Hendley's review of Dora Russell

by Beverley M. Earles

I FEEL I MUST register a protest concerning the review of Dora Russell's *The Religion of the Machine Age* by Brian Hendley, in *Russell*, Vol. 6, no. 2 (Winter 1986–87).

Referring to various key ideas in the book, Hendley writes that "None of this is particularly innovative...." I should like to point out that at the time in which these ideas were conceived they were indeed innovative. I refer here to her particular theory of sex differences, the positive view to be taken of same, and the patriarchal dimension of industrial attitudes. These were based on a critique of Cartesian thought and its continued influence in Western culture. The machine idea was conceived around 1920 and the notion of sex differences was developed in *Hypatia* (1925) and in what is probably by far her best book, *The Right to be Happy* (1927). It is noteworthy that theory of a similar genre has found a voice in the new wave of the women's movement which opposes the neuter thinking, the aspirations of unisex which were a main thrust in the sixties and early seventies. Hendley points out that the project that eventuated in *Religion of the Machine Age* is about sixty years old. I find it surprising that he can then so promptly forget this fact and dismiss it all as somewhat lacking in originality. *He* has not argued *his* case on this, and there is certainly one to be made.

I also take exception to the statement that "Despite their shortcomings, these volumes are clear proof that Dora Russell was not just 'Mrs. Bertrand Russell'". If she had never written anything would she then be properly designated as "just 'Mrs. Bertrand Russell'"? How can anyone be justifiably referred to in such a dehumanizing way?

As for Hendley's statements to the effect that Russell is too much of a subjectivist, I can only say that this is not the case at all. What she advocated was a healthy integration of intellect and feeling both for men and women in the interest of their becoming fully human. This emphasis is not well brought out in *The Machine Age*, but she does nevertheless make it clear that she does not devalue scientific method and the employment of objective attitudes in living. For instance, in the last chapter, p. 251, she says: "The intention of this book was never to denigrate or hold in contempt all that skill and patient endeavour in the quest for knowledge and truth. It was to expose the dangerous error of *reverencing in worship only one aspect of human achievement*, and, what

is more, of letting it be prostituted to the service of the destructive elements in the human psyche" (my italics).

It is true that Russell does make pronouncements and sweeping generalizations in this book, but this is not so odd in popular works. Bertrand Russell was not unknown to do the very same thing, and it usually did not matter that he did so—quite the contrary in fact. But this is not the place to further discuss such matters.

Although I am a great admirer of Dora Russell, I am not a blind one. I personally think it a tragedy that she did not write *The Machine Age* when she first conceived it. I think it is far from her best and that in the earlier works (cited above) she made her case with greater clarity and did not leave herself as open to being misunderstood.

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