The incompatible prophecies

by Harry Ruja

Louis I. Greenspan. *The Incompatible Prophecies: An Essay on Science and Liberty in the Political Writings of Bertrand Russell*. Oakville, Ontario: Mosaic Press, 1978. 80 pp. C$3.95 (paper); $8.50 (cloth).

THE THESIS OF this slim but compact monograph, as the title suggests, is that Bertrand Russell was moved by two opposing forces in his thinking on political theory: one cherishing science as a key to the rational organization of society which would promote mankind's well-being, the other apprehensive of the power of the tyrant who uses modern technology for oppression and self-aggrandizement. "The liberal faith", says the author, is "the conviction that a scientific ordering of human affairs is compatible with liberty" (p. 25). But Russell came to question this article of the liberal faith. The world may very well need to be "dragged" to freedom, he came to suspect, through force.

What brought Russell to disenchantment with liberalism? The events of August 1914 both in the government chambers and in the streets of London, the turn towards tyranny in Russia following the Bolshevik Revolution, accomplanied as he saw in Lenin by cynical disregard of mass suffering, the rapid spread and success of fascism in the 20s and 30s, the irrational nature of men's impulses, the docility and apathy which are displayed at the expansion of capitalist monopoly, and the waging of imperialist war—all persuaded him that men's attachment to liberalism is tenuous, anemic.

Russell's loyalty to freedom as an end never wavered, but he doubted profoundly that liberalism could bring it to pass on any wide scale. "Just as the substitution of orderly government for anarchy in the Middle Ages", he wrote in *New Hopes for a Changing World* (Allen and Unwin, 1951, p. 77), "depended upon the victory of the royal power, so the substitution of order for anarchy in international

relations, if it comes about, will come about through the superior power of some one nation or group of nations".

Thus, though Russell had no sympathy for the idol of nationalism, he found himself forced to acknowledge that it was an indispensable first step on the road to internationalism. Peace among nations, he believed, could be achieved only by means of a world government which in effect represented the dissolution, or at least the diminution, of the sovereignty of nations—but paradoxically only through force exerted by a superpower could that world government be established. In short only nationalism can destroy nationalism.

Though it was widely misrepresented and misunderstood, this in effect was the reasoning of his notorious proposal in 1947 to threaten the USSR with the atom bomb if it did not agree to the internationalization of the major implements of war. It is refreshing to find Greenspan not repeating the canard that Russell *advocated* bombing the USSR. The critics of Russell failed to distinguish between advocating and threatening and ignored the rationale of the proposal.

Though worldwide peace can be achieved only by force ("owing to men's folly", Russell adds cynically) and tyranny is likely to prevail for a considerable period thereafter, eventually, Russell supposed, a high level of material comfort for the general population will be achieved, fear of sudden death by war or revolution will diminish, and gradually freedom will spread.

This reminds us all, as Greenspan remarks, of the Marxist conceit that the dictatorship of the proletariat will in time be dissolved as the state "withers away".

Greenspan skillfully brings to our attention remarks by Russell explicating this issue which continues to confront us, and stimulates our thinking on it as Russell himself did.

Greenspan took advantage of his proximity to the Bertrand Russell Archives at McMaster University, where he is associate professor of religious studies, to seek out and to quote meaningful and important passages from Russell's unpublished writings relating to this issue. Pedant that I am I took the trouble to verify his quotations from Russell's published writings, and to my dismay I discovered that Greenspan's documentation is not wholly reliable. The wrong book, the wrong volume number, the wrong year, the wrong page number—all these bibliographical errors appear. Punctuation and capitalization are changed, Russell's words are replaced by others, a passage is presented as if quoted but in fact it is paraphrased, and occasionally (but rarely) an omission of a phrase changes the intent of a sentence.

None of these flaws, which may have resulted from careless transcription or proofreading or from the ill-advised efforts of an overzealous editor to improve on Russell's style, affects the thrust of Greenspan's exposition and interpretations. They are sound and merit study of all who seek better understanding of a central issue in political theory for our time, no less than for Russell's.

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