

# Reviews

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## Russell's politics

by Royden Harrison

Alan Ryan. *Bertrand Russell: a Political Life*. London: Allen Lane the Penguin Press; New York: Hill and Wang, 1988. Pp. xi, 226. £16.95. US\$19.95. c\$24.95.

THIS IS A Life and a Commentary. A Life normally follows a chronological arrangement. Ryan respects this convention although he is more interested in the Commentary than in the Life. It's a Life with the sex and the symbolic logic left out. He begins with what he describes as the "Liberal Upbringing". This contains some perceptive judgements. For example, it is argued that Russell's concessions to mysticism and religiosity were a matter of trying to drum up convictions which he did not really possess. But this chapter also contains some very odd assertions. Thus, Mill's great autobiography is dismissed as "a sort of extended reading list with commentaries on the books that most affected him" (p. 11). This is astonishing since Ryan has long been regarded as a leading authority on Mill. Then Russell's early opinions are reduced to what Radical Liberals had accepted as valid in: "the socialist complaints against capitalism by 1872". As Noel Annan and others have observed, if we leave aside Frederic Harrison's *Order and Progress* there were hardly any such "complaints" during the mid-Victorian years. What Ryan wants to insist upon from beginning to end is Russell's life-long commitment to "moral individualism". He asserts: "Liberals ... believed that what gave a society its worth was the quality of *individual* existence, not some communal quality, and what gave individual life its value was the degree of individual choice and responsibility it contained" (p. 18).

The second chapter on Religion, Ethics and Liberal Politics takes matters up to 1914. Once again this does contain a few biographical details which are new—or, at least, new to me. Thus, I was unaware that Russell's letters to Couturat reveal that he was myth-making when he wrote about his response to Mrs. Whitehead's heart attack as a "conversion". It is in this chapter that Ryan offers a short account of how Russell insisted upon the disjunction between philosophy, properly so called, and moral and political reflections. Accordingly, this is the most technical chapter in the book. I found it clear

without finding it entirely convincing. It is not clear that one can deny a "judgement", but not a "definition" (p. 44). Surely lexicographical definitions are reports which may be false. If they are attempts to state distinctive or essential characteristics they may be mistaken. If the definition is a stipulation or a statement of intent it can hardly be denied, but it may be declared to be useless.

In his third chapter Ryan introduces us to Russell at his most political: in those years when he was At War with War. He contends that "for the student of Russell's ideas about politics and society, the essays of the wartime years and immediately afterwards are the high point of his career" (p. 55). This does not mean that Ryan finds all these essays to be persuasive. He complains that Russell reached the conclusion that "only if capitalism were abolished would there be a chance for peace" (p. 78). One must agree that this was a bizarre opinion for a Liberal, as distinct from a Socialist, to entertain. According to Ryan it was also odd in another way since Russell arrived at it not by analyzing the political economy, but by observing the malign effects of chauvinist psychology and by noticing the psychological state of national leaders. But this is not such a difficult problem. Russell came to regard the abolition of capitalism as a condition of peace because he came to believe that capitalism encouraged the possessive as opposed to the creative impulses.

This leads on to a discussion of Russell as An Ambivalent Socialist. We are told that he was "at best a hesitant and anxious socialist". He was concerned, about how to reconcile socialism with: "the freedom needed by the artistic and intellectual elite" (pp. 81, 87). This is certainly correct. Yet Ryan does make a number of mistakes on points of fact. Some of these errors, as with dates of publications, are trivial. Others are more serious. It's wrong to allege that Russell saw "fixing prices and production [as] a technical matter to be resolved by trial and error." He thought that they could and should be resolved by the State: something which would assuredly have emasculated the Guild Socialism which he was advocating. However, Ryan is fully entitled to point out that Russell never worried very much about the economics of socialism. But he is surely not entitled to contend that Russell's "strength is that he makes power and organization central issues of social analysis, not property and social class" (p. 101). Blackstone is better than Burnham! It was Blackstone who defined property as that "sole and despotic dominion which one man claims and exercises over the external things of the world, in total exclusion of the right of any other individual in the universe." In short, property refers to protected powers of varying extent.

The fifth chapter treats of Russell's educational theory and practice. Russell's limited attention to problems in higher education and his boringly meritocratic solution to the problem of Oxbridge are noted. For the rest: "Liberals have always been obsessed with education. Liberals want reform, not revolution; revolution is costly, inefficient, violent and nasty; education offers progress without the horrors of violent change" (p. 105). The following chapter dealing with Peace, Power and Democracy is even more discursive. *Freedom and Organization* is identified as the key work belonging to this period. Predictably it is

held to characterize “what one might call the sober liberal in Russell ...” (p. 127). This “sober liberal” was greatly to be preferred to the Misguided One who wrote *The Scientific Outlook or Which Way to Peace? Power* was another matter. According to Ryan it made the best possible case for “a lively and unaggressive liberalism” (p. 155). Then there is a penultimate chapter in which we are introduced to The New Voltaire? his attempts to cover Russell’s life after his return to Britain in 1944 until about 1958. These were the years when his “anxiously liberal brand of socialism” was in fashion.

The book concludes with a discussion of Russell’s thought and activities between the formation of C.N.D. in 1958 and his death a decade later. There is much here which I found interesting and persuasive. It identifies Russell during the Schoenman years: no easy task. It arrives at the shrewd conclusion that “Unilateralist politics always wavered between an isolationist desire to cut Britain off from global conflicts and a moralizing ambition to lead the rest of Western Europe into non-nuclear virtue” (p. 191). Yet there is something stationary about even the best of Ryan’s insights. Thus it is just not sensible to complain that Russell called for Black Rights in what he stigmatized as a Racist State. What on earth was he supposed to do!

If this book is considered as a Life it won’t do. Few readers of *Russell* will find much that is new. Worse, it omits all reference to entire passages of development which are of exceptional interest. For instance there is not one word about Russell’s leading role at the Leeds Convention held in June 1917. It was from there that the call went out for Labour to impose Peace upon the belligerents. It was from there that the demand was raised for the creation of the Soviets in Britain. Of course, all these happenings had a strange, dream-like quality. They came to nothing. They were lost beyond recall. But Russell’s presence in this extraordinary non-event is something which his biographer ought to attend to very closely. But the failure of this book considered as a Life is far less serious than its failure as an essay in sustained political analysis. This sort of analysis was just what Ryan’s readers were entitled to expect. Instead we have Russell being commended here and reprimanded there in accordance with some sort of Brownie points system. This marking is related to some implicit celebration of essential Liberalism and The Individual. The evidence against these views in terms of conceptual and other difficulties is simply not considered. The challenging question: was Bertrand Russell not the last word in Left-Wing Intellectual, is ignored.

Ryan likes and respects Russell. He was a great gad-fly. “If he did not reorganize the educational system, introduce industrial democracy, abolish armies and destroy the authority of the Church, he woke up the middle-aged and encouraged the rebellious young” (p. 163). But this liking and respecting makes it hard for Ryan to bear Russell’s faults. If the real Russell was always a Liberal, he did not always exhibit the appropriate forms of self-control or indeed of intellectual discipline. “The wonderful briskness and flair with which Russell writes, and the entertaining invective with which he laces his work, perhaps disguised from both his audience and himself a curious thinness in his

arguments” (p. 81). Thus, on the need for a world peace-keeping authority: “He too often said that things went badly only because stupid and wicked men were in power, and that paradise might be regained if the virtuous took over” (p. 102). Sometimes the virtuous took the shape of philosopher-kings, sometimes of the uncorrupted plain men. This recurrent fault is summed up by asserting that he had a habit of “making out that all his opponents are knaves or fools or both at once, the subordination of literal truth to the telling phrase, and the pretence that very simple solutions will cope with very complex problems” (p. 86). We are advised that Russell, as in *Which Way to Peace?*, was sometimes “paranoic” (p. 149). As for his last years: “at some times he flatly contradicted himself, and at others was disconcertingly evasive. Whatever the merits of his advocacy of an aggressive American foreign policy in 1945–49, for example, he ought not to have denied having put it forward—especially when he went on almost at once to withdraw the denial too. Nor should he have simultaneously declared that the Russians’ overriding duty was to move with extreme caution and then that they had every right to put missiles into Cuba if they chose to” (p. 174). Russell’s life ended, it is alleged, with “hysterical and one-sided outbursts” against America; outbursts which made him neither friends nor converts (p. 202). What is happening is that Alan Ryan is following Tony Flew in scolding Russell for not carrying on as an agitator or a journalist in just the same way as he carried on as a philosopher.<sup>1</sup> Without suggesting that agitators should be allowed to be evasive, self-contradictory or hysterical, they are not to be judged by Cathedral Close morality or as if they were delivering a paper at All Souls. In fact, it is Alan Ryan who gets the lines crossed when, awarding yet another black mark, he writes: “For much of his life he [Russell] plainly felt a contempt for uneducated people which is entirely at odds with the sentimental profession of solidarity with humanity’s sufferings which opens his Autobiography.” Surely I can despise bingo and feel anguish for the poor wretches for whom life without bingo has no meaning. It is outrageous to suggest that some minimum I.Q. or amount of learning is required before anyone qualifies as the subject of compassion or regard.

Of course it is the central contention in this book that Russell was always a Liberal and ought always to be remembered as one. Perhaps it is this central contention which explains why Ryan is so appalled by Russell’s lapses. The Great Man’s temperament was not appropriate to a great Liberal. With respect to temperament John Stuart Mill was some sort of saint, but Bertrand Russell was some sort of revolutionary. Russell was more anxious for comradeship than for loving kindness. He was possessed by furious enthusiasms and sometimes by passionate hatreds. If Mill was never young, Russell was never old.

We are told over and over again that what made Russell a Liberal rather than a socialist was his commitment to moral individualism. “What gave society its worth was the quality of individual existence ...” (p. 18). We are repeatedly referred to “Russell’s obsession with the qualities of individual character ...”

<sup>1</sup> Anthony Flew, “Russell’s Judgement on Bolshevism”, in George Roberts, ed., *Bertrand Russell Memorial Volume* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1978), pp. 428–54.

(p. 69). We are told that like J.S. Mill he stood by "the liberal view that a tolerable democracy must reconcile majority rule with the liberties of the minority ..." (p. 77). The most that Ryan will allow is that Russell may have been a "liberal socialist", never a libertarian socialist (p. 170). I find it extraordinary that Ryan finds none of this problematic. He ignores the evidence which tells against his conclusions. He makes no attempt to clarify what he means by his key terms "The Individual", "Moral Individualism", "Liberty" "Liberalism", and so forth.

No self-respecting scientist, historian or biographer fails to ask himself how his own conclusions might be overturned. He searches for the ugly little fact that will destroy his beautiful theory. But Ryan lays himself open to the charge that he has ignored not one ugly little fact, but a whole host of them. The brutal critique of Benthamism written in 1916 culminated in the view not just that "English Liberalism as we know it is dead", but that "Marx was wiser than the individualists; his emphasis upon class-consciousness, class-conflict, and the substitution of monopoly for economic competition, proved far more nearly true...."<sup>2</sup> In *The Prospects of Industrial Civilization* he and Dora declared that: "Liberalism with its insistence upon the individual, is unable to find any cure for the evils of capitalism." They insisted that individualists had freed business from the control of the State only to find that they had subjected the State to the control of business. Nor is it correct to suggest that Russell was one of those former Liberals who joined the Labour Party because they knew it was not serious about socialism. Russell repeatedly exposed the sham and complained about it. He did this whether he was confronting simple-minded optimists in the American Labour Movement or responding to the bitter, knowing reproaches of Leon Trotsky. In "Trotsky on Our Sins" he wrote:

It is thought that the important thing is to get Socialists elected to Parliament by hook or by crook, even if, in order to get elected, they have had to let it be understood that they will refrain from carrying out large parts of the socialist programme. To secure a Government composed of professing socialists is not the same thing as to secure Socialism; this has been proved in many European countries since the war. Socialism will never be actually established until the leaders are in earnest in desiring it; by this I mean not merely that they should favour it in the abstract, but that they should be willing, for its sake, to forgo the amenities of bourgeois success, which are enjoyed by successful Labour politicians so long as they refrain from abolishing bourgeois privileges.... We shall achieve nothing until we desire Socialism more than the approval of our enemies, which is only to be won by treachery, conscious or unconscious.<sup>3</sup>

It would be quite wrong to suggest that this relates to only a passing phase of Russell's career. He denounced milk-and-water socialists, humbug, hypocrisy

and mugwumps again and again.

Turning to the need for conceptual clarification, I have no wish to repeat what I wrote in my "Bertrand Russell: from Liberalism to Socialism?"<sup>4</sup> However, I do wish to refer to the concept of the Individual and Individualism which Ryan takes to be crucial to the whole nature of Liberalism. Unfortunately, like Russell himself, he offers neither a definition nor any extended account of what he means by The Individual. Indeed one is tempted to offer a parody of the Russell paradox and ask: Is The Individual a member of a class? If he is, then he isn't an individual. If he isn't, then he is! This parody is not entirely frivolous. Of course it would be as silly to deny the reality of the Individual as it was silly of Mrs. Thatcher to declare: "There is no such thing as Society." Yet it is important to be reminded that The Individual's individuality consists of nothing more than a specific structure and a peculiar sequence of general characteristics. These general or common characteristics of age, gender, nationality, class, religion, culture, degree of intelligence, sort of disposition and so forth are brought together in a distinctive way which makes me singular to those who know me. Now "those who know me" is a significant political qualification. To most people I am no more than a slightly overweight, white, male Englishman of advanced middle age who is kind to children and rude to everyone else. Of course I myself know better. As Blake put it:

Naught loves another as itself  
Nor venerates another so  
Nor is it possible to thought  
A greater than itself to know.

This is not to say that we can only be ourselves when we are playing at being solipsists at the top of Telegraph House.<sup>5</sup> It does follow that The Individual can be recognized, protected and enriched only in small, face-to-face groups. The sphere of the Individual is not the State, but the family, the neighbourhood, the school and the small workshop. To be sure, the State may encourage these small units and discourage that hugeness which is well understood to submerge the Individual. But it dare not have many direct dealings with the Individual in the performance of either its enabling or its punitive functions. Every act of discretion is liable to become a threat to the rule of law. The State—unless it is an Oriental despotism—ignores the Individual. It deals with subjects and citizens; men and women; young and old; but—outside the courts—never with Individuals. For this reason those who evoke the claims of The Individual against Authority almost always turn out to be appealing on behalf of a particular type. This was notoriously true of the Vulgar Political Economists. With them the Individual turned out to be a well-heeled calculating consumer; a capitalist or a scab. For Carlyle or Plekhanov the Individual

<sup>2</sup> "Disintegration and the Principle of Growth", in *The Collected Papers of Bertrand Russell*, Vol. 13: *Prophecy and Dissent, 1914-16*, ed. R.A. Rempel with B. Frohmann, M. Lippincott and M. Moran (London: Unwin Hyman; Boston: Allen & Unwin, 1988), pp. 307-14 (at 311).

<sup>3</sup> "Trotsky on Our Sins", *The New Leader*, Lon., 13, no. 22 (26 Feb. 1926): 3.

<sup>4</sup> *Russell*, n.s. 6 (Summer 1986): 5-38.

<sup>5</sup> See "Modern Physics", *The Autobiography of Bertrand Russell*, Vol. II: 1914-1944 (London: Allen & Unwin, 1968), pp. 158-9.

tended to be turned into the Hero in History whether or not he was to be celebrated or contained. J.S. Mill was cautioned—and quite rightly—by some of his Conservative critics for a propensity to identify the Individual with an amiable eccentric. As for Russell he was ingenuously explicit. Discussing the role of individuality he made it clear that he was referring to the “impulses and desires that belong to some members of the community but not to all.”<sup>6</sup> For him The Individual was the exceptional man who resembled Einstein or himself. It was his way of referring to a creative elite: “prophets, mystics, poets, scientific discoverers ... men whose lives are dominated by a vision; they are essentially solitary men....”<sup>7</sup> In his enthusiasm for the claims of this elite he did not bother to point out how often the Individual in ordinary talk turns out to be an imposter. Almost everyone is stirred to sympathetic anger when he hears tell of the Individual frustrated by bureaucracy. Few pause to enquire whether The Individual is a claimant kept waiting in a Social Security office or a developer being prevented from encroaching upon the green belt. My complaint is that Ryan makes The Individual the linchpin of Liberalism without disclosing how often he is simply carrying the claims of a particular social type who may or may not deserve to be freed from restraints. At the same time I would dispute that Liberalism can claim an exclusive concern with The Individual properly so called: the individual who is not masquerading for a social interest. It was Marx himself who looked forward to the day when “the condition of the free development of each will be the condition for the free development of all.”

In conclusion, this would have been a more rewarding book if the author had tried to relate Russell to the tradition of the Left-Wing Intellectual. Whether Russell is best considered as Liberal or Socialist, he was certainly a model of the Left-Wing Intellectual. He always sought to diminish the power of ruling classes and oligarchies. David Cauter is not alone in thinking that this is at the heart of being on the Left. Of course Russell himself would have protested. He is reputed to have said: “I have never called myself an intellectual and nobody has ever dared to call me one in my presence. I think that an intellectual may be defined as a person who pretends to have more intellect than he has, and I hope that this definition does not fit me.” Yet one ought not be deterred from trying to organize an account of Russell’s political life around this type by this entertaining disclaimer.

Certain things emerge clearly. Russell had as strong affinities as any Englishman could have with the Russian intelligentsia. He had a strong liking for aristocratic anarchists such as Bakunin and Kropotkin. He was as prepared as they were to challenge all authority in Church and State. However, he was not guilt ridden as were so many among the Russian nobility. Moreover he found it difficult to enter into any close and continuing relationship with the equivalent of the *raznochintsy*—the embittered men of non-noble descent who provided the other component of the Russian intelligentsia. Russell’s threat to

become a Russian never deserved to be taken seriously. Yet his identification with the peculiarly British tradition of left-wing intellectuals organized into a succession of politico-philosophic pressure groups was incomplete and imperfect. He never allowed himself to become immersed in any of them despite their undeniable impact upon the development of law and opinion in England. Obviously the influence of the Philosophic Radicals was profound. He was the heir to their tough-minded consequentialist ethics even if he came to subject Bentham to devastating criticism. His parents were close to the Positivists. He himself played tennis with Frederic Harrison until he caught Harrison cheating. (I owe this anecdote to Professor Sidney Eisen of York University, Ontario.) As for the Fabians: he acknowledged his debt to Graham Wallas. He enjoyed the society of the Webbs and gave them credit for abolishing the Poor Law. He seems to have disliked Bernard Shaw. The point is that Russell’s identification with these three groups was strictly limited. If he belonged to the Fabian Society for a brief period, he preferred the enthusiasts of the Independent Labour Party. The fact that he kept his distance in this way is explained, in part at least, by his impatience with detail whether in relation to law, administration or economics. Yet he was like the Utilitarians, Positivists and Fabians in that he declined to be wholly absorbed in the up-close milieu of public affairs. He never lost sight of his Guild Socialist ideals—at least not after 1915. But like all good left-wing intellectuals Russell never sought personal power. Like the rest of them he knew that Parliament was not his scene. In fact even Mill and Webb learned, through bitter experience, that it was probably better to be sent to prison than to be sent to Parliament.

In practice, Russell’s tradition was more akin to that of the great single-issue campaigns of nineteenth-century reformers than to that of the politico-philosophic ginger groups. He cared for free trade or votes for women or justice for conscientious objectors more than anything. He was dismayed by the squalid compromises which were taken to advance most other political causes. As an Apostle he was a potential Leninist. The procession of upper-class Cambridge men out of the Apostles into the Communist Party and the K.G.B. is not as remarkable as those who harp on treason to King, country and class imagine. There is a perfect continuity between the assumptions of spiritual and intellectual superiority found in the one case and in the other. But Russell could never have been a Leninist. He longed for fellowship. Yet his concern for solidarity was fully matched by his attachment to the right of dissent. This tension is at the heart of British political culture. Russell is best remembered as the representative of this tradition. I find it sad that Alan Ryan has not taken his chance to celebrate Russell in this context.

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<sup>6</sup> *Authority and the Individual* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1949), p. 46.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 113.