

Discussion

Bertrand Russell, Karl Marx, and *German Social Democracy revisited*

by Paul Gallina*

IN HIS PREFACE to the 1965 edition of *German Social Democracy* Russell writes: "The point of view from which I wrote the book [in 1895] was that of an orthodox Liberal. It was not until 1914 that I became a member of the Labour Party. I have made no attempt to modify the book in a way compatible with my present opinions. I have left it as an historical document, in which a former writer comments on a former world."¹ Here Russell, with nearly seventy years of hindsight, suggests there are some important limitations to his first published book, but has decided to leave it unrevised. It is surprising, then, that Jack Pitt's recent article in this journal, "Russell and Marx: Similarities and Differences", should discuss *German Social Democracy* in such an uncritical light.

In the following, which is for the most part a critical commentary on Pitt's article, two areas of concern will be discussed. Section I analyzes aspects of the intellectual history of the period along with Russell's own intellectual development in order to reassess some of the issues which concerned him in *German Social Democracy*, particularly Lecture I, "Marx and the Theoretical Basis of Social Democracy". Section II turns briefly to the similarities and differences between Russell and Marx on religion and labour.

I

Near the beginning of his discussion Pitt suggests: "The net effect of the book is to force one to choose between the oppressed and impoverished associations of German workers, and an unpleasant assortment of autocratic and unscrupulous Prussians. Russell, as usual, does not disguise

where his sympathies lie."² Undoubtedly Russell's sympathies in this case lie with the workers. But to suggest that this is the net effect of the book is to miss a second, very central debate. Certainly the concomitant concern for Russell in his first book is the debate taking place among the various associations of German workers, specifically the Marxist and non-Marxist social democrats. On this score Russell's sympathies are clearly with the latter.

It appears that at the core of Russell's criticisms of the Marxist social democrats is an abhorrence of the fatalism of their political perspective—something he would share with many Western Marxists.³ As he explains: "There is an almost oriental tinge in the belief, shared by all orthodox Marxians, that capitalistic society is doomed, and the advent of the communist state a foreordained necessity" (pp. 6–7). Whether or not Russell correctly interprets Marx will be discussed later. For the moment, let us concentrate on Russell's assessment of the "Marxist" social democrats.

According to Russell, as a result of this fatalism German workers affiliated with the Marxist social democrats were not anxious to participate in trade unionism, in agrarian reforms, or in attempts to collaborate with other parties. There may be some truth to Russell's account, but it is certainly not the whole truth. Eduard Bernstein, a leading figure in the German social democratic movement (who would later influence the Fabians), was at the time critical of Russell's account. His hitherto neglected review (reprinted below in the Appendix) gives an alternative account.⁴ In essence, Bernstein suggests that most refusals of the Marxist social democratic movement to participate in agrarian reforms or collaborate with other parties were purely tactical moves since it did not want to appear to have a disunity of purpose. The movement could not

² Jack Pitt, "Russell and Marx: Similarities and Differences", *Russell*, nos. 37–40 (1980): 10.

³ Here Russell is dealing with perhaps the major historical split within Marxism, which, as Carl Boggs notes in *Gramsci's Marxism*, "revolved precisely around this basic issue: whether politics should be conceptualized as the reflection of 'deeper' economic and social processes in a society, or whether it has (or should have) an independent and creative role to play in socialist transformation" (London: Pluto Press, 1976, p. 11). For a reading of Marx which stresses his non-deterministic contingency, see José Porfirio Miranda's *Marx Against the Marxists* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1980).

⁴ Eduard Bernstein, "[Review of *German Social Democracy*]", *The Progressive Review*, March 1897, pp. 562–4. This review is identified as Bernstein's in Achim v. Borries' Introduction to his translation of *German Social Democracy (Die deutsche Sozialdemokratie)*, Berlin: J. H. W. Dietz, 1978, p. 30, the manuscript being among his papers. Von Borries refers also to a lengthier German review by Bernstein, "Die deutsche Sozialdemokratie in englischer Beleuchtung", *Die Neue Zeit*, 5th year, vol. 1 (1897): 431–6.

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¹ London: Allen & Unwin, 1965, p. v. First published in 1896.

see how it could represent the interests of the labouring peasants and landowning farmers at the same time. In a talk to the Fabian Society in 1896 entitled “German Social Democracy, as a Lesson in Political Tactics”,⁵ Russell reiterates his points against the political inflexibility of such fatalism and shows his sympathies for the non-Marxian Von Volmar, and for one of the fathers of German socialism, Ferdinand Lassalle.

Readers of *Russell* unfamiliar with these early writings might wish to take note of Russell’s admiration of Lassalle. In a little-known confessional essay entitled “Self-Appreciation: Orlando” (written in 1897), Russell notes, “I think Spinoza and Lassalle attract me as much as any one in history.”⁶ Not only did he admire Lassalle’s “rather aristocratic Socialism”,⁷ but there was a personal attraction to this charismatic figure fighting the forces of evil, so characteristic of Russell particularly in later life. Russell reveals: “The secret of his influence lay in his overpowering and imperious will, in his impatience of the passive endurance of evil, and in his absolute confidence in his own power” (*German Social Democracy*, p. 42).

To return to political economy, the two pillars of fatalism inherent in the Marxist position to which Russell wishes to draw attention are the concepts of surplus value and the monopolization of capital. To put this discussion in Lecture I of *German Social Democracy* in the context of the whole work, it seems to me that what Russell is trying to do is to debunk these two concepts in order to prepare the ground for his support of the non-Marxist social democrats later in the book. Now what does Pitt have to say about Lecture I?

Wrongly Pitt begins by suggesting that Russell’s account of Marx and political economy emerged out of thin air “without any support from his intellectual environment or encouragement from specific individuals” (p. 10). Just the opposite was the case. Socialism and often Marx himself were extensively and often bitterly discussed in Britain in the 1880s and 1890s in such leading periodicals as the *Contemporary Review*, *Westminster Review*, and *Fortnightly Review*⁸—so much so, in fact, that the

theologian W. Douglas Mackenzie was to observe in May 1890, “It is felt by every student and every statesman, even by every one who reads the newspapers, that Socialism is ‘in the air’.”⁹ Moreover, Russell’s reading in economics was directed by one of the chief formulators of utility theory, Alfred Marshall, who gave Russell in 1894 a list of books to read, and invited him back for more specialized titles.¹⁰ This is to say nothing of the trip Russell and his wife Alys took to Germany early in 1895 in order to study economics. Who specifically influenced Russell on this trip is difficult to ascertain. However, from Alys’s scrapbook we do know that he at least had meetings with Liebknecht.

Compounding the error of Russell’s intellectual isolation, Pitt goes on to suggest that “It is apparent none of the reviewers knew enough about surplus value or Marx’s theory of history to discuss these issues at the level of Russell’s presentation” (p. 10).¹¹ On the contrary, at least three reviewers were eminently qualified to assess Russell’s efforts: Eduard Bernstein, already cited; William Harbutt Dawson, perhaps the leading English interpreter of German social democracy and author of *German Socialism and Ferdinand Lassalle* (1888); and Henry W. Macrosty, a member of the Fabian executive.

Before going on to assess the originality and correctness of Russell’s criticisms of Marx, it might be useful to cite some key passages from these reviewers. Certainly the most critical was Bernstein, who wrote:

The first chapter of the book is in our opinion the least successful. Mr. Russell tries here to analyse the theoretical basis of the Socialism of German Social Democracy, viz., the theories of Karl Marx, and for this enterprise he is hardly sufficiently equipped. He seems to have read more *on* the literature in question than *of* it, some of the more important publications of Marx, and his co-worker Engels, being not even mentioned in his books consulted. Errors committed by earlier critics of Marx and long since refuted, reappear in this book in the full blossom of youth.

He criticized Russell’s use of sources in other respects as well. In a more sympathetic tone, the conservative Dawson wrote:

⁵ Now published in *Cambridge Essays, 1888–99*, edited by K. Blackwell, A. Brink, N. Griffin, R. A. Rempel and J. G. Slater, Vol. 1 of *The Collected Papers of Bertrand Russell* (London and Boston: Allen & Unwin, 1983), pp. 312–18.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 73.

⁷ *Freedom and Organization* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1934), p. 443.

⁸ For invaluable perspectives on the early introduction of Marx’s thought in Britain, to which this author is particularly indebted, see Eric Hobsbawm’s “Dr. Marx and the Victorian Critics” in his *Labouring Men* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1964), and Kirk Willis’s “The Introduction and Critical Reception of Marxist Thought in Britain, 1850–1900”, *Historical Journal*, 20 (1977): 417–59.

⁹ “The Socialist Agitation”, *Westminster Review*, 133 (May 1890): p. 495. Quoted by Willis, “Introduction”, p. 418.

¹⁰ *Cambridge Essays*, p. 306.

¹¹ For a more complete assessment of how *German Social Democracy* was received, see Willis, “The Critical Reception of *German Social Democracy*”, *Russell*, nos. 21–22 (1976): 34–45. Unfortunately, he was unaware of Bernstein’s review, perhaps the most enlightening.

After a paraphrase of Marx's Communist Manifesto—a production which is described as “magnificent”—there is a lucid exposition of the theories of surplus value and the concentration of capital, with an acute and judicious examination of their defects and incompleteness. It is traversing old ground, but such a statement and critique were necessary in any adequate treatment of the German socialist movement.¹²

And finally, an ambivalent assessment by Macrosty on Russell's Lecture I noted that it was “generally acute, though occasionally trivial and sometimes unjust”.¹³

Dawson's reference to Russell “traversing old ground” does indeed suggest that there is little original material in the latter's critique of Marx. This may not be entirely surprising. For as Hobsbawm comments: “Marx's works, though voluminous, are limited in size; it is technically impossible for more than a certain number of original criticisms to be made, and most of them were made long ago” (p. 239). Whether this was true in 1895 may be disputed. However attempted refutations of Marx from the perspective of utility were already well developed by the time Russell was writing. The Jevonian Philip H. Wicksteed suggested that: “Exchange value itself is always immediately dependent, not upon ‘amount of labour’, but upon abstract utility.”¹⁴ Another critic, John Rae, remarked that “Marx's radical error lies in defining value in terms of labour only, ignoring utility.”¹⁵ Compare the similarity of these two positions with Russell's: “commodities have also another common quality, utility namely, or the power of satisfying some need” (*German Social Democracy*, p. 17). There is no evidence to suggest that Russell was familiar with either Wicksteed's or Rae's writings (although it would be strange if he were not). However, there is evidence to suggest that he was aware of the work of Jevons himself.¹⁶ To answer, then, Pitt's concern with Russell's originality, it is clear that the *form* (utility theory) of Russell's criticisms is by no means original, and in matters of *content* he shares a great similarity with other Jevonians.

Besides the question of originality, another crucial question is: do Russell's criticisms illustrate a good understanding of Marx, or in other

words, to what extent are Bernstein's criticisms on this point valid?

In a review of the first English edition of Volume I of *Capital*, George Bernard Shaw revealed possibilities for misunderstanding Marx which I think are applicable to Russell. Shaw wrote:

For Marx, in this first book of his, treats labour without reference to variations of skill between its parts; or raw material without reference to variations of fertility; and of the difference between the product of labour and the price (wages) of labour power, as “surplus value” without reference to its subdivision into rent, interest, and profits.... Some economists, too confident to do more with any new treatise than dip into it here and there, have supposed that Marx himself was ignorant of the considerations he purposely omitted, and have discussed him with a contemptuously adverse decision which they will some day, possibly, be glad to forget.¹⁷

To be sure, the purpose of *Capital* is not primarily to account for price in the capitalist economy (the concern of utility theorists), but rather to discover the secret of value independent of existing social relations, *i.e.* capitalism, and to discover and explain exploitation within the capitalist system. In short, it is not a theory of prices at all, but one of exploitation. It is not surprising, then, that Russell's youthful understanding of Marx is flawed—he is accusing Marx of not discussing phenomena he purposely set out not to consider.¹⁸

Later, in *Freedom and Organization* (1934), Russell reconsiders the question of surplus value. The first part of his analysis is a more sophisticated attempt to criticize Marx for his failure to account for price. He then appears to grasp Marx's intentions in *Capital* when he suggests there may be ethical content to Marx's account which attempts to deal with the question of economic justice (pp. 235–41). Unfortunately, he does not deepen this analysis. On the question of monopoly capital in this work, Russell does a complete about-face from Lecture I in *German Social Democracy*. In the later work, one of the four points for which he

¹² “[Review of *German Social Democracy*]”, *Economic Journal*, 7 (June 1897): 248.

¹³ Macrosty, *Fabian News*, 7 (June 1897): 15.

¹⁴ “*Das Kapital: A Criticism*”, *Today*, n.s. 3 (1885). Quoted by Willis, “Introduction”, p. 444.

¹⁵ *Contemporary Socialism* (London: W. Isbister, 1884), p. 156. Quoted by Willis, *ibid.*

¹⁶ “I have not urged the fundamental objection, which I might have derived from Jevons's theory of value ...” (*German Social Democracy*, p. 20).

¹⁷ “Karl Marx and *Das Kapital*”, *National Reformer*, 7 August 1887, p. 85.

¹⁸ Willis never makes this evaluative defence of Marx anywhere, and appears to be very sympathetic to reading Marx from a liberal perspective. Marx himself was very aware of the distinction between value and price, and although he saw no need to make it in Volume I of *Das Kapital*, he did make it in *Value, Price and Profit*, originally given as an address to the First International in 1865. To go into these distinctions would require more than another article. For an elementary commentary on Marx's theory of value, see G. D. H. Cole's *What Marx Really Meant* (London: Gollancz, 1934), particularly pp. 207–49. For a more advanced and recent discussion, see Diane Elson, ed., *Value: The Representation of Labour in Capitalism* (London: CSE Books, 1979).

considers Marx to be a man of supreme intelligence is his discovery of the law of concentration of capital, passing gradually from competition to monopoly (p. 252). Again it is unfortunate that for a man with such insight, Russell does not anywhere reconsider these questions in detail.

In order to fill out our picture, let us now briefly look at what Russell says about Marx in his *History of Western Philosophy* in the following passage written fifty years after his first book:

He [Marx] disclaimed always all ethical or humanitarian reasons for preferring Socialism or taking the side of the wage-earner; he maintained not that this side was ethically better, but that it was the side taken by the dialectic in its wholly deterministic movement.... It is only because of the belief in the inevitability of progress that Marx thought it possible to dispense with ethical considerations. If socialism was coming, it must be an improvement.¹⁹

Interestingly enough, here again one finds hints of the fatalism first mentioned in *German Social Democracy*. Whereas one might be kinder to Russell's misrepresentations in his earlier work since in 1895 many of Marx's works were not yet available, Russell's later work also demonstrates a limited knowledge of Marx's writings (particularly the early works), and a cursory and simplistic treatment of the theory of historical materialism.

Hence, to conclude against Pitt's critique again, there should be little wonder on his part why Russell's first book has been overlooked by contemporary Marxists—it is hardly original, and does not demonstrate a good knowledge of Marx.

II

Now that I have completed my comments on Pitt's account of some issues in *German Social Democracy*, I turn to his presentation of Russell's and Marx's ideas about human labour in general. Whereas their views on religion are similar and occupy the same degree of insignificance in their philosophical writings, this is not the case for labour. Indeed, there are significant similarities with Marx on labour in the two passages quoted by Pitt, both from *Principles of Social Reconstruction* (1916). However, even though Russell devoted much of his time to social concerns, from a philosophical perspective the problem of labour is at best a peripheral one for him. Marx, as the world's leading social philosopher, allows himself no such luxury, and aside from his doctoral dissertation, the

problem of labour is a *leitmotif* of his thought.

The moral position completely missed by Russell is that Marx believes that human labour is not only exploited in capitalist society, but also that in this context it denies men and women the exercise of what are essentially human capacities. In other words, the exploitation of labour is seen as the fundamental source of alienation. Marx's solution to the problem is that of a revolutionary. Russell, on the other hand, as Pitt correctly suggests, believes that the problems of human labour can be resolved within capitalism. His solution to the problem is that of a reformist.

Undoubtedly there are truths to both these solutions—revolutionary and reformist—particularly in different times and places in history. It is their fundamental irreconcilability, however, which results in the differences of opinion on the German social democratic movement.

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APPENDIX: BERNSTEIN'S REVIEW

German Social Democracy. Six Lectures by Bertrand Russell, B.A. With an Appendix on Social Democracy and the Woman Question in Germany by Alys Russell, B.A. (London: Longmans, Green and Co.)

WRITTEN ON THE whole in a fair and judicious spirit, and based upon close observation of the movement it describes, Mr. Russell's book gives much valuable information on the great Social Democratic party in Germany. The general aims, the conditions and the methods of the party are faithfully presented, whilst the author's criticism is throughout that of a progressive democrat.

The first chapter of the book is in our opinion the least successful. Mr. Russell tries there to analyse the theoretical basis of the Socialism of German Social Democracy, viz., the theories of Karl Marx, and for this enterprise he is hardly sufficiently equipped. He seems to have read more *on* the literature in question than *of it*, some of the most important publications of Marx, and his co-worker Engels, being not even mentioned in his list of books consulted. Errors committed by earlier critics of Marx and long since refuted, reappear in his book in the full blossom of youth. We cannot enter here into details, but we are prepared to prove this statement point by point.

Although the chapters dealing with the party itself are incomparably better, they are, however, not free from mistakes. Mr. Russell is a shrewd observer so far as his searchings go, but too often he is content with criticising things from their outward appearance—with what we may call skin-deep analysis.

Take, *e.g.*, his presentation of the recent discussions, in the ranks of the party, on the agrarian question. According to the picture he gives it would appear as if

¹⁹ Revised ed. (London: Allen & Unwin, 1961), p. 753. First published in 1945.

the great majority of German Socialists, the "orthodox" Marxists at their head, preferred to have no agrarian programme at all rather than concede that peasant proprietors were not to be eaten up by big capitalists, root and branch. But this was not at all the question at issue. The real question was whether the party could consistently advocate measures which to some seemed apt to promote rather the interests of labour-exploiting farmers than those of labouring peasants. Those who negatived the agrarian programme proposed at Breslau in 1895 did nowise object to all its clauses; they rejected it because it was in their opinion contradictory. Mr. Russell's quotations are in this respect quite misleading. He only refers to reports, most of them abridged, of speeches. But the copious articles in the *Neue Zeit* and other papers on the subject, seem not to have existed for him.

The main idea which lies behind this agrarian and other discussions, is the question whether Social Democracy, since it has become a strong party, shall retain its character as the party of the wage-earners, or become, in enlarging the circle of its clients, a radical or "peoples" party tinged with collectivism. No doubt under the present condition of Germany, even as such it might find useful work to do. But the great majority of its members thought concentration of purpose the more appropriate course. That this does not necessarily mean an impossibilist sectarianism, is proved by the fact that even amongst the adherents of this view there are advocates of an occasional co-operation with other advanced parties. They deem such an occasional compromise for a distinct purpose preferable to confusion in the ranks of the party.

Mr. Russell denounces with vivid colours and just disgust the police rule in Germany. But his picture is not free from exaggeration. Local exploits of police over-zeal must not be taken as examples of the state of the whole country, the nominal power of the government not be confounded with its actual possibilities. Here again Mr. Russell is misled by his too empirical way of looking at things. He does not seem to realise clearly enough how all this semi-feudalistic survival is powerless against the growing industrialism of the country and its concurrent social evolution. In stating this we do not mean to say that Mr. Russell is not justified when, in his concluding remarks, he expresses the wish that a better state of mind may obtain in the ranks of the ruling classes in Germany. They could, indeed, do better than endeavour to repress the irrepressible.

As to the Social Democratic party, Mr. Russell's pious wish is that it may lose something in logical acumen, and "adopt, in its political activity, maxims, really inconsistent with its fundamental principles, but necessitated by practical exigences". This, because he does not care to see it reduced in numbers, which might be the result of a precipitate revision of its fundamental principles. But here again he seems to be on the wrong track. He takes recent cases of deviation in action from proclaimed theory as a new departure, whilst, as a matter of fact, such deviations have always occurred, and in former years more frequently than to-day. The real evolution of the party has been one in the direction of closer identity of programme and action, proclamations and possibilities, and it seems to us most desirable that this should continue.