

# Russell and Marx: similarities and differences

*by Jack Pitt*

THERE ARE TWO purposes which I hope may simultaneously be served by what follows. One is to draw our attention to a portion of Russell's first published book, *German Social Democracy*. This seems worth doing in itself since it is both a very good book and one which has been largely passed over. The second purpose of these remarks, one which necessarily is entwined with the first, is to promote our understanding of Russell by comparing and contrasting certain of his beliefs with those of Marx. Rudyard Kipling has a poem which contains the line:

Who knows England  
Who only England knows?

In a similar spirit we might ask:

Who knows Russell  
Who only Russell knows?

Part of understanding a philosopher is to see him in perspective, and in juxtaposition with other writers. Where possible, then, we should build bridges between Russell and other philosophers just as he was always ready to give credit for his most original ideas to other people.

One may wonder if it has been Marx's notoriety in the Western world which has been responsible, in part, for the failure to give Russell's first published book the attention it deserves. *German Social Democracy* (1896) opens with a quotation from Engels, and while he and Marx are subsequently criticized, their opponents, the Kaiser and Bismark, are severely castigated or ridiculed. 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.

Another hurdle, at least for the non-specialist, is that the first chapter of *German Social Democracy* is far from easy going. It presupposes enough sophisticated economic theory to discourage anyone who is not convinced that he must find out what Marxism is about. And for most of this century most of us have not had that conviction. It is precisely here, I think, that Russell's genius is at work. For without any support from his intellectual environment or encouragement from specific individuals, Russell was motivated to do an enormous amount of reading, in both English and German, of many of the works of Marx available to him. And he saw immediately the theoretical significance and the immense social implications of the material before him. Unfortunately his audience was not prepared to understand his excitement. One indication of this is in the reviews the book received. 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. Less excusable, but compatible with this unfortunate result, was the absence, in the appropriate professional journals, of any response to the philosophical portions of the book. And that is the way it was going to be. Even sixty years later when Britain was to produce philosophers interested in Marx, they would write as if *German Social Democracy* had never been written. (I have in mind Lord Acton's *The Illusion of the Epoch*, 1955, and J. P. Plamenatz's *German Marxism and Russian Communism*, 1954.<sup>1</sup>)

What did Russell think of Marx way back in 1896? Of the *Communist Manifesto* he writes: "For terse eloquence, for biting wit, and for historical insight, it is, to my mind, one of the best pieces of political literature ever produced".<sup>2</sup> "In this magnificent work we have already all the epic force of the materialistic theory of history" (pp. 13–14).

But his admiration for Marx's outrage, and for his sense of historical drama by no means blunts his critical faculties. He makes a number of important distinctions and objections which display a considered and confident command of the material at his disposal. I shall note a few of them.

<sup>1</sup> For an excellent, detailed study of the early history of British reactions to Marx, see Kirk Willis's "The Introduction and Critical Reception of Marxist Thought in Britain, 1850–1900", *Historical Journal*, 20 (1977), 417–59.

<sup>2</sup> *German Social Democracy*, new ed. (London: Allen & Unwin, 1965), p. 10.

(a) He distinguishes Marx's views from the more rigid form in which they are expressed by Engels. As a result,

(b) he does *not* attribute to Marx a simplistic economic determinism. He writes, "To judge the work of Marx ... from a narrow economic standpoint, is to overlook the whole body and spirit of its greatness."

(c) But he does recognize in Marx a very subtle and unusual theory of historical inevitability. To quote again, "Marx rests his doctrine [his theory of history] not on the justice preached by Utopia mongers (as he calls his socialist predecessors), not on sentimental love of man, which he never mentions without immeasurable scorn, but on historical necessity alone ..." (p. 14).

(d) Perhaps the most prescient, the most perceptive distinction Russell draws is between Marx's labour theory of value and his materialist theory of history. The two do not stand or fall together. It was a long time before others arrived at the same conclusion. What makes this an especially remarkable combination of insight and detective work is the jumbled-up form in which Marx's ideas reach the reader, in particular the reader of eighty years ago who could not profit from advances in editorial procedure.

Russell is strongly critical of Marx's labour theory of value. Very precisely and in some detail he itemizes its deficiencies from the standpoint of a version of the utility (supply–demand) theory. What would be of interest would be for someone with the appropriate background in the history of economics to evaluate the originality of Russell's criticisms. Was he voicing standard objections current at the time, or were at least some of his criticisms original? His manner of exposition suggests he thought the latter. Certainly nowhere else is his knowledge of economic theory so vividly and consistently displayed.

With regard to Marx's theory of history, Russell is necessarily more circumspect since we are here within a world view of enormous proportions. He is obviously sceptical of historical inevitability, but he respects Marx's erudition, and finds himself in agreement on many specific issues (for instance the exploitative nature of the medieval Church). Russell is at a disadvantage here which was not present in his discussion of economic theory. There he had a ready-to-hand alternative to Marxian economics. But he is without a rival view to place beside Marx's theory of history. His Hegelian period does not seem to have included adherence to Hegel's philosophy of history, and the only other alternatives would have their source in religion. Probably his eventual position was that no theory of history

was, in practice at least, feasible; all of them rested on too little evidence and too much romance.

Under these circumstances what I should like to do now is select two topics, religion and human labour, with a view to noting a few similarities and differences in the respective approaches of the two men.

*Religion:* By any ordinary standards both Russell and Marx were unbelievers. They were each convinced theology was, at the least, misplaced human effort and both men were extremely critical about the historical role of the Church in political and social affairs. But beyond this broad sense of agreement there are interesting differences of emphasis and elaboration.

Towards the end of his book on Leibniz Russell lays out in some detail his refutation of the traditional arguments supporting the existence of God. In many places he comments on the lack of evidence for immortality and other religious beliefs. He even gives us assessments of some major religious leaders. In all this activity he is concerned with a particular kind of truth, truth as conceived by the mathematician or physicist. And upon examination the alleged truths of religion turn out, he believes, to be factually false. As a good scientist he allows he could be wrong—hence, I presume, his preference for calling himself an agnostic rather than an atheist.

Marx, on the other hand, makes no attempt to refute the claims of religion in the customary philosophical sense. The question whether any of these claims might be true is never seriously raised. His premise is that were religion to be right, the world would be different. History has already refuted religion.

Towards the end of “Why I Am Not a Christian” Russell writes, “Religion is based, I think, primarily and mainly upon fear. It is partly the terror of the unknown and partly ... the wish to feel you have a kind of elder brother who will stand by you in all your troubles and disputes. Fear is the basis of the whole thing....”<sup>3</sup> In this passage Russell is addressing a very Marxian kind of question. It might be phrased as follows: “Why is it that a body of false ideas can exert widespread, deep rooted influence over a very long stretch of time?” Usually, as in the passage just quoted, Russell responds to this question, as did Freud, at the psychological level. Marx could agree with this type of response, but he could not hold it to be sufficient. For him religion was an ideology, a set of false ideas systematically, though not necessarily consciously, used in the interest of the ruling

class by keeping the ruled class ignorant of their true condition. What most of us learn first about Marx on religion is that he said it was the opium of the people. It is useful to recall the lines that precede that phrase: “Religious suffering is at the same time an expression of real suffering and a protest against real suffering. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the feeling of a heartless world and the soul of soulless circumstances. It is the opium of the people”.<sup>4</sup> Like real opium, religion puts people in a state of mind where they no longer think straight, and since they cannot think straight their capacity to act intelligently in response to their circumstances is correspondingly curtailed. And also, as in the case of real opium, the diffusion of religion is sanctioned and encouraged by those most likely to profit thereby.

Both Russell and Marx call for the passing away of religion. Referring to fear, which he has cited as the psychological source of religion, Russell writes, “Science can help us get over this craven fear in which mankind has lived for so many generations. Science can teach us ... no longer to look around for imaginary supports, no longer to invent allies in the sky, but rather to look to our own efforts here below to make this world a fit place to live in instead of the sort of place that the churches in all these centuries have made it” (*German Social Democracy*, p. 22).

Marx shared Russell’s early optimism as to the possibilities of science, and would have found it easy to agree with this passage. He himself puts the matter this way: “The abolition of religion as the illusory happiness of the people is the demand for their real happiness. The demand to give up the illusions about their condition is the demand to give up a condition which requires illusion” (“Towards a Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right”, p. 64). Russell, I believe, would agree.

*Human Labour:* If there is one cultural phenomenon more widespread and more fundamental than religion it is human labour. But few famous philosophers or theologians have written about it. Once one does inquire seriously into it one finds it becomes the basis of an entire social philosophy.

Russell and Marx both did take human labour seriously. Both were appalled by the forms it has taken throughout most of human history, and both regarded one aim of social analysis to suggest a new environment in which human labour can occur.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Karl Marx, “Towards a Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right”, in *Karl Marx: Selected Writings*, ed. David McLellan (Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 64.

<sup>5</sup> There is an opportunity for detailed investigation of the extent to which Russell assents to

<sup>3</sup> *Why I Am Not a Christian* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1957), p. 22.

What I propose to do at this point is to outline the initial phase of the problem of human labour in a way I believe would be acceptable to each philosopher. I shall then adduce a few quotations designed to validate and enlarge upon the encompassing character of my outline. And finally I shall note why they differ as to the type of response the problem requires.

To survive we must satisfy certain primary needs. Since we are not Adam and Eve, our initial position is within a world wherein ways of coping with hunger, thirst, weather variations, etc., already exist. If we are to survive we must adopt these or new ways of coping. This pursuit envelops us; we may not notice, therefore, that the manner in which we obtain what is necessary to our existence concurrently shapes our existence. Put another way, since work involves sustaining ourselves biologically and socially, it would be wrong to say we work *in order* to live. Working (labouring) *is* living; the job is inseparable from its ambience.

It is through human labour that the goods and services of society are produced and distributed. Inevitably working involves entering into relations with others. These relations are basically relations of power which only later may be sanctioned by law as contractual relations. One way this power manifests itself is in the capacity of employers, owners, or controllers to answer, and to implement the answers to, a set of questions which determine in depth how the daily lives of subordinates are to be passed. High among such questions is: "What kind of work do we want done?" This will decide what kind of employment is available, and this in turn determines how subordinates will be able to satisfy their needs. Since Marx and the early Russell wrote, unions have arisen in some countries which sometimes have the interest of their members at heart. But if we consider the world at large, the owners or controllers usually have the power to determine how the tasks of the subordinates are to be organized. In so deciding they answer questions regarding how, when, and where a job will be done. They prescribe the required qualifications for employment, and determine the disposition of the product produced. Because of this imposed passivity subordinates live much of their lives by proxy.

and embellishes upon Marxist claims. A beginning could be made by rereading pertinent passages from *Roads to Freedom* (1918), *Freedom and Organization* (1934), and *Power* (1938), in addition to the works cited herein. Neglect of this topic surely springs in part from Russell's antipathy towards Lenin and the Russian revolution. But our eye should be on what Russell says about capital, class oppression, and related subjects, and not on his opinions of personalities and current events.

Russell endorses and embellishes upon this picture when he writes:

... the chief defect of the present capitalist system is that work done for wages very seldom affords any outlet for the creative impulse. The man who works for wages has no choice as to what he shall make: the whole creativeness of the process is concentrated in the employer who orders the work to be done. For this reason the work becomes a merely external means to a certain result, the earning of wages. Employers grow indignant about the trade union rules for limitation of output, but they have no right to be indignant, since they do not permit the men whom they employ to have any share in the purpose for which the work is undertaken.<sup>6</sup>

Russell develops this idea further in the following passage.

The whole wage-earning system is an abomination, not only because of the social injustice which it causes and perpetuates, but also because it separates the man who does the work from the purpose for which the work is done. The whole of the controlling purpose is concentrated in the capitalist; the purpose of the wage-earner is not the product, but the wages. The purpose of the capitalist is to secure the maximum of work for the minimum of wages; the purpose of the wage-earner is to secure the maximum of wages for the minimum of work. A system involving this essential conflict of interests cannot be expected to work smoothly or successfully....<sup>7</sup>

Marx expresses similar concerns regarding the social arrangements within which human labour occurs.

[Human] labour is exterior to the worker, that is, it does not belong to his essence. Therefore he does not confirm himself in his work, he denies himself, feels miserable instead of happy, deploys no free physical and intellectual energy, but mortifies his body and ruins his mind. Thus the worker only feels a stranger. He is at home when he is not working and when he works he is not at home. His labour is therefore not voluntary but compulsory, forced labour. It is therefore not the satisfaction of need but only a means to satisfy needs outside itself. How alien it really is is very evident from the fact that when

<sup>6</sup> *Principles of Social Reconstruction* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1916), pp. 136–7.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 138–9.

there is no physical or other compulsion, labour is avoided like the plague.... The external character of labour for the worker shows itself in the fact that it is not his own but someone else's, that it does not belong to him, that he does not belong to himself in his labour but to someone else.... The result we arrive at then is that man (the worker) only feels himself freely active in his animal functions of eating, drinking, and procreating, at most also in his dwelling and dress, and feels himself an animal in his human functions.<sup>8</sup>

We all know Russell and Marx responded differently to the problems posed in organizing human labour. What I have tried to suggest is that to a considerable degree they saw the problems in similar terms. In 1916 Russell thought capitalism could be contained, presumably by governmental restriction, and that a little capitalism could serve a useful purpose by keeping people on their toes. For Marx, capitalism is simply the most recent of a series of interlocking economic systems, one destined to self-destruct, but thereby giving birth to a society free of exploitation, free of scarcity, and free of fear. I would be pleased to be able to agree with either of these scenarios since each contains an optimism about the future which I do not share. We have, I believe, come to the end of optimism. That does not mean pessimism must reign; we could, after all, have realism. But that is another story.

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<sup>8</sup> "Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844", in McLellan, ed., p. 80.