

Bertrand Russell and the Dimensions of Edwardian Liberalism

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Introduction

“My life before 1910 and my life after 1914 were as sharply separated as Faust’s life before and after he met Mephistopheles.” So Russell wrote in commencing the second volume of his autobiography. A process of rejuvenation, begun with his affair with Lady Ottoline Morrell, brought about a reorientation of his work and his thought, of which he became strongly self-conscious. “I have therefore got into the habit of thinking of myself as a non-supernatural Faust for whom Mephistopheles was represented by the Great War.”¹ The war was a political watershed as well as a personal turning-point. Before 1914 Russell had been a member of the Liberal Party. Indeed, as the grandson of Lord John Russell, he was not so much in it as of it. He put himself forward for the Liberal nomination at Bedford in 1910, with rather the same sort of prescriptive claims which, a generation earlier, Lord Randolph Churchill had asserted at Woodstock. If Bedford did not, like Woodstock, lie literally at the gates of a ducal palace, nonetheless any scion of the Russell family had innate advantages as a prospective candidate and it took the peculiar genius of Bertrand Russell himself to cancel them out by a display of atheistic principle and provocative candour.

Russell, like many of his generation, was thus axiomatically a Liberal in party allegiance during the Edwardian period, only to find an equally inevitable home in the Labour Party after the war. The commitment in each case was clear and straightforward, albeit tempered with some reserve. If Bedford had not been worth a mass in 1910—nor even the undertaking to attend church occasionally, which was all that the Liberal Association had asked—Russell was similarly dispassionate in his later attitude towards the Labour Party. “I do not like them,” he wrote in 1930, “but an Englishman

has to have a Party just as he has to have trousers, and of the three Parties I find them the least painful.”²

So far Russell’s position was like that of other intellectual recruits to Labour, for example, J. A. Hobson, Arthur Ponsonby, G. Lowes Dickinson, E. D. Morel, C. P. Trevelyan, Charles Roden Buxton or J. L. Hammond. Coming into the Labour Party, often through the ante-chamber of the Union of Democratic Control, they were naturally identified as socialists henceforth. Yet this was no more than a colloquial gloss upon their opinions, which remained essentially those of the New Liberalism which had flourished before the war. Two things had been changed by the war. Firstly, the conception of Liberals and Labour working together in a progressive movement was exploded. Instead the tactical pressures of party drove apart people who had previously been in alliance. Secondly, progressives who were forced to choose Labour rather than the Liberals did so not because they thought there was too little socialism in the Liberal Party, but because they thought there was more liberalism in the Labour Party. I have expanded upon these points elsewhere:

The new Liberalism, because of its insistence on the substantive compatibility of the aims of Liberalism and Labour, saved the Liberal party from a lingering death: before 1914 by giving it hope of continued life, after 1914 by making its death sudden. If the choice between the Liberal party and the Labour party was only tactical, this had the effect of recruiting Liberal support from socialists before 1914 and Labour support from liberals afterwards. The social democratic case for the Liberal party had been seen at its most cogent in 1910, and it was not disappointment with the Liberal record in this respect that produced disaffection. Where the Liberal party let down its intellectuals thereafter was on a range of issues where its competence ought to have been guaranteed by its own historic tradition: woman suffrage, Ireland, civil rights, conscription, Free Trade. Many progressive intellectuals turned hopefully to Labour because they thought the struggle for social democracy could be better conducted in a party whose liberalism was not tainted.³

It tallies with this that a striking feature of the history of these converts is the absence of a conversion experience. In making this observation previously, I have tended implicitly to assimilate Russell to this analysis. On closer inspection, however, it appears that this is erroneous. In Russell’s case there was indeed a conversion, and we shall see more clearly why this was necessary if we examine the dimensions of his Liberalism during the Edwardian period.

The three relevant dimensions can be dubbed political, economic and social, and his writings under each of these heads will be set in the context of

contemporary Liberal thinking and of his own career. To judge from the comment in Ronald Clark’s biography that Russell was merely “tentatively dabbling” in politics during these years, this inquiry ought not to detain us long.⁴ Clark finds four pages out of 640 sufficient to exhaust the theme. There is some ground for this assessment if it refers to the seriousness of Russell’s ambition to enter Parliament, but, as a broader indication of the strength of his political commitment, it seems wide of the mark. Certainly the implication that it was only later that Russell found political questions of compulsive interest sits oddly with other evidence. “I quite agree that politics is *the* important thing,” he assured Lady Ottoline Morrell in 1911;⁵ and if his fervour partook of personal passion as well as public zeal, this ought not unduly to surprise us.

1 *Political Liberalism*

The ideal of political liberty stood at the heart of Russell’s conception of politics. He showed himself truly the godchild of John Stuart Mill in seeking to liberate the individual from external coercion. Russell stated these maxims plainly in a paper of 1906:

It is good that, to the utmost possible extent, every man’s actions should proceed from his own judgment and his own choice. It is bad that others should employ an outward compulsion to force a man to do what he considers evil, even if he is mistaken in so considering it. It is bad that others should exert their will to induce a man, voluntarily but against his own judgment, to act as they think right. It is bad that a man should himself resign to others the task of deciding what he ought to do.⁶

Three postulates underpinned these assertions. The first was the value of individual judgment in itself, whether right or wrong. Like Mill, Russell looked to the exercise of this faculty as an expression of personality, as a means of education, and as a road to wisdom. The second point concerned the role of government. Russell’s framework presupposed the autonomous individual and endowed his (or her) freedom from constraint with moral value. The corollary was that “the ideal of mutual independence ... could only be fully realized by a complete absence of government, and then only if every citizen was willing to forego the private exercise of force.”⁷ This was a utopian hypothesis, predicating a beneficent condition of anarchy which it was no part of Russell’s purpose to advocate. Nonetheless it led him to stack the cards against the use of state power to achieve ends which might be commendable in themselves but inconsistent with the principle of liberty. His general proposition was “that, since compulsion is an evil, it may be

unjustifiable even when its results are on the whole good; for the intrinsic evil of the compulsion may more than counterbalance the goodness of its results.”⁸ The third premiss which Russell incorporated was a necessary link between liberty and equality. Indeed he worked *from* equality *to* liberty in arguing that since “equal relations are better as ends, and are generally better as means, than unequal ones”, it followed that “the essence of equality consists in the preservation of individual judgment on both sides”.⁹ Thus the system was founded upon a definition of equality in terms of liberty, invoking their common antithesis to the notion of *submission* to suggest their congruence. This afforded, in Russell’s eyes, “a broad argument for democracy and for restricting the interference of government”.¹⁰

These arguments were bold and sweeping in their central postulates; rationalistic in their conception of politics; individualistic in their social analysis; and subject in their practical application to a test of expediency, in that every case had to be “considered on its merits”.¹¹ The general mode of reasoning is unmistakably Utilitarian, in a tradition stretching back through the moral niceties of J. S. Mill to the unyielding logic of Jeremy Bentham. In view of Russell’s own pedigree, this is hardly surprising. He once wrote to Harold Laski: “I discovered accidentally from an old envelope used as a bookmark that at the moment of my birth my father was reading Bentham’s *Table of the Springs of Action*. Evidently this caused me to be Benthamically ‘conditioned’, as he has always seemed to me a most sensible fellow.”¹² At a technical level, to be sure, Russell had come to reject the philosophical apparatus of Utilitarianism, especially the attempt to derive moral principles from the calculus of pain and pleasure. (This is the burden of a discussion of ethics which he broached with Gilbert Murray in 1902.)¹³ But at a common-sense level, Russell’s political language was stamped with the sort of Utilitarian reasoning which had proved so serviceable to nineteenth-century radicalism. Thus when he argued against A. V. Dicey’s views on woman suffrage, at least both men were working from the same fundamental premisses. It was left to Russell to instruct Dicey (of all people) that “the community is only the sum of the individuals”.¹⁴ Moreover, Russell’s general advocacy of woman suffrage was linked back, time and again, to a Utilitarian view of democracy. The contention that women were inherently inferior to men in the exercise of political judgment was treated as a special case of the general imputation of unfitness to the disfranchised. Russell therefore extended to women the classic Utilitarian objection against a limited franchise, that “a class excluded from power will have its interests almost certainly neglected”.¹⁵

Russell thus tended to represent the issues he cared about in Edwardian politics as the unfinished business of the nineteenth-century reform movement. The language of radicalism was larded with an interpretation of history which was Whig in more senses than one. There was nothing

unusual in a hopeful applicant, addressing the Bedford Liberal Association, beginning in this way: “We find ourselves in the midst of a political crisis of the very greatest importance—the most important, in my opinion, since 1832.”¹⁶ Any forthcoming election is perennially the most momentous choice the British people have had to face since one or other resonant date conjured up from a mythical past. Russell’s readiness to subjugate his iconoclasm to the rigamarole of the party hack may be all that can be inferred from his opening with this cant phrase. In closing, however, who but the grandson of Lord John Russell would have spoken so proprietorially of inaugurating “a long era of Liberal ascendancy and beneficent reform such as resulted from *our* victory in 1832”?¹⁷ As far as the conflict between the Liberal Government and the House of Lords was concerned, Russell found sustenance in the Whig tradition, looking back to the way the peers had been overawed during the Reform Bill crisis. Moreover the quarrel had been faithfully kept up within the family and Bertrand Russell recalled Lord John’s widow, Countess Russell, inveighing against the position of the Lords at the time of Gladstone’s second Home Rule Bill in 1894.

The way was prepared, therefore, for Russell, despite his own roots in the aristocracy, to broaden the issue into one of democracy in general, which allowed him, of course, to elevate the disfranchisement of women to prominence alongside the pretensions of the House of Lords as the two grave anomalies needing attention. Born a Whig, Bertrand Russell effortlessly appropriated the style and values of the radical tradition in speaking to the concerns of the Edwardian Liberal Party. At Bedford in 1910, he claimed that there were “two great connected issues to decide, the one constitutional, the other economic”.¹⁸ On the first, as we have seen, his position was coherent and, with the link to woman suffrage, innovative. What did he mean by the second?

2 *Economic Liberalism*

The great issue here, of course, was free trade versus tariff reform. After Joseph Chamberlain had launched his campaign for tariff reform in May 1903, Russell soon became caught up in the controversy, and during the year 1904 he published a number of polemical comments, including one major essay (“The Tariff Controversy”) in the *Edinburgh Review* upon the fiscal question. It is not immediately obvious why he should have devoted so much energy to the subject at a time when his work on the *Principia* was making strenuous demands upon him. Maybe he felt the call of duty here since, although persuaded that he himself “ought to pursue philosophy”, as he told Gilbert Murray in 1902, “I had (and still have) no doubt that by doing economics and the theory of politics I could add more to human

happiness.”¹⁹ The fact that he was adept in the sort of reasoning with which the issue was infused may have stirred him to intervene, for when he did so, he showed an impressive mastery of the abstract logic of classical economics. By treating the issue in this way, which was admittedly standard practice on the free-trade side, Russell was able to show that the rough-and-ready demotic appeal of the cry for protection rested upon intellectual foundations which were logically fallacious. The satisfaction of demonstrating this, as against the frustration of watching the fallacy go unrefuted, must have made a strong appeal to Russell’s temperament.

At the time he wrote, the term tariff reform covered three proposals, which it was one aim of Russell’s analysis to distinguish from each other: namely, retaliation (as urged by Balfour), preference (as urged by Chamberlain), and the general cry for protection. (A fourth aim was later to be declared, in the use of tariffs to provide revenue, but this possibility was dormant in 1904). The differences in emphasis and approach between the three aims were widely recognized, not least by Chamberlain, who privately expressed his scorn for retaliation. There was a natural tendency, however, for the Liberals to denounce as protectionists all those who departed from the established policy of free trade, and to this extent, Russell’s dissection of the arguments introduced a kind of precision which was a polemical rarity. In particular, he made it clear that the objections to retaliation were of a different order from the objections to preference or protection.

Russell pointed out that retaliation was inconsistent with the other forms of tariff reform in that it aimed at increasing, not decreasing, foreign trade. He summarized Balfour’s position thus: “If we want imports, we must have exports; our exports are being more and more shut out by tariffs; how, he asks, shall we get purchasing power to pay for the imports of food and materials that are necessary for us?”²⁰ Moreover Russell acknowledged that this line of argument was perfectly logical. The issue here was one of practical expediency and judgment as to whether other countries could in fact be induced to dismantle their tariff walls by the actual or threatened imposition of retaliatory duties by Britain. Russell, of course, considered that this was a vain hope, but he did not impugn the consistency of the argument for retaliation.

When Russell came to protection, however, the urbane agreement to differ was replaced by a somewhat different tone. As far as his examination of dumping was concerned, the appraisal was carefully measured, with empirical examples to sustain his conclusions. Likewise, in considering the alleged threat to trades which were desirable from a national point of view—“not a strictly economic argument”, as was acknowledged on all sides—Russell cited a number of specific examples to the contrary, quite apart from his *a priori* disinclination to accept the tariff reformers’ disparagement of “jam and pickles”.²¹ But the crux of the case against tariff

reform rested on demolishing two propositions of the Chamberlainites: that manufactured imports diminished home employment and “that the free-trade case supposes a mobility of labour and capital from trade to trade which does not, as a matter of fact, exist”.²² Russell stated these as separate contentions but they were so closely related as to drive him in effect upon a common refutation. This refutation was emphatic and forthright. The notion that imports displaced domestic labour was categorized as “a sheer mistake”,²³ and the reason Russell lapsed into this sort of language was surely because, for all his deference to the trade statistics, it was here that his case turned upon logical axioms.

Russell had prefaced his treatment of protection with a claim that he would examine the case for free trade, not as it had traditionally been enshrined by the repeal of the Corn Laws in 1846, but as it applied to the new conditions of a generally protectionist world. “The old orthodox defence of free trade”, he wrote, “rested upon the advantages of division of labour, combined with the fact of differential advantages in production in different countries. A given expenditure of labour and capital can produce, in Russia, more corn than iron; in England, more iron than corn. Consequently both England and Russia will be richer if Russia sends corn to England and England sends iron to Russia.”²⁴ By offering this summary of the Cobdenite position before going on to examine the new lines of attack developed by the Chamberlainites Russell surely aroused an expectation that he would subsequently advance a correspondingly refined or revised line of defence.

It is accordingly rather a surprise that his counter to the tariff reform claim on employment—the “sheer mistake”—should read thus:

If labour and capital are allowed to find their most profitable employment, which is the result of free imports, they produce more wealth, demand is stimulated, and wages and employment increase. If, on the other hand, prices are raised by protection, there is a diminution in demand, and therefore there is less employment.²⁵

What is this but a restatement of the all-round advantage conferred by the division of labour within a rationally operating free market? We are still in a world where smiling English iron-smelters congratulate themselves on their good fortune in finding friendly Russian corn-reapers ready to jump at the happy chance of a mutual exchange of their wares. But Russell’s patronizing demonstration that it is simply fallacious to suppose otherwise depends, of course, upon the actual existence of this frictionless world of hypothesis.²⁶ His answer on whether employment will be diminished, in short, relies absolutely upon his answer on whether complete mobility between factors of production can be presumed. All he has to say on this point is that the

processes of adjustment are likely to be gradual and hence likely to operate without undue friction or hardship to labour.

It can be seen, therefore, that Russell's case really rests upon a singularly pure extrapolation from the axioms of classical economics. He did not accept that this was a beautiful theory rendered obsolescent in a fallen world. As he wrote to Elie Halévy, who had suggested as much: "I don't agree with you that any of the arguments of '46 were unsound or have become inapplicable."²⁷

Russell was undoubtedly happiest on the high ground of theory, which suited his talents so well. As Beatrice Webb noted in 1901, "in his thought he is almost violently impatient of bad reasoning; a right conclusion come to by bad arguments is offensive to him: it is the *perfection of the reasoning* that he seeks after, not truth of the conclusions."²⁸ Again in June 1902 she pointed to his "faith in an absolute logic, absolute ethic, absolute beauty, and all of the most refined and rarefied type."²⁹ The rejection of qualification, compromise and uncertainty were all of a piece with this. "A proposition must be true or false; a character good or bad; a person loving or unloving, truth-speaking or lying."³⁰ The defence of free trade lent itself to rigorously sustained, black-and-white judgments of this kind when it was conceived as a refutation of the doctrine of protectionism.

When it came to the case for imperial preference, Russell was less engaged, except insofar as he could reduce it to a corollary of protection. Thus he took a special delight in identifying an internal inconsistency in the rationale of preference: "The inherent difficulty of the situation is this: all the arguments employed to demonstrate the advantage which we should derive from protection apply even more strongly to the colonies, and are believed by them to be sound."³¹ Russell had characteristically transmuted a practical point about the difficulty of implementing a scheme of reciprocal preference into a concern with "the perfection of the reasoning".

Preference lay at the heart of Chamberlain's proposals, and closest to his own heart in that it directly subserved his imperial dream. By 1904 Russell rejected both the means and the end. True, in his published writings he did not affront imperial sentiment to its face; but in his private journal he wrote in July 1903 that "the Empire has come to seem to me not worth preserving."³² It seems clear from his correspondence with Louis Couturat that the tariff reform campaign had served to clarify his views. "I am passionately for free trade; moreover, I have completely abandoned imperialism."³³ This reappraisal gave Russell's economic defence of free trade a further resonance. He laid it at the door of the "ugly side" of imperialism that it had "encouraged the belief, now accepted as almost axiomatic, that whatever benefits one nation must harm another, and vice versa."³⁴ Thus protection must be good for Britain if British tariffs were bad for Germany.

Russell saw this sentiment as the chief driving-force of protectionism.

Perhaps it drew his peculiar wrath because it was so despicably *unenlightened*: uniting a meanspirited international outlook with a wrong-headed assessment of self-interest. "The only cosmopolitan element in the Free Trade case", he maintained, "is that Free Traders are unwilling to forego an advantage to their own country merely because the securing of that advantage incidentally benefits other countries also."³⁵ The Liberal vision of mutual enrichment was challenged by a self-defeating view of trade as a zero-sum game, enlisting national prejudice to the impoverishment of all—the economics of the dog in the manger. Hence Russell's propensity in 1903 to become "wildly excited about Free Trade; it is to me the last piece of sane internationalism left, and if it went I should feel inclined to cut my throat."³⁶ To this one need only add that there may have been a further reason for Russell to spend so much time in the service of the Free Trade Union in 1904—addressing perhaps as many as seventeen meetings between January and March. The position of Ivy Pretious as the secretary of the Union may well supply the final key to Russell's conduct here, making all those inconvenient visits to its London offices, and those awkward overnight absences from his wife, vividly worthwhile.

3 *Social Liberalism*

When Chamberlain claimed that the free traders were still in thrall to the doctrine of *laissez faire*, he plainly had some truth on his side. To the leaders of the Fabian Society, the problem was likewise how to resist what Beatrice Webb called "this recruiting of reactionary enlightenment".³⁷ Bernard Shaw pressed this conclusion most forcefully with his assertion: "We are necessarily anti-Free Trade, anti-Manchester, anti-*laissez-faire*, anti Cobden and Bright, anti all the Liberal gods."³⁸ In defending free trade, the Liberals were indeed reverting to the historic canon of their beliefs. They stood upon the status quo, in an essentially negative posture.

This comes out clearly in Russell's correspondence with Halévy in 1903–05. Russell was fairly shrewd in seeing that Chamberlain was unlikely to succeed because of the strength of "the forces which make against him". In listing eight factors which would defeat him, he was really pointing to vested interests dependent on free trade, existing sentiment and myth about cheap food, and the difficulty of forcing through a constructive policy against the weight of influential opinion, especially in the civil service. "Mere Conservatism counts for something, and is on our side", Russell concluded.³⁹ It was an odd position when the ostensibly radical party could take comfort from the immobilism of a complacent nation in order to check a challenging initiative from its opponents. The frustration of the Fabians can be well understood in this situation, and Halévy more dispassionately

drew Russell's attention to the neglected implications. "I only wonder," he wrote in March 1905, "what the Liberal party will look like when it comes again into power. I see but two possible political alternatives before England. A radical party, with a programme that should be hostile in the same time to imperialism and military expenses and to the legal privilege of the big landowners. But I do not see the shadow of a ghost of such a party and as a mere conservative free-trade party the Liberal party is doomed. Or a Conservative party, with a kind of German state socialism programme."⁴⁰ It was the second of these alternatives which the Fabians were inclined to back in 1903–04, indicating an important parting of the ways within the collectivist or social democratic left.

The social democratic thrust of Liberal policy, which was manifested from 1907, belatedly met the challenge of tariff reform by developing an active social policy with inescapable financial implications. By 1909–10 the Liberal Party had made a decisive break with *laissez faire* in social policy. Its legislative proposals on old age pensions, sickness insurance, and unemployment marked a new sort of state intervention in fields where the unregulated free market had hitherto imposed its own imperatives. The inception of expensive welfare programmes, at the same time as the Liberals agreed to meet the costs of heavy armaments, meant an abandonment of the old cry of retrenchment. The Gladstonian rules of public finance were subverted, first by Asquith's 1907 Budget and more comprehensively by Lloyd George's People's Budget of 1909. Free-trade finance now meant finding from direct taxation the new revenues which the big state needed, and which tariff reformers insisted could only come from the adoption of their policy.

The fiscal theory of the New Liberalism rested heavily on the assumption that progressive taxation, especially on high incomes, was able to tap an unearned surplus, which was essentially a social creation. If the surplus was in this sense unearned by those at present drawing it, it followed that there was both a moral and an economic justification for its appropriation through taxation. Morally, the present owners had no claim upon it and it was thus being reclaimed on behalf of the community which had created it. Economically, the fact that it was unearned meant that it was not a reward for services rendered, so taxation could not impair the incentives needed to sustain productive effort. Stated in this way, the justifying theory owed much to the writings of J. A. Hobson; and the attempt to relate earned and unearned income to what he distinguished as a productive and an unproductive surplus is peculiarly his. But this way of specifying the relation of service to reward, and the state's role in adjusting it, did not wait upon Hobson's mature exposition. It rested intrinsically upon the Fabian theory of rent, which was developed in the late 1880s and which remained the rock upon which a non-Marxist scheme of gradualist collectivism was founded.

In short, this dimension of the New Liberalism ought to have been well understood by anyone who was familiar with the work of the Fabian Society.

Russell's links with the Fabians went back to the early days of his marriage to Alys Pearsall Smith in the 1890s. Beatrice Webb wrote in 1895 of Russell as among "a certain set of young people all more or less devoted to the Fabian junta."⁴¹ In 1897 she listed the Russells among "a stream of young radicals coming and going with easy familiarity, a sort of outer circle of the 'Bo' family."⁴² Russell's assistance to the London School of Economics in its early years helped bring him into contact with the Webbs, and in later years they came to stay at Friday's Hill, notably nine weeks in 1902. There was plenty of opportunity for the Webbs to subject Russell to a prolonged permeation with Fabian thinking, even apart from his own active inquiries into socialism. It is not surprising, therefore, that Russell should have adopted a view of the Boer War much more in sympathy with the constructive imperialism of *Fabianism and the Empire* than with the pro-Boer radicalism of Hobson's *Imperialism*. Sidney Webb reported in March 1900 that the Russells were "in the best of spirits, keen about the war, and eager to get on foot a sane theory of Imperialism; anxious to federate the Empire and so on."⁴³ The rationale of this link between Fabianism and Liberal Imperialism was indicated by Beatrice Webb in 1902 when she wrote: "the leaders of the other school of Liberalism are extremely distasteful to us: we disagree with them on almost every point of home and foreign policy. Before we can get the new ideas and new frame of mind accepted, we must beat out the old."⁴⁴ This was the fundamental point of divergence between the Fabians and those like Hobson and Hobhouse who spoke instead of a New Liberalism which sought to capture the spirit of the old Liberalism on behalf of collectivism rather than seeking to exorcise it.

Russell's adherence to this kind of Fabianism, however, proved short-lived, as indeed did his marriage. "At the beginning of the war," he wrote later, "I was an imperialist more or less. In the middle of it, for other reasons, I had a sudden 'conversion', a change of heart, which brought with it a love of humanity and a horror of force, and incidentally made me a pro-Boer."⁴⁵ The reference here is to his semi-mystical encounter, while staying with the Whiteheads in February 1901, which began an emotionally charged relationship with Evelyn Whitehead. There is no doubting the force of this experience; but Russell may well, in retrospect, have telescoped into a moment a change of heart which in reality took much longer to work through into his political outlook. A further influence upon him, in his relations with the Fabians, was his friendship with Graham Wallas, who was undergoing his own maturing crisis of confidence over the course on which Fabianism seemed set. Neither Russell nor Wallas precipitated a sudden break over the issue of the Boer War itself, but the logic of an imperialist

policy became increasingly distasteful to them.

By the time the Webbs launched their social imperialist dining club, the Co-efficients, in the autumn of 1902, it ought already to have been plain that Russell was an untrustworthy recruit. But Beatrice Webb was most reluctant to let the friendship wane, having taken Alys for three weeks' holiday in the Italian Lakes once she had noticed the strains of the Russell marriage. "We must try to see them often as I think we are a bond between them", Beatrice Webb wrote to Sidney in July 1902;⁴⁶ and possibly the invitation to the Co-efficients had a kindly personal motive behind it. Russell was thus from the outset a most unlikely Co-efficient, and there is little surprise that he fell out with the rest in an abrupt and spectacular manner. It can be accepted that he found the imperialist fervour of Hewins, Amery and Mackinder offensive, even if the account in the *Autobiography* of a prescient denunciation of Grey's faith in the Entente, face to face across the table, seems too good to be true.⁴⁷ "We have felt that you were out of sympathy with the Co-efficients and are prepared for your resignation", Beatrice Webb wrote to Russell in late May 1903.⁴⁸ In this context, the tariff reform crusade was the last straw. To Graham Wallas, the protectionist assumptions with which Shaw infused the tract, *Fabianism and the Fiscal Question*, provided a final reason for leaving the Fabian Society in February 1904. Russell had already resigned in December 1903.

On the rebound, Russell reverted to a kind of Liberalism which extenuates much of Beatrice Webb's characterization of the party of *laissez faire*, and may well have given her some of her evidence. She wrote in her diary in May 1904; "The Bertrand Russells still affectionate and personally interested have cooled in comradeship—he is becoming every day more decidedly Whig and abstract in his political thought—impatient with our criticism of the Liberal opposition and our constant re-iteration of the need for concrete knowledge."⁴⁹ When Russell came forward at Bedford in 1910, the social democratic side of the Government appeal went almost wholly by default. "Two alternative means of raising revenue are before the country," he proclaimed: "Tariff Reform and Taxation of Land Values."⁵⁰ The land issue was thus pressed into service as the core of the Liberal appeal, giving it a prominence far beyond its financial contribution to the Budget and virtually ignoring the Government's social measures. To be sure, many New Liberals showed an interest in the land, as much for its ideological as its immediate fiscal significance. For them it was a means of generalizing propositions about unearned income from rent to the other factors of production which sustained the rentier in industrial society. Little trace of this analysis, however, can be found in the Liberal case as Russell put it in 1910.⁵¹

Conclusion

For all his commitment to the political ends of Liberalism, and for all his fierce espousal of economic liberalism in defence of free trade, Russell seems to have been almost unaffected by the social dimension which Edwardian Liberalism was developing. The new Liberalism of Hobhouse and Hobson seems to have passed him by, in a way that, given his temperament and his exposure to the appropriate influences, remains rather a puzzle. There is one answer which some would urge in explanation. This would be that Russell's political outlook is to be explained by his philosophical position, and in particular his rejection of Idealism. There is a reading of the New Liberal political theory which sees it as centrally dominated by an Idealist view of the state and of morality: working out the neo-Hegelianism of T. H. Green into an ambitious harnessing of the general will to collectivist action by government. Yet the correlation between Idealism and collectivism is surely not strong enough to bear such weight. When Bernard Bosanquet, as the leading English Idealist, advocated a principled individualism, and when Hobhouse, as a prominent critic of Idealism, became the spokesman for collectivism, what explanatory value is left?⁵² The fact that Russell was at one time an Idealist, only to reject Idealism later in the 1890s, on a time scale quite out of keeping with any change in his political opinions, looks like a red herring. Russell's political allegiances can better be traced in terms of the political and personal influences to which he responded. This makes for a more messy picture but one that is perhaps more lifelike.

The effect of the First World War upon Russell's views is not a subject which can be tackled here. It is enough to say that his utter disapproval of the war brought about his disillusionment with the Liberal Party, from which he resigned in 1915. He warmly agreed with the line the Independent Labour Party had taken on the war and considered joining it. "But I am not a socialist," he wrote, "though I think I might call myself a syndicalist."⁵³ It was a trend in his thinking susceptible of rapid extension, so that by the end of 1917 he was ready to plead the case for Guild Socialism. My suggestion is that although Russell broke with the Liberal Party largely on account of the war, his social views needed a real measure of reconstruction before he could decently join the Labour Party. The Labour policy admittedly fell short of an outright espousal of socialism, and in its practical implications it lay well within the parameters of the New Liberalism of the Edwardian years. Hence many of Russell's contemporaries were able to make the transition without fuss. Russell's distinctively high-and-dry radicalism, however, which had a political thrust and an economic thrust before 1914, nonetheless almost entirely lacked a social dimension, and it was left for the First World War to convert him.

Notes

- 1 *The Autobiography of Bertrand Russell*, 3 vols. (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1967–9), 2: 15.
- 2 Russell to Maurice Amos, 16 June 1930, in *The Autobiography of Bertrand Russell*, 2: 195.
- 3 Peter Clarke, *Liberals and Social Democrats* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), p. 195; cf. Clarke, “The Progressive Movement in England”, *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 5th ser., 15 (1974): 177.
- 4 Ronald W. Clark, *The Life of Bertrand Russell* (London: Jonathan Cape and Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1975), p. 119.
- 5 Russell to Lady Ottoline Morrell, April 1911 #48. Quoted in Clark, *op. cit.*, p. 168.
- 6 “On the Democratic Ideal” in *The Collected Papers of Bertrand Russell*, Vol. 12, eds. Andrew Brink, Margaret Moran and Richard A. Rempel (London: George Allen & Unwin, forthcoming), p. 250.
- 7 *Ibid.*, p. 255.
- 8 *Ibid.*
- 9 *Ibid.*, p. 248.
- 10 *Ibid.*, p. 256.
- 11 *Ibid.*, p. 255.
- 12 *The Autobiography of Bertrand Russell*, 2: 177.
- 13 *Ibid.*, 1: 157–9.
- 14 “Anti-Suffragist Anxieties” in *The Collected Papers of Bertrand Russell*, 12: 307.
- 15 “The Status of Women” in *The Collected Papers of Bertrand Russell*, 12: 262.
- 16 “Address to the Bedford Liberal Association” in *The Collected Papers of Bertrand Russell*, 12: 297.
- 17 *Ibid.*, p. 303 (emphasis supplied).
- 18 *Ibid.*
- 19 *The Autobiography of Bertrand Russell*, 1: 158.
- 20 “The Tariff Controversy” in *The Collected Papers of Bertrand Russell*, 12: 195–6.
- 21 *Ibid.*, pp. 208 ff.
- 22 *Ibid.*, p. 201.
- 23 *Ibid.*
- 24 *Ibid.*, p. 200.
- 25 *Ibid.*, p. 201.
- 26 Cf. Keynes’s later statement: “Free trade assumes that unemployment is an abnormal break in prosperity of which one should not take account. It assumes that if you throw men out of work in one direction you re-employ them in another. As soon as that link in the chain is broken, the whole free trade argument breaks down.” Private evidence to the Macmillan Committee, 28 Feb. 1930, in *The Collected Writings of John Maynard Keynes*, Vol. 20, ed. Donald Moggridge (London: Macmillan, Cambridge University Press, for the Royal Economic Society, 1981), p. 117.
- 27 Russell to Halévy, 2 Sept. 1903.
- 28 Beatrice Webb, *Our Partnership*, eds. Barbara Drake and Margaret I. Cole (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1948), p. 217, entry for 1 July 1901.
- 29 *Ibid.*, p. 243, entry for 5 June 1902.
- 30 *Ibid.*
- 31 “The Tariff Controversy”, p. 211.
- 32 Clark, *op. cit.*, p. 120.
- 33 Quoted in Richard Rempel, “From Imperialism to Free Trade: Couturat, Halévy and Russell’s First Crusade”, *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 11 (1979): 127–8.
- 34 “The Tariff Controversy”, p. 213.
- 35 “Mr. Charles Booth’s Proposals for Fiscal Reform” in *The Collected Papers of Bertrand Russell*, 12: 226.
- 36 *The Autobiography of Bertrand Russell*, 1: 170.
- 37 Beatrice Webb’s diary, 6 Jan. 1904: Passfield Papers, British Library of Political Science.
- 38 Shaw to E. R. Pease, 30 Sept. 1903: Shaw Papers, British Library, Add. Mss. 50557, ff.71–3.
- 39 Russell to Halévy, 21 Aug. 1903.
- 40 Halévy to Russell, 4 March 1905.
- 41 *Our Partnership*, p. 128, entry for 8 Oct. 1895.
- 42 Beatrice Webb’s diary, 24 May 1897.
- 43 Sidney to Beatrice Webb, 7 March 1900, in *The Letters of Sidney and Beatrice Webb*, Vol. 2: *Partnership 1892–1912*, ed. Norman Mackenzie (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, published in co-operation with The London School of Economics and Political Science, 1978), p. 126.
- 44 *Our Partnership*, p. 228, entry 28 Feb. 1902.
- 45 Clark, *op. cit.*, p. 86.
- 46 *The Letters of Sidney and Beatrice Webb*, 2: 163.
- 47 See H. G. Wells, *Experiment in Autobiography*, 2 vols. (London: Gollancz and The Cresset Press, 1934), p. 765; and *The Autobiography of Bertrand Russell*, 1: 153. The Co-efficients receive a trenchant analysis in Geoffrey Searle, *The Quest for National Efficiency: A Study in British Politics and Political Thoughts, 1899–1914* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1971).
- 48 *The Letters of Sidney and Beatrice Webb*, 2: 185.
- 49 Beatrice Webb’s diary, n.d. (but this passage is dated May 1904 in *Our Partnership*, pp. 290–2).
- 50 “Address to the Bedford Liberal Association”, p. 299.
- 51 My reading of Russell’s views at this juncture thus differs in emphasis from that put forward in the useful article by Richard Rempel, *op. cit.*, pp. 424, 441–2, where it is suggested that Russell was closer to the New Liberalism. Insofar as this suggestion applies to the years 1911–14, however, it may well be correct, pointing to the influence of Lady Ottoline Morrell in extending Russell’s political sympathies.
- 52 The best demonstration of this point is in Stefan Collini, “Hobhouse, Bosanquet and the State: Philosophical Idealism and Political Argument in England, 1880–1918”, *Past and Present*, 72 (Aug. 1976): 86–111.
- 53 Clark, *op. cit.*, p. 256.