidence that Russell believed that there were laws, akin to the laws to be found in natural science, that govern historical development whether Marxist or otherwise. If we examine the work which Russell published either just before or just after he delivered these lectures the avowal in this Preface appears decidedly odd. In *Roads to Freedom* (1918), completed just before his imprisonment, he anticipates the distinction which is made here between Marx and his "Utopian" predecessors. (Incidentally, Marx himself insisted that this was the only context in which he laid claim to the title of "Scientific Socialist".⁴) But Russell considered that Marx's merit was diminished by his underestimation of the strength of nationalism: by his failure to see that the polarizing effect of the concentration of capital was diminished through the spread of share ownership: by his expectation of the increasing immiserization of labour which had proved to be mistaken outside the tropics: and by his underestimation of the social importance of "the skilled worker of the present day [who] is an aristocrat in the world of labour".⁵

In *The Practice and Theory of Bolshevism* (1920) Russell wrote: "... a general theory of history is likely, at best, to be only true on the whole and in the main. The dogmatic character of Marxian Communism finds support in the supposed philosophic basis of the doctrine; it has the fixed certainty of Catholic theology, not the changing fluidity and sceptical practicality of modern science." He then immediately conceded: "Treated as a practical approximation, not as an exact metaphysical law, the materialistic conception of history has a very large measure of truth."⁶ But a few pages later he complained about the narrow, hedonistic assumptions which he thought underpinned the whole approach.

⁴ Marx on Bakunin, "A Neglected Text", ed. H. Meyer, *Etudes de Marxologie*, no. 2 (1959): 113.

⁵ *Roads to Freedom* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1918), p. 25, for Marx and the Utopians. For the criticisms, see pp. 43–4. Also pp. 154–5 where Russell anticipates at least one of E.H. Carr's detections of flaws in formal logic to be found in the *Communist Manifesto*. (E.H. Carr, *Studies in Revolution* [London: Macmillan, 1950], pp. 29–30.)

⁶ Pp. 80–1 of the 2nd ed. (London: Allen and Unwin, 1949).

"... To Marx, who inherited eighteenth-century rationalist psychology from the British orthodox economists, self-enrichment seemed the natural aim of a man's political actions. But modern psychology has dived much deeper into the ocean of insanity upon which the little barque of human reason insecurely floats. The intellectual optimism of a bygone age is no longer possible to the modern student of human nature. Yet it lingers in Marxism making Marxians rigid and Procrustean in their treatment of the life of instinct. Of this rigidity the materialistic conception of history is a prominent instance."⁷

In *The Problem of China* (1922), written directly after his return from that country, Russell's interpretation seems to be remote from the Marxist tradition at most of the salient points. Thus, at the outset he declares that *cultural* considerations are more important than economic or political ones.⁸ He goes on to insist upon the importance of diffusion in the history of civilizations.⁹ Marx's interpretation is notoriously unilinear. The German acknowledged diffusion only when he had to in the course of detailed and specific analysis. However, this generally unilinear approach by Marx is apparently interrupted at one point—a fascinating one from the standpoint of this discussion. In the famous "Introduction" to the *Critique of Political Economy* (1859), Marx asserted: "In broad outlines we can designate the Asiatic, the ancient, the feudal, and the modern bourgeois methods of production as so many epochs in the progress of the economic formation of society."¹⁰

What did Marx mean by the Asiatic mode of production? It seems incongruous. It looks like the intrusion of a geographical category into a socio-economic series. This has led some Marxists to suggest that we should indeed read the term "Asiatic" anthropologically: it's really a reference to primitive communism.¹⁰ This seems as implausible as the suggestion that when Marx referred to the Lumpen Proletariat he was not departing from his usual method of characterizing social formations, but intended to refer only to the unemployed. It seems to me that Russell was far closer to what Marx must have meant when in *The*

Problem of China he asserted:

China belongs, in the dawn of its history, to the great river empires, of which Egypt and Babylonia contributed to our origins, by the influence which they had upon the Greeks and Jews. Just as these civilizations were rendered possible by the rich alluvial soil of the Nile, the Euphrates, and the Tigris, so the original civilization of China was rendered possible by the Yellow River. Even in the time of Confucius, the Chinese Empire did not stretch far either to south or north of the Yellow River. But in spite of this similarity in physical and economic circumstances, there was very little in common between the mental outlook of the Chinese and that of the Egyptians and Babylonians. Lao-Tze and Confucius, who both belong to the sixth century B.C., have already the characteristics which we should regard as distinctive of the modern Chinese. People who attribute everything to economic causes would be hard put to it to account for the differences between the ancient Chinese and the ancient Egyptians and Babylonians.¹¹

Here we have Russell clearly distancing himself from vulgar Marxism. At the same time we see him anticipating the great debate concerning Marxism and Asia: the hydraulic civilizations upon whose "foundations" arose "Oriental despotisms".¹²

If it is correct to recall what Russell had to say concerning Marx and Marxism in the books which he published around the time he spent in China, a special importance must attach to *The Prospects of Industrial Civilization* (1923). This was the book to which this Preface was supposed to be directly related. This was the book in which Russell's socialism appeared at its most unequivocal. It presents special difficulties for those who wish to follow Halévy in placing Russell among "the individualists and libertarians, not among the socialists". But even if the *Prospects* was the most Marxist offering for which Russell was ever responsible, it was far from being unequivocal. In it Marx was accused of thinking of the transition from the present system to socialism in terms of a "schematic simplicity".¹³ The points at which Marx's predictions had turned out to be at least partly mistaken were enumerated at considerable length.¹⁴ As with the *History of Western Philosophy* it was a work in which Marx was acknowledged with sympathetic

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 85.

⁸ B. Russell, *The Problem of China*, 2nd impression (London: Allen & Unwin, 1966), p. 10.

⁹ It should be made clear that Russell came out unequivocally for international socialism, e.g. on p. 184. But on the next page he argued: "Contacts between different civilizations have often in the past proved to be landmarks in human progress. Greece learnt from Egypt, Rome from Greece, the Arabs from the Roman Empire, medieval Europe from the Arabs, and Renaissance Europe from the Byzantines."

¹⁰ V. Kiernan, "History", in D. McLellan, ed., *Marx: the First Hundred Years* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1983), p. 73.

¹¹ *The Problem of China*, p. 187.

¹² Héléne Carrère d'Encausse and S.R. Schram, *Marxism and Asia* (London: Allen Lane, 1969).

¹³ B. Russell in collaboration with D. Russell, *The Prospects of Industrial Civilization* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1923), p. 105.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 105–6.

respect.¹⁵ But no serious critic could describe it as "Marxist". If Russell had placed this Preface at the front of the *Prospects*, he would have been charged—and rightly—with *self-contradiction*.

How then are we to explain this strange Preface?

First, we must notice that Russell entices the reader into describing him as a Marxist without explicitly calling himself one. His Marxism is not bold and unqualified as his Communism is. Indeed, he is at some pains to distinguish his position from those whom he refers to as the "nominal followers" of Marx: those who ignore the Master's requirements for requisite levels of economic and cultural development. And this is spelt out unambiguously with respect to China. On Marxist principles Communism was not and would not for a long time to come be a serious possibility in China. No wonder that the leader of the Long March, the champion of the Great Leap Forward and then of the Cultural Revolution, who was among those who heard Russell lecture, was disappointed.¹⁶ He would not be stirred by such academic and Menshevik opinions concerning the prospects of revolution. He would not be impressed by Russell insisting on the "laws" of social development if all that amounted to was a reiteration of the old maxim that Ought implies Can. (The last words of the Preface have little more substance.) This does not add up to "Scientism" as defined and condemned by Karl Popper in *The Poverty of Historicism* (1957).

Second, this Preface has to be read in the context of Russell's habit of trying to please his wives and mistresses, not by being dishonest about his opinions, but by being extravagant or economical with the truth as the case might require. Having quarrelled violently with Dora about Bolshevism before they left for China, he certainly wanted to repair bridges as far as possible.¹⁷ He started to do this on the boat where his lecture on Bolshevism outraged and infuriated the representatives of respectable society.¹⁸ With or without Dora, the imp in Russell might have been tempted by the chance to annoy the complacent businessmen and government officials. But Dora's enjoyment of the occasion must have helped. But if he would answer to the requirements

of the imp, he would also respond to the expectations of courteous and generous hosts. The Chinese who had invited him wanted him to counteract the allegedly conservative influence of John Dewey.¹⁹ There were among them those who must have looked to him as a former political prisoner and acquaintance of Lenin to offer them an exhilarating revolutionary perspective. Some of them were quite explicit about what they wanted. Russell had the impression that most of them were Marxists.²⁰ A good teacher changes the opinions of his students; but he takes account of those opinions before he starts to change them.

Thus, the Preface does not require us to imagine that Russell was, even briefly, a Marxist. His proximity to Marx and Marxism varied repeatedly over the course of his long life. Perhaps it was never closer than when he wrote this piece and worked with Dora on what became the *Prospects*. It certainly constitutes a fresh difficulty for those who wish that Russell was always "really" a Liberal and never a Socialist or Communist.

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¹⁵ B. Russell, *History of Western Philosophy* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1946), pp. 813–14.

¹⁶ Han Suyin, *The Morning Deluge: Mao Tsetung and the Chinese Revolution 1893–1953* (London: Cape, 1972), pp. 96–7. "The soft, non-violent kind of Communism Russell preaches is good for Capitalism, it can never achieve Socialism", said Mao in December 1919 [i.e. 1920].

¹⁷ B. Russell, *The Autobiography*, Vol. II: 1914–1944 (London: Allen and Unwin, 1968), p. 124.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 125.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 136. It's the letter by Johnson Yuan to Russell, 6th Oct. [Nov] 1920.

²⁰ B. Russell, *The Problem of China*, p. 175.