

## The world as jelly

In 1968 John Lewis's book entitled *Bertrand Russell: Philosopher and Humanist*<sup>1</sup> first appeared in print. As a factual account of Russell and his ideas, this volume is ill-considered, patchy, dogmatic and not written with any respect for a deeper understanding of the subject matter. When we ignore the occasional line of praise, Mr. Lewis considers Russell to have been basically a shallow, simplistic fool, an "armchair philosopher", and a man without any practical sense whatever. We are confronted with statements such as the following:

But the activity of a mental factor in determining what we perceive is too evident a fact to be denied. Perhaps Russell missed it because he was not a working scientist, or anything of a mechanic or creator, not even a gardener. He was essentially an armchair philosopher, however intense the cerebration in that recumbent situation. (p. 49)

And again:

But someone has said that he is the only person to be awarded the Order of Merit for writing bad philosophy in impeccable English. (p. 78)

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<sup>1</sup>New York: International Publishers; London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1968, 96 pp.

Finally:

None of his sociological works represent the exact conclusions of scientific thinking. There is in fact no evidence at all of any previous social thinkers being studied. (p. 78)

In short, Mr. Lewis's game is knocking down the straw man - in this case, making the wise seem foolish. His piercing and profound intellect makes short work of *his* Russell. We can but marvel that Marxism can claim within its ranks a thinker of Mr. Lewis's obvious stature, and I am sure that Russell would have welcomed this invaluable critique of his labours.

Russell once said that, by and large, thinkers tend to view the world in one of two ways, either as a blob of jelly or as a pile of lead shot.<sup>2</sup> The "jelly" camp maintains that the world is an homogeneous whole in which each part is only an illusion subsumed within the collective or totality. Thus, according to this view, there are no raisins in my porridge, only porridge which happens to be speckled. The "lead shot" camp, on the other hand, asserts that the world is not homogeneous but rather patchy, and that, for example, the clover which grows in Ireland has or had no direct effect upon the fact that Columbus reached the New World in 1492. This issue of the one and the many, like a road which divides into two directions, admits of no neutral coherent stance. Depending upon which initial turn is taken, much follows from it.

The book illustrates this clearly. Being a Marxist, Lewis cannot tolerate Russell's emphasis upon the discrete particular in epistemology and the unique individual in political or ethical theory. For Lewis, collective entities prevail. Society is different from the sum total of its members and their reactions to one other. There are no grounds for Russell's analysis into "atomic" propositions. The universe, the world, nature and society are all predicated upon the solemn belief that all is jelly. Russell and Lewis are thus fated to be in conflict, which is why Lewis must reject his opinions upon every major assertion.

Now, although both stances originate primarily in what Russell freely admits is a matter of temperament, it still remains to be seen which attitude does more justice to the subject matter. As Mr. Lewis admits, "Emotional immaturity often expresses itself in a dogmatic attitude. It is a sign of maturity to live with an unfinished world-view" (p. 32). Since this is a question of temperament, let us consider which stance expresses a more mature attitude towards the world.

I would argue that in fact Mr. Lewis's attitude expresses a profound paradox, which may be stated as follows. Experience shows that those who predicate their arguments upon the assumption of wholes or collectives are able to do so because their own self-esteem is so large that it allows them to extend it effortlessly for the benefit of others. Recently I had occasion to be visited by several friends, each of whom possessed independent means of transport. When we finally decided to visit some establishment for a drink, one insisted that we should all use his vehicle since ours were two-seaters while his would carry all of us. At first this appeared to be a generous offer, but as the evening progressed it became increasingly apparent that this selfless gesture had been made so that he could ensure himself of the pleasure of driving us wherever his fancy took him. The moral of this tale is that selfishness often shows itself in the most considerate of ways.

Russell once said that those who advocate tyranny usually, if not

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<sup>2</sup>Dear Bertrand Russell (London: Allen and Unwin, 1969), p. 160.

always, covertly see themselves in the position of control. He would argue, I think, that the best cure for such an illusion would be to make them identify with the oppressed rather than with the oppressor. This is the real issue when Russell and Lewis discuss Plato. Russell maintained that Plato was the first true fascist. Those who compare the *Republic* with Orwell's *Brave New World* may be struck by the way in which one man's utopia can be another's hell. Stability in Plato's system is obtained only at the expense of eliminating individual freedom and diminishing those features of civilization which make for the realization of a rich culture. Plato himself can fit within the framework of his Republic in only one of two ways. Either he is the philosopher-king, or he is one of the roving poets upon whom praise is heaped on condition of a quick exit. Most of us would not create a political utopia from which we ourselves were excluded, so that we may assume that Plato considered himself in the former role. Lewis, on his own admission, regards himself as being in the position of power. He states:

Having learned a tolerance which Plato did not possess, we shall not turn him away, but shall certainly point out to him that his message is not sufficient for our contemporary needs, and that, while we owe him a great debt, both for his instruction and for entertainment, we must as regards moral and social enlightenment, turn from him and look for something of greater weight and substance. (p. 73)

Thus Mr. Lewis is willing to exercise both more and less tolerance than Plato. Plato was willing to give due praise to the poet and the threat which he represented was acknowledged as real. Mr. Lewis, on the other hand, proclaims to his subjects that the poet may stay if he is not taken seriously. In short, he remains if and only if his integrity is forfeited. We see that Lewis is already straining at the bit to control our opinions. We note his perverted sense of the word "tolerance", as well as his inclusion of the royal "we", and suggest that Mr. Lewis has missed his calling, that of a B.B.C. censor. In such a post he could obtain a practical outlet for his impulse to control opinion by doctoring the "entertainment" with his own shears.

In conclusion, Russell's view seems more realistic and selfless than that of our worthy Marxist. By concentrating on particulars and individuals, Russell arrives at a more meaningful insight into complexes and the relations in which they are involved. Lewis, on the other hand, while asserting the collective nature of the subject matter, is revealed to be extending his own ego to supplant the independence of others. Just as immature forms of love are often the most crushing kinds of selfishness, in which the illusion of the other is a mere projection of the self, a higher form of love recognizes the limitations of and division between self and other. The analogy holds true for an appraisal of the temperamental positions on the issue of the one and the many. Society is not merely one man writ large, nor is another person limited in himself to only those properties which I am able to detect or appreciate. To Russell, society and reality consist of events both independent of us and more complex than our ability to grasp them. What is added in complexity by such a view affords a proportional increase in richness. Mr. Lewis labours under an illusion stemming from his own immature attitude. He would have been better off had he staked his own claim in a more definite manner. For in the last few decades in which he has been tilling gardens, he has yet to learn where his own property ends.

To return finally to our choice of directions, this point emerges with clarity. The one road leads to freedom while the other offers nothing but disguised tyranny.