Russell and his detractors

by Peter G. Cranford

TO THE RUSSELL admirers who have been shaken by emotionally powerful but essentially irrelevant recent criticism, an examination of detraction itself may afford possible degree of objectivity. On the surface the posthumous attack on Russell is comparable to the attack on the corpse of Mussolini after he was executed, or the attack of primitive people upon the carcass of a feared tiger. Beneath the surface, detraction is a universal phenomenon.

Detraction is related to rivalry, and more specifically to the phenomenon of the pecking order. This in turn is a method which the herd uses to establish leadership and to strengthen the genetic pool. More primitive yet is segmental ascendency in certain worklike organisms so that the destruction of the "head" is replaced by its adjacent segment; thus "leadership" in the organism is assumed by a sort of president-elect. It seems obvious that the system has biological survival value, unfortunate though it may be for the man who is assassinated, or for the bull who is gored to death or ostracized by one of his matured sons.

From this tendency we have gossip as a spin-off, a much maligned human trait which is nevertheless useful to grand juries. We have seen the above relished in the attacks on Russell's personal life, the lampooning of ex-President Ford's stumbling, and the lascivious criticism of President Carter (when he was a candidate for that office) for an interview in *Playboy* in which he acknowledged the existence of personal lust. Beyond "Love me, love my dog", we feel "Love me, love my ideas" . . . as many Ph.D. candidates have found in working with their major professor. When attacked ideas happen to be existential defences, we may well become frightened or angry.

Some attacks are not stimulated by rivalry or by threatening ideas. They stem from the inherent excitement of controversy and Russell did his share of stirring things up . . . but rarely simply for effect.

Lately, Russell has been assailed from a number of sources, expected and not expected. This will continue for a long time because of the huge pool of potential critics he created. He attacked all religions, traditional sex and morals, communism, capitalism, naked force and pyschological force. The pool could well serve to populate the world government he so ardently desired. It is testimony to the tenacious power of rationalism that he was not the most hated man on earth.

On one side of the rivalry coin there is detraction. On the other is praise—though faintly lettered. Praise is a Johnny-come-lately attribute of man. It is generally used only when it suits our purposes—as when we promote the political candidate least likely to injure us and most likely to fulfil his promises. Individual praise pushes others up in the pecking order and is subconsciously repressed. Detraction pulls others down and raises us in the pecking order.

All this is understandable and must be realistically faced. However, it need not be depressing. The giving of justified praise, though most difficult to exercise, can become a more prominent characteristic of man. Instincts can be greatly modified in humans when it is generally realized that such modification is to the advantage of both the individual and society. Skinner has demonstrated the great power of reward, both material and psychological, in influencing behaviour. Detraction cannot compare with reward as a motivating force. More and more the non-productive aspects of criticism are being bared by psychologists, and more and more it is seen that the key to influencing others is in altruism and its derivatives.

I do not know of anything that costs less and contributes more to the sum total of human happiness than the cultivated habit of seeking out legitimate things to praise in others. Russell has more need for praise now than when he was alive and could handle his detractors with relative ease.

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