

Russell's influence in Sweden

by Stefan Andersson

Gunnar Fredriksson. *Bertrand Russell: en intellektuell i politiken* [*Bertrand Russell: an Intellectual in Politics*]. Stockholm: ALBA, 1984. Pp. 268. 15 photos. Price: 110 Swedish Kronor.

IT IS DIFFICULT to give a brief and fair description of Russell's influence in Sweden. First of all one must distinguish between the influence he has had on professional philosophers on the one hand and on Swedish intellectuals in general on the other. I shall start with the professional philosophers.

Until the end of the Second World War, philosophy, as well as most other aspects of Swedish cultural life, had for centuries (except for a short French period) been dominated by a strong German influence. In the beginning of the twentieth century something quite unique in the history of Swedish philosophy took place. In the introduction to *Contemporary Philosophy in Scandinavia* G. H. von Wright says:

A new era in Swedish philosophy was inaugurated by Axel Hägerström (1868–1939) and Adolf Phalén (1884–1931), two men of great acumen and depth. They are the founders of the so-called Uppsala School in philosophy, which can be regarded as a noteworthy forerunner of what is currently known as analytic philosophy. Phalén in particular explicitly stated that the task of philosophy was conceptual analysis.¹

Hägerström and Phalén seem to have paid very little attention to what was going on in philosophy in Great Britain. In certain respects they never totally broke away from the influence of Kant and Hegel, but they had at least three things in common with their colleagues in Cambridge: (1) the emphasis on conceptual analysis; (2) the condemnation of metaphysics; and (3) the critique of epistemological idealism.²

Russell had been introduced as a social philosopher as early as 1920, but it was not until the end of the 1930s that a younger generation of Swedish philosophers started to show an interest in the new English

¹ Ed. Raymond E. Olson and Anthony M. Paul (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1972), p. 5.

² Cf. Anders Wedberg's article "Sweden", *Handbook of World Philosophy: Contemporary Developments Since 1945* (London: 1981), pp. 174–6.

philosophy. In the beginning they were quite critical, but within a few years the three major figures in Swedish philosophy at that time—Konrad Marc-Wogau (1902–), Ingemar Hedenius (1908–1982) and Anders Wedberg (1913–1978)—had adopted several major ideas from the Cambridge school of analysis. The two oldest were in certain respects more influenced by Moore than by Russell, but on the whole it is Bertrand Russell more than anyone else who has given inspiration to analytic philosophy in general and to the study of mathematical logic in particular. Von Wright says: “After the breakthrough of modern analytical philosophy in Sweden, at about the time of World War II, interest in logic—mathematical and philosophical—has been the most conspicuous feature of philosophy in that country.”³

Although Russell and Moore have had a great effect on Swedish philosophy, not much has been written about their ideas in this country. There has been only one dissertation written about some aspect of Russell’s thinking, and that is Erik Götlind’s doctoral thesis, *Bertrand Russell’s Theories of Causation*, at the University of Uppsala (1952). If one looks in the Swedish journal of philosophy *Theoria*, which started in 1935, one will find a translation of Russell’s essay “The Limits of Empiricism” in the second volume.⁴ Then one has to wait until 1952 before Russell’s name is mentioned in a title. That article, however, is written by a Danish philosopher. Fifteen years later there appears a short paper written by Bengt Hansson (then a graduate student in philosophy) with the title “Some Incompatibilities in Russell’s *Introduction to Mathematical Philosophy*”. In the last ten years three more articles about Russell’s philosophy have been published in *Theoria*, but none of the authors is Swedish. I have been able to find only seven other separate writings about Russell’s philosophy written by Swedes. Also worth mentioning is what Wedberg writes about Russell in the third volume of his *History of Philosophy*.

Approximately the same number of books and articles have been written about Moore’s philosophy. From this point of view one can hardly conclude that Russell has been of greater importance than Moore, but there is one big difference: several of Russell’s books have been, and still are, required reading for both undergraduate and graduate students in philosophy. The book which probably has been one of the most widely read books in philosophy in Sweden is *The Problems of Philosophy*. His *Introduction to Mathematical Philosophy*, *History of Western Philosophy*

and *Human Knowledge: Its Scope and Limits* also deserve mention in this context. Although Moore’s *Principia Ethica* and his *Ethics* have been and still are required reading for some advanced courses in practical philosophy, it alone cannot compete with all the books of Russell.

Apart from Russell and Moore there is only one other Cambridge philosopher who has had a noteworthy influence on Swedish philosophy, and that is C. D. Broad. This has not only to do with the fact that he was an interesting philosopher, but for two decades after the Second World War he visited Uppsala almost every year. He knew Swedish and translated several of Axel Hägerström’s works into English. What is perhaps a little surprising is that neither the early nor the later Wittgenstein has been much discussed in print by Swedish philosophers, although Wedberg has translated and introduced both the *Tractatus* and the *Philosophical Investigations*. In contrast, Wittgenstein has been of great interest to Finnish philosophers like von Wright and Erik Stenius, who, however, have written about him in Swedish. Outside the sphere of professional philosophers, there is a very considerable interest in Wittgenstein’s life and thought.

Turning now to Russell’s effect on the educated part of the Swedish population, one can without hesitation say that he can only be compared with thinkers like Karl Marx and Sigmund Freud. Moore is little known in Sweden outside of professional philosophers. Some indications of Russell’s influence are that thirty-five of his books have been translated into Swedish. Several of them have been reprinted more than once. The first to be translated was *Principles of Social Reconstruction* only two years after it was published in Great Britain in 1916. A number of Russell’s newspaper articles were also translated and published in Sweden. In the late forties he even published some original articles in Swedish. When *Why I Am Not a Christian* was translated into Swedish in 1958, it caused quite a reaction in the press. The fact that Russell was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1950 is only one small indication of his reputation in Sweden. His involvement in different political issues after the Second World War made a great impression on many liberal-minded people in Sweden. More than twenty articles have been published about him in different kinds of political and cultural journals since 1950.

Clark mentions that Russell was in Sweden in 1920, 1948 and in 1950. He does not say anything about a visit to Sweden in 1935, but the fact is that Russell spent two days in Lund, in the south of Sweden, in the middle of October that year. The first evening he addressed the Philosophical Association at the University and spoke about “The Limits of Empiricism”. Unfortunately the records from that meeting cannot be traced. The second evening he spoke at the Student Union on “The

³ *Contemporary Philosophy in Scandinavia*, p. 10.

⁴ First published in *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 36 (1935–36): 131–50.

Revolt Against Reason".⁵ The local newspapers noticed the event, but they published very short reports of what he had said. One newspaper noted his attack against "hitlerianism" and other irrational tendencies. One of the articles started: "Strangely enough the student-evening yesterday did not attract a quite full house. This was in spite of the fact that the platform was occupied by a man with the well-known name of Bertrand Russell."

It is not until now that there has appeared a book about Russell in Swedish written by a Swede. The author, Gunnar Fredriksson, studied philosophy in Lund for some years and completed his scholarly career with a master's degree in philosophy. He also studied philosophy at Oxford for one year. While he was there, he met Russell and had an interview with him. This was in 1960. Since then he has worked as a journalist and was editor-in-chief of *Aftonbladet*, a major Swedish newspaper, for many years. He has published several books, including one about Joseph Conrad in 1982.

The title of the book under review is a little misleading. Although there is some emphasis in this work on Russell's political activities and writings, it is not strong enough to be mentioned in the title. The book is not written for scholars in political philosophy but addresses itself to a broad audience. The author has not done any original research, and consequently he has no new information to present. His two main sources are Russell's autobiography and Clark's biography. This does not mean that Fredriksson's book is not worth reading. The author's comments and analyses are often interesting, although what he has to say about Russell's philosophy is sometimes so simplified that it becomes misleading. The author does not try to present himself as a commentator on Russell's philosophy. One has to wait until the very end of the book before Fredriksson reveals his intentions: "Most of all my goal has been to present my own picture of how his thinking as a whole and his role as an intellectual can be understood by someone who earlier, perhaps excessively, has admired him. Now the picture becomes richer and one can perhaps admire him again" (p. 253).

This perspective makes the book interesting and gives it a personal touch that says something about the author himself. I have no difficulties in recognizing the pattern of development concerning Fredriksson's thoughts about Bertrand Russell: a phase of great admiration was followed by a phase of considering Russell as rather superficial, which after some years was followed by a new phase of admiration of a more sophisticated character. In examining the work I shall concentrate my remarks

on what Fredriksson says about Russell and religion.

The book starts with a description of the interview that the author had with Russell early in 1960. He says that he does not have any notes left about what Russell said, but he did write an article about it that was published in *Aftonbladet* on 27 March 1960.

The first chapter is followed by seventeen others loosely hung together. The book is basically a chronological description of Russell's life and work. Fredriksson has picked out what he finds particularly interesting, and I think he has made a good selection. In the second chapter, "Relatives and Parents", he mentions how Russell according to his own opinion gave up religion at the age of eighteen after having read Mill, adding that "he was quite glad to be done with the whole subject". Fredriksson adds a short comment: "He was going to concern himself with it for another eighty years" (p. 22). I think Fredriksson's ironic remark touches an important theme in Russell's life: his ambiguous attitude towards religion. In the following chapter, "Cambridge", Fredriksson puts a rhetorical question: "Perhaps mathematics served as a substitute for religion for the young Bertrand Russell" (p. 25). I think Fredriksson's question is quite justified considering what Russell himself has said both in his published books and in his diaries and letters.

In a chapter called "Women and politics" he discusses Lady Ottoline's influence on Russell's views on religion and says that those who think that Russell merely adjusted his opinions to Ottoline's have perhaps done a too superficial analysis. He says: "... it is probably more interesting than that" (p. 67). Fredriksson thinks that Ottoline stimulated a mystical strain in Russell's thinking. This is not an uncommon point of view, but what I lack is a critical discussion of the expression "mystical strain". Fredriksson says that Russell's thoughts were close to Plato and Spinoza's mysticism, but he offers no supporting arguments. Nor does he even say what he means by "mysticism" in this context.

In the next chapter, "Conrad, Lawrence and Eliot", he says that Conrad was as little religious in the ordinary sense as Russell and that both were indifferent or hostile towards organized forms of religion and the clergy. "But there was a mystical dimension, an insight in the tragedies of loneliness and a pessimistic view of man that united them" (p. 82). Once again I find Fredriksson's usage of the expression "mystical dimension" so vague as to be almost devoid of content.

The thirteenth chapter is called "Religion and Sex". Here he discusses Russell's increased hostility towards Christianity at the beginning of the twenties. Among other things he says: "He is now far away from the moderating influence of Ottoline Morrell concerning religion. He was possibly more influenced by Dora, who was even more radical than

⁵ Published in *In Praise of Idleness* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1935).

himself both in politics, religion and morality" (p. 176). I think Fredriksson is on the right track. Dora at least influenced his way of expressing himself about religion. Religion was an important issue in his relationship with several women and men, and Russell was not immune to external influences on his views concerning religion. I am thinking particularly of his relationship with his grandmother, his first wife, Lady Ottoline and Dora Black. Among his male acquaintances one can mention Dickinson, Wittgenstein and Eliot. There are many interesting problems here that one can discuss in more detail. Whatever the result of such investigations, I think it is safe to say, as Fredriksson does, that Russell was *not* done with the whole subject at the age of eighteen.

Although the book from a scholarly point of view is of little interest, it still fills a gap in Swedish literature. Alan Wood's biography was translated in 1958, but it has been out of print for many years. Clark's book has not been translated yet. Most people in Sweden who are interested in Russell can read English without any great difficulty, but Fredriksson's book still serves a purpose as an easy and stimulating introduction to Bertrand Russell's life and thought.

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