

Russell, Fascism and the Thirties

Tues, 4 Sep 1997

{Ray Monk was arguing that Russell was politically inactive during the thirties, a fact which required an explanation.}

Just a few ideas since I clearly have not read or thought as much about these matters as either Ray, Ken or K.S.

1) Ray mentions two burning questions for the nineteen thirties: 'What to do about unemployment?' and 'What to do about Nazism?'. But there were at least two other issues that were equally important at least in the context of British politics: 'What to do about the Empire and specifically India?' (a question K.S. has alluded to already) and 'What to do about the rise of Communism?' Now, it seems to me that Russell held, and I think advocated, strong opinions on both these topics. If I am not mistaken, he thought the British should get out of India. And though he was not in favor of either economic or military action against the Soviet Union, he was in favor of mobilizing democratic opinion on the Left to counter the spread of Bolshevik ideas. He thought that these ideas would lead to a disaster both for democracy and the working class if they were widely accepted. Thus his many writings on the Practice and Theory of Bolshevism *constitute* political action, since what he was committed to was a propaganda war. I should not need to remind Ray that words are deeds!

2) Right up to 1939 (and perhaps thereafter) it was reasonable to regard Stalin as a far worse tyrant than Hitler. Stalin was *already* responsible for several (perhaps up to six) million deaths by 1933 when Hitler came to power since this is about the number that died during the period of 'collectivization' and the ensuing terror famines in the Ukraine and elsewhere. Indeed as a leading member of the Bolshevik regime he bears his share of responsibility for the millions of deaths that occurred in the Civil War Period. Hitler did not institute a policy of genocide (as opposed to a

policy of pogroms and persecution) against the Jews until well into the war. Now nobody, then or now, seems to have thought that it would have been a good idea to rearm with a view to levying a war against Stalin despite his monstrous crimes. Why not? a) Because no vital national interest was at stake. Russia posed a political rather than a military threat to the capitalist democracies of the West. People were worried about subversion rather than invasion. As I have noted, Russell was already doing his bit for democracy on the ideological front. b) A war of liberation against the communists would not have met with popular support and would have been horrific in its consequences. (Think of the numbers who really DID die on the Eastern Front during WWII) It might well have added to the pile of corpses without doing any good. Thus even anti-communists were not in favor of a crusade against a regime that had already committed crimes at least as bad as those that Hitler was to commit. Why then was it right and rational (as Ray seems to think) to prepare for and even to launch a war against a regime that up to that time had been far less murderous? Answer: Because Hitler's Germany unlike Stalin's Russia was an expansionist power with ambitions to take over a sizable proportion of the world. . So it was, but was this obvious at the time? Right up to takeover of Czechoslovakia after the Munich Settlement it might have looked as if Hitler's desires were more modest - to unite all or most of the German-speaking peoples in one powerful nation-state and to wipe away the humiliations of Versailles. It is true that *Mein Kampf* said otherwise, but observers may be forgiven for taking his rantings with a pinch of salt. After all, Mussolini was nearly as prone to tough guy talk and military posturing yet it must have been obvious to all by the nineteen thirties that he was pretty much of a marshmallow. Neither France nor Britain lived in fear of Italian expansionism.

3) Thus the simple fact that Hitler's regime was evil did not constitute a good enough reason for rearming or for risking war with Germany. (At least, if it did, almost everybody else was as wrong about this as Russell.) It was because they wanted to spread this evil about by military means that they deserved to be resisted. If Russell (like many others) did not believe in the military threat his follies become much more excusable.

4) It often seems to me that Ray is a lot more harsh on Russell than he is on Wittgenstein. Wittgenstein can steal the horse whereas Russell is not allowed to look over the fence. For example here is Ray waxing indignant about Russell's naive views concerning the Nazis. It cannot be denied (and Russell himself did not deny it) that Russell's views were silly and that his arguments were stupid. But at least he did not endorse their regime to the extent of wanting to go and live in Germany. Yet W did precisely this with regard to the Communists, and this at a time when their record for crimes against humanity reduced Hitler's doings to insignificance. Ray passes over this with hardly a murmur of criticism. W's argument (such as it was) was that he did not think tyranny was as bad as unemployment, a view which seems to me to display a crass insensitivity to what was really going on. (Not to mention the idiotic work ethic of an industrialist's son who cannot conceive of anything worse than having the hands standing idly about.) You cannot excuse Wittgenstein by saying that he was an unworldly person with no pretensions to political expertise. Here he stands condemned out of his own mouth: 'What is the use of being an expert at some abstruse question in logic or the philosophy of mathematics if you cannot think more clearly than any JOURNALIST about the questions of everyday life?' (I quote from memory.)

5) K.S. is no doubt aware that his account of why non-violent methods worked against the British (in the end) but would not have worked against the Nazis, coincides with Russell's opinion as expressed in his *Autobiography*. Though the British could be brutal (witness Amritsar) there was usually a point beyond which they were not prepared to go. The Nazis had no such inhibitions.

6) There had been so much propagandistic lying about the crimes of Imperial Germany, that many people found it difficult to believe that the Nazis were as bad as they were said to be. I suspect Russell was one of them. Even if he accepted a report at a conscious level his suspicion of the source may have led him to downplay it.

Must stop - my daughters are appearing in a concert.

Charles

Russell on Fascism and Related Issues

Mon, 22 Sep 1997

Ray,

First of all, I am willing to accept that you are right and that during the nineteen-thirties the communists in Britain did not exercise much influence outside the chattering classes. (As I said, I am not anywhere near as well-informed on the subject as you are.) But this does not mean that Russell did not regard his writings on the subject as a form of political action. If a vociferous segment of the chattering classes embraced communism, he might have thought it worth his while to refute them and might even have considered it his political duty to do so. It may be that most of the young communist intellectuals were as fundamentally frivolous as Gilbert Pattison. (I'm not knocking him - he emerges from the pages of your life of Wittgenstein as not only a sympathetic character but a fun person.) But was this obvious at the time? After all some of them were sufficiently serious about it to go off to Spain and risk their lives fighting Franco. And even if communism was not much of an issue domestically it *was* an issue in foreign affairs.

There is a good reason for a writer to attack pernicious ideas that are popular among the chattering classes. What the chattering classes think today often becomes public policy tomorrow. Not always of course but *often*. (After all, you cannot run a government without ideas of some kind and they have to come from *somewhere*.) Recent history provides a case in point. In New Zealand the ideas of the New Right have never been widely popular. No government has campaigned successfully on the basis of a New Right agenda and the one party which gives itself out unabashedly as the representatives of the New Right can only command 6% of the vote. Yet New Zealand is famous as having enacted what is virtually a New Right Revolution. How did this happen? It happened in part because social democratic ideas ceased to be fashionable among the chattering classes whilst the ideas of the New Right became all the rage. The Labour party President, Jim Anderton, who had promoted a number of bright young things from the chattering classes to leading positions in the party, watched with horror as the Labour leadership betrayed the

traditions of the Labour movement. When the voters finally turned against Labour, National came in as representatives of 'the decent society' which meant, if it meant anything at all, some sort of humane and patriarchal conservatism. But his too had ceased to be fashionable among the chattering classes and what we got was another set of New Right ideologues.

Now Russell was well aware that sects among the chattering classes can exert an influence out of all proportion to their size. The philosophic radicals, to whom he devotes so much space in *Freedom and Organization*, were a tiny group but their impact on History (mostly for the good) was enormous. That the communists might have been similarly influential in the long run was surely something that it was reasonable to believe. Since this was, or seemed to be, a real possibility, it was surely reasonable for Russell to devote some of his energies to a theoretical critique of communism. No intellectual however fundamentally frivolous is going to be converted by the rantings of the *Daily Mail*. But some well-written chapters in *Freedom and Organization* might make a difference.

Incidentally, you asked me earlier why I thought FREEDOM AND ORGANIZATION was a good book. I have said something about this already but I want to say a bit more. One good thing about the book is Russell's critique of Marxism. I think very highly of this, and so, I suspect, do many of the best modern Marxists. For two years I taught a course on Analytical Marxism and it seemed to me that the question the Analytical Marxists were trying to answer could be phrased as follows: 'How much of Marxism can be salvaged if we accept (most of) the criticisms of Russell and Popper?' Perhaps they did not have Russell and Popper explicitly in mind (G.A.Cohen's stock opponent is an epigone named Acton) but they certainly seem to be dealing with themes that are raised in the writings of Popper and Russell and have subsequently become common currency. I got fed up with teaching Analytical Marxism for a number of reasons. But one of them was that at the conclusion of their painfully honest labours the answer that the Analytical Marxists come up with is 'Not much.' I found this rather depressing and my class seemed to do so too.

Now back to the thirties. You seem to be arguing that Russell was not much involved in politics in the thirties for the simple reason that he did not have any answers. It is true that he was not much involved in *party* politics, partly because he did not regard the kind of socialism which he favoured as a practical possibility and partly because he does not seem to have had much enthusiasm for the party of which he was a member. 'I do not like [the Labour Party] but an Englishman needs to have a Party, just as he needs to have trousers, and of the three Parties I find them the least painful' (*Autobiography* II p. 195, 1930, see also CPBR 10, p. 292) *Why* he did not like it is not entirely clear but it must have been rather difficult to summon up much enthusiasm for a party led by either McDonald or Lansbury, and even Atlee's sterling qualities may not have been obvious at the outset of his career as leader. But the fact that Russell was not much involved in *party* politics does not mean that he was politically quiescent. Of course, I am not claiming that he was as active as he was during WWI or as he was to be in during sixties. But I think it is wrong to depict him as someone who had abandoned the present for less depressing past.

Your claim is based on the premise that there were TWO burning questions during the thirties: 'What to do about unemployment?' and 'What to do about the Nazis?' He had virtually nothing to say about the first and what he said about the second was silly. I replied that there were (at least) two other questions: 'What to do about Communism?' and 'What to do about the Empire especially India?' Russell's answer to the first question was to mount a propaganda campaign (of a sophisticated and philosophical sort) against communist ideas, whilst his answer to the second question was that the British should get out of India, a view he was prepared to advocate publicly. Your reply is that he was silly to be worried about communism in Britain and that he was not a very active campaigner for Indian independence. My reply to this is that even if he WAS silly to be concerned about the communists, this does not mean that his anti-communist polemics do not constitute a form of political activity, and that his relative inactivity re India would count as taking a strong stand in anyone less energetic. (Ken's latest posting is relevant here.)

Thus we have FOUR burning questions during the 1930s:

1. What to do about unemployment?
 2. What to do about the Nazis?
 3. What to do about Communism?
- and
4. What to do about the Empire especially India?

With respect to 1, he had indeed little to say. He seems to have been a tag-along Keynesian, and as you would expect of a tag-along Keynesian, all he did was make vaguely Keynesian noises.

With respect to 2, he was active in defense of his foolish opinions.

With respect to 3 he may have been mistaken (because communism was not much of a threat), but he WAS active as an anti-communist writer.

With respect to 4, he was sufficiently well-known as advocate for Indian independence that Krishna Menon recruited him as President of the India society.

This looks to me like the portrait of a politically engaged and active person. But that is not the end of the story.

5. The thirties were marked by a disenchantment (or perceived disenchantment) with liberal and democratic values. One way or another, Russell was active in defence of these; FREEDOM AND ORGANIZATION provides a case in point. The nineteenth century showed what could be done by rational debate and parliamentary action.

6. Russell's anti-religious writings had a political dimension to them. The established churches were much more influential during the thirties than they are today and their influence was generally exercised on behalf of reactionary causes. Bothering the God-botherers was a politically charged activity.

7. Sexual politics is a form of politics and this was especially true of Russell's activities as moral reformer since they often had a feminist dimension to them.

So my conclusion is that during the thirties Russell WAS politically active and this was because on a wide range of issues, he thought he had the answers. Whether he was right or wrong is another question.

I have more to say but I must go mark some essays.

Regards

Charles

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