

Russell on the 'eighties

by *Louis Greenspan*

BERTRAND RUSSELL IS no longer the household name he once was. This year I offered a course on his social and political writings and only four students, all of them Russell buffs, showed up. When I mentioned this fact to a number of students in another class, I learned, again to my surprise, that most of them had never heard of him.

I believe, of course, that this decline is temporary and that Russell will speak to a new generation. Unfortunately, he was *sui generis*. No one can speak for him, and no one has the versatility to create the Russell that is needed for these times. Russell himself was able to adapt his message to changing generations. Thus the post-World War I generation, which was tired of the old world that had so recently sent itself to ruin, had Russell the revolutionary; and the post-World War II generation, which was appalled by the destruction caused by the ideologues of the left and the right, had Russell the sober rationalist, the defender of empiricism and liberalism.

These changes do not demonstrate that Russell was simply an opportunist ready to follow the crowd wherever it led. Two great themes dominated his life, the theme of liberty and the theme of reason. These themes were not integrated into a harmonious metaphysical system, but rather, from time to time, one had to be asserted against the other. At the end of his life Russell was a

revolutionary allied with revolutionaries. The struggle of the Vietnamese people was a "give me liberty or give me death" struggle, which he supported. I am inclined to think that, had he lived (he was snatched away at the age of ninety-seven), he would now be a rationalist and empiricist, that is, a man of moderation and caution.

Russell held that the most serious problems that mankind had to face arose from the fact that collectively we had not created institutions which would make science and technology beneficial to the human race. He held that the first steps in this direction would be: (1) the establishment of a world government, (2) the creation of a situation of material equality between various parts of the world, (3) a stationary population, and (4) the psychological conviction that progress is possible. Behind all of these is the conviction that the modern world is building intolerable pressure towards war. All of these measures indicate that politically, socially and psychologically the growth of science and technology is bringing the forces of destruction rather than those of creation to the surface, and that progress towards these goals would at last put mankind on the road to paradise.

In the mid-'fifties he came to the conclusion that Russia was more or less satisfied in its territorial aims, had rid itself of the most fanatical parts of the Marxist creed and, though it maintained a detestable internal regime, was at least ready to move in the right direction. America, on the other hand, so Russell believed, was slowly but surely falling into the grips of a fanatical anti-communism, had become berserk with its own power, and was a menace to the future of the human race. He believed, moreover, that the world system that America represented and supported was destined to keep a good part of the human race in poverty and fear.

Since his death the overall situation has become even more dark. New countries have acquired nuclear weapons, with the result that any world government will find it infinitely more difficult to impose itself. Moreover, the communist powers have embarked on wars of aggression: Russia in Afghanistan, China against Vietnam, and Vietnam against Cambodia. Moreover, the fear of a basic shortage of oil means that the spectre of war for maintaining the life-blood of industrial civilization has become a

reality. Thus the whole project of a world government established by some sort of agreement amongst the superpowers has all but evaporated. The rise of the Reagan regime in the United States has underlined this.

There has also been an increase in highly politicized religious fundamentalism. The regime of the Ayatollah Khomeini in Iran, the rise of the so-called moral majority in the U.S., the Gush Emunim in Israel and the pronouncements of the papacy against birth control, would all have alarmed Russell into fearing the rise of a new atmosphere of inquisition.

What would Russell have said in the face of the fact that the extinction of liberal civilization, morally, militarily and culturally, seems at least conceivable?

It is impossible to imagine that he would have given up altogether. I believe that instead of preaching revolution he would be preaching moderation, that is, the Russell of *New Hopes for a Changing World* (1951) would be reincarnated. He would probably join the new "small is beautiful" movement, urging that those who are learning to live with moderation and restraint are creating something like a social and cultural movement that is capable of securing the future.

This hope, combined with measures such as an international authority for supervising the world's energy resources, would have been Russell's essential programme. Can it work? There was one thing about modernity that Russell hoped for—namely, that in the end men would turn to reason rather than destroy themselves. World War I seemed to teach him that they might not opt for reason. But he continued to believe that men would realize their opportunities for constructive internationalism by behaving sensibly.

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