# Is Russell a political philosopher? a critique of his critics

*by Chandrakala Padia*

IS RUSSELL A political philosopher at all? One cannot simply dismiss the question. Russell's political writings are often viewed as mere literary reflections on contemporary politics and, what is worse, as unoriginal, unsystematic, and inconsistent. Such an attitude to his political philosophy is encouraged by Russell's own occasional remarks of the following kind: "I did not write *Social Reconstruction* in my capacity as a 'philosopher'; I wrote it as a human being who suffered from the state of the world, wished to find some way of improving it, and was anxious to speak in plain terms to others who had similar feelings."[1] Further, at times Russell himself labels his political works as mere "potboilers". The critics are more explicit.

In an article entitled "Russell's Judgement on Bolshevism",[2] Antony Flew points out that while discussing Bolshevism Russell not only fails to explain the key idea (or ideas) of "Socialism" but also uses the term in two senses in the same paragraph without bothering to distinguish the two:

> ... the method by which Moscow aims at establishing Socialism is a pioneer method, rough and dangerous, too heroic to count the cost of the opposition it arouses. I do not believe that by this method a stable or desirable form of Socialism can be established.[3]

[1] "Reply to Criticisms", in *The Philosophy of Bertrand Russell*, Vol. 5 of *The Library of Living Philosophers*, ed. Paul Arthur Schilpp (La Salle, Ill.: Open Court, 1971), pp. 730–1.

[2] In *Bertrand Russell Memorial Volume*, ed. George W. Roberts (London: Allen & Unwin; New York: Humanities Press, 1979), pp. 428–54.

[3] *The Practice and Theory of Bolshevism* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1962; 1st ed. 1920), p. 7.





> ... although I do not believe that Socialism can be realized immediately by the spread of Bolshevism, I do believe that, if Bolshevism falls, it will have contributed a legend and a heroic attempt without which ultimate success might never have come.[4]

Flew here points to two inconsistent claims made in the same breath. "[A]t the top of the page, [Russell maintains] that Bolshevik methods can produce socialism ... [but] at the bottom of the page, that they cannot produce any kind of socialism at all.... Clearly, what we need is some distinction between two senses of 'socialism'."[5] The needed distinction is not forthcoming. Flew, therefore, agrees with Stuart Hampshire's contention that "Unlike his predecessors and peers in public philosophy—Plato, Aristotle, Spinoza, Locke, Hume, Hegel—Russell did not apply to politics the analytical methods which he called for in the theory of knowledge."[6] Two main objections are made here against Russell: first, that in the extracts cited from his writings, he both admits and denies the possibility of the emergence of socialism from the practice of Bolshevism; and secondly, that as in his political writings generally, Russell fails to make requisite analytical distinctions.

I do not think, however, that the charges are unanswerable. To begin with the first objection, a close look at the second extract reveals that what Russell does is not totally to deny the possibility that Bolshevism may produce socialism, but only to express his belief that the goal in question cannot be realized immediately. In respect of the second point of criticism, my answer has to be divided. I may say, first, that though the required distinction—between good and bad socialism—is not made there, it has been drawn at fair length in his other works[7]; and secondly, that in the writings of Russell there is no dearth of acute analyses of concepts that his political theory freely uses. I invite attention to the following treatments of various concepts: freedom in *Prin-*

[4] *Ibid.*, p. 8.

[5] Flew, "Russell's Judgement on Bolshevism", p. 432.

[6] "Russell, Radicalism, and Reason", in *Philosophy and Political Action*, ed. V. Held, K. Nielsen and C. Parsons (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), p. 262.

[7] *In Praise of Idleness* (Bombay: Allen & Unwin (India), 1973), pp. 76, 95; with Dora Russell, *The Prospects of Industrial Civilization* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1923), pp. 103–4.

*ciples of Social Reconstruction*,[8] *Roads to Freedom*,[9] *Fact and Fiction*[10]; theory of impulse and desire in *Principles of Social Reconstruction*,[11] *Political Ideals*,[12] *The Analysis of Mind*,[13] *Human Society in Ethics and Politics*[14]; and the concept of power in *Power*[15] and *The Prospects of Industrial Civilization*.[16]

As a clear illustration of Russell's careful and balanced attitude to the psychological concepts he uses in his political writings, the following may be cited:

> Desire, as opposed to impulse, has, it is true, a large and increasing share in the regulation of men's lives. Impulse is erratic and anarchical, not easily fitted into a well-regulated system.... All impulse is essentially blind, in the sense that it does not spring from any prevision of consequences.... Blind impulse is the source of war, but it is also the source of science, and art, and love. It is not the weakening of impulse that is to be desired, but the direction of impulse towards life and growth rather than towards death and decay.[17]

This quotation enables me to meet a part of John G. Slater's well-known criticism of Russell. But let me first cite the critic's own words:

> In none of his [Russell's] works do we find any sustained analysis of such notions as "freedom", "the state", and so on. Russell does treat of these topics many times, but always at a non-philosophical level. His interest is always elsewhere, usually in trying to get his readers to act on certain beliefs in order to improve the lot of mankind. The existing political order of the Western democracies is usually taken for granted and his recommendations consist in suggesting modifications in it whose consequences, he argues, will right some present wrongs. It is altogether very practical writing....[18]

[8] *Principles of Social Reconstruction* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1980; 1st ed. 1916), pp. 21, 101, 157.
[9] *Roads to Freedom* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1966; 1st ed. 1918), p. 82.
[10] "What Is Freedom?", in *Fact and Fiction* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1961), pp. 49–50, 61.
[11] *Principles of Social Reconstruction*, pp. 11, 15, 161.
[12] *Political Ideals* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1963; 1st ed. 1917), pp. 11, 63.
[13] *The Analysis of Mind* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1921), pp. 58, 68.
[14] *Human Society in Ethics and Politics* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1954), p. 59.
[15] *Power* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1960; 1st ed. 1938), pp. 9, 11.
[16] *The Prospects of Industrial Civilization*, pp. 188–9.
[17] *Principles of Social Reconstruction*, pp. 14–15.
[18] "The Political Philosophy of Bertrand Russell", in *Russell in Review*, ed. J.E. Thomas and Kenneth Blackwell (Toronto: Samuel Stevens, Hakkert, 1976), p. 144.



With regard to the charge that Russell's interest is "always practical", I would say that it is on the whole both theoretical and practical, though the emphasis naturally varies. Moreover, the fact that a thinker does not always put the same emphasis on a particular concept is not necessarily a sign of inconsistency. It may simply indicate awareness of changing social conditions. Only mathematical concepts can be credited with unchanging meanings. Concepts of political life are bound to call for changing emphasis in accordance with the shift in social conditions and demands. I cannot accept the categorical charge that Russell's interest here is non-philosophical; and I say so on the basis of references which I have already made to instances of theoretical watchfulness in his writings.

As a philosopher, too, in so far as he is opposed to *a priori* elements in epistemology, Russell is forced to look at concepts and problems in a social context. Without bearing this in mind it is impossible to see how it is "perfectly legitimate and even praiseworthy" for Russell, as Alan Wood says, to change his views so much "in a world which never stays the same, and where changing circumstances continually change the balance of arguments on different sides."[19] The other charge, that Russell does not make radical suggestions in respect of western democracies, is not borne out by a careful reading of his writings. Consider, for example, Russell's emphasis on the need for a world government, guild socialism, and freedom for the working of creative impulses in society.[20]

Nor do I find it possible to accept D.H. Monro's criticism of Russell's theory of impulse. But I must first outline the criticism. In *Principles of Social Reconstruction* Russell refers to two kinds of impulses—creative and possessive—and holds that the world's progress depends on the flowering of creative impulses, while in *The Practice and Theory of Bolshevism* he regards only the following four passions as fundamental: "acquisitiveness, vanity, rivalry and love of power".[21] The two sides collide. For the passions listed may be classed, upon Russell's own view, as "possessive or bad impulses"; and if these alone are of basic importance, the value that Russell first attached to "creative

[19] *Bertrand Russell: The Passionate Sceptic* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1963), p. 64.
[20] B. Russell, "An Outline of World Government", in *Bertrand Russell: An Introduction*, ed. Brian Carr (London: Allen & Unwin, 1975), pp. 105–7; *Principles of Social Reconstruction*, pp. 6, 74, 162–3; "Three Essentials for a Stable World", in *Portraits from Memory* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1961), p. 235.
[21] *The Practice and Theory of Bolshevism*, p. 64.

impulses" in *Principles of Social Reconstruction* simply vanishes.[22] In that work Russell said: "I consider ... the worst [life] that which is most inspired by love of possession."[23] So it is startling to find him writing in his work on Bolshevism: "The progress or retrogression of the world depends, broadly speaking, upon the balance between acquisitiveness and rivalry. The former makes for progress, the latter for retrogression".[24]

I can answer this objection quite simply. First, Russell does *not categorically* say that "acquisitiveness, vanity, rivalry and love of power" alone are of basic value, but only that these are "the prime movers of almost all that happens *in politics*".[25] He is referring to the vital determinants of present-day political affairs. He is not claiming to give an exhaustive list of the determinants of human conduct generally, or of politics as it ought to be. Secondly, so far as Russell's emphasis on acquisitiveness is concerned, the two positions which Russell adopts in *Principles of Social Reconstruction* and *The Practice and Theory of Bolshevism* do not really clash. What he means to say in the first is that a life which is mostly determined by love of possessions is detestable; and what he says in the second is only that "acquisitiveness ... makes for progress in the sense of securing improved methods of production ... which may be employed to increase the general share of goods."[26] In other words, Russell is talking only of material progress, and there is no doubt that such advance depends basically upon love of possessions. Russell is not suggesting that "human progress"[27] as a whole (or in the ideal sense) depends upon the instinct of acquisitiveness. There is one more criticism of Monro's which deserves consideration. He contends that, whereas in *Principles of Social Reconstruction* Russell is inclined to accept the Freudian view that the natural man is needlessly cramped by social conventions—and makes a good deal of the point that repression of impulse is not merely tiring and destructive of vitality, but also the source "of destruction and death"[28]—later in the same work we find "interesting echoes, both of the eighteenth-century view that man is

[22] Monro, "Russell's Moral Theories", *Philosophy*, 35 (1960): 42; reprinted in D.F. Pears, ed., *Bertrand Russell: a Collection of Critical Essays* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday Anchor, 1971).

[23] *Principles of Social Reconstruction*, p. 6.

[24] *The Practice and Theory of Bolshevism*, p. 66.

[25] *Ibid.*, p. 64. Emphasis added.

[26] *Ibid.*, p. 66.

[27] The all-round progress of Man depends, as Russell insists, on freedom of intellect. *Ibid.*

[28] *Principles of Social Reconstruction*, p. 14.



naturally good and corrupted by society and, rather surprisingly, of the Idealist view that moral rules are prescriptions for 'realizing' the true self."[29]

Here, again, the criticism may be met by paying closer attention to the text of Russell's writings. In *Principles of Social Reconstruction* he does not say that every check on impulse is bad, but only that a "... life governed by purposes and desires, to the exclusion of impulse, is a tiring life; it exhausts vitality...."[30] In other words, what Russell protests against is only a total repression of impulse. Such a protest, it is easy to see, does not clash with his following words to which Monro objects:

> [There is an] ... intimate centre in each human being.... It differs from man to man, and determines for each man the type of excellence of which he is capable.... [Man's] impulses and desires in so far as they are of real importance in ... [his life] are not detached one from another, but proceed from a central ... instinctive urgency [to grow as he wishes to and can] ... [what] social institutions can [and should] do for a man is to make his own growth free and vigorous: they cannot force him to grow according to the pattern of another man.... [I]mpulses ... which do not grow out of the central principle ... for example, those towards drugs ... when they become strong enough to be harmful, have to be checked by self-discipline. Other impulses ... [which] may be injurious to the growth of others ... need to be checked in the interest of others.[31]

The substance of these remarks is that impulses should be allowed free play, but only in so far as they conduce to the distinctive growth of which the individual is capable, without harming others' interests. There is nothing mysterious about the central principle; it is only the instinctive demand of the individual to develop in his own way. There is no acceptance here of the extreme alternatives that impulses are to be totally repressed or allowed absolutely unchecked play.

Finally, as some critics allege,[32] in his writings on political matters Russell does not seem to meet the conditions he has himself laid down for the right kind of philosophizing. In his technical works he insists that philosophy should be scientific and should refrain from value judg-

[29] Monro, "Russell's Moral Theories", p.36.

[30] *Principles of Social Reconstruction*, p. 15.

[31] *Ibid.*, p. 19. The citation changes the order, but not the meaning of the original.

[32] For instance, see Slater's remarks in "The Political Philosophy of Bertrand Russell", p. 140.

ments. But in his own political writing does Russell always take his stand on the findings of psychologists and sociologists? Does he not often seem to go by his own impressions? And are not his remarks, such as the following, clear cases of value judgments? "The life of an individual, the life of a community, and even the life of mankind, *ought to be* not a number of separate fragments, but in some sense a whole."[33] "I consider the best life that which is most built on creative impulses, and the worst that which is most inspired by love of possession.... Liberation of creativeness *ought to be* the principle of reform both in politics and in economics."[34]

Now, as to whether Russell heeds the evidence of the experts, my answer has to be qualified. He freely accepts the conclusions of scientific research. But where the question concerns the meaning of a concept, he may be expected and may be allowed to disagree with the scientists, because, as a philosopher, he can do the job perhaps a little better than the scientists. Turning to the charge of making value judgments in political philosophy, it may be said that this discipline is not pure philosophy; and that where, as in political philosophy, one is concerned with questions of human welfare and liberty, a certain amount of value judgment is unavoidable. The charge in question is softened the moment we see that a distinction has to be drawn between the activity of doing philosophy and the state of mind of a man who has become deeply imbued with the philosophic temper. Russell's own words may be cited:

> The mind which has become accustomed to the freedom and impartiality of philosophic contemplation will preserve something of the same freedom and impartiality in the world of action and emotion.... The impartiality which, in contemplation, is the unalloyed desire for truth, is the very same quality of mind which, in action, is justice, and in emotion is that universal love which can be given to all, and not only to those who are judged useful or admirable. Thus contemplation enlarges not only the objects of our thoughts, but also the objects of our actions and our affections: it makes us citizens of the universe, not only of one walled city at war with all the rest.[35]

Besides this defence against criticisms, it is also possible to argue positively that Russell is a political philosopher. To begin with, the theory of impulse as put forward by him adds a new dimension to political thought. The only psychological concept which some of the earlier thinkers deal with in detail is desire. But their concern is so restricted that they do not even relate desire to impulse. Russell sees and repairs this defect. He emphasizes the need for a political theory that may make due provision for the proper channelization of man's impulses as the basis of social conduct:

> A political theory, if it is to hold in times of stress, must take account of the impulses that underlie explicit thought: it must appeal to them, and it must discover how to make them fruitful rather than destructive.[36]

> All human activity springs from two sources: impulse and desire. The part played by desire has always been sufficiently recognized ... and political philosophy hitherto has been almost entirely based upon desire as the source of human actions. But desire governs no more than a part of human activity, and that not the most important but only the most conscious, explicit, and civilized part.[37]

Russell also classifies both desire and impulse as creative and possessive. The creative ones are inherently harmonious, whereas those that impel us to acquire and hold property are inherently conflictive. This distinction, repeated throughout Russell's social writings, turns out to be (as Richard Wollheim says) a distinction of great political significance[38] for him, because, in his view: "The best life is that in which creative impulses play the largest part and possessive impulses the smallest ... [and] the best institutions are those which produce the greatest possible creativeness and the least possessiveness compatible with self-preservation."[39]

Further, Russell stresses the need to regulate the working of our basic psychological forces by means of spirit, which is, in his view, the ideal determinant of the good life. Action as such may well be said to spring from impulses or desires, or from both. But *desirable* human action proceeds only from a regulation of their activity by spirit, by which Russell means the capacity of man to rise above selfishness and to universalize his emotions: "[I]n order that human life should be good ... [instinctive] impulses must be dominated and controlled by desires

[33] *Principles of Social Reconstruction*, p. 158. Emphasis added.
[34] *Ibid.*, p. 6. Emphasis added.
[35] *The Problems of Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford U. P., 1967; 1st ed., 1912), p. 93.



[36] *Principles of Social Reconstruction*, p. 168.
[37] *Ibid.*, pp. 11–12.
[38] "Bertrand Russell and the Liberal Tradition", in *Bertrand Russell's Philosophy*, ed. George Nakhnikian (London: Duckworth, 1974), p. 213.
[39] *Principles of Social Reconstruction*, pp. 161–2.

less personal and ruthless, less liable to lead to conflict than those that are inspired by instinct alone. Something impersonal and universal is needed over and above what springs out of the principle of individual growth. It is this that is given by the life of the spirit."[40]

Russell's concern with instinct is philosophical by virtue of its being a significant exercise in thought, developed through analysis and synthesis. All philosophic treatment both distinguishes and relates what it deals with. Russell tells us both what instinct itself is and how it is related to other aspects of human life and personality:

> Instinct is the source of vitality ... the basis of all profound sense of union with others, and the means by which the collective life nourishes the life of the separate units. But instinct by itself leaves us powerless to control the forces of Nature ... and keeps us in bondage to the same unthinking impulse by which the trees grow. Mind can liberate us from this bondage, by the power of impersonal thought.... But mind, in its dealings with instinct, is *merely* critical.... Spirit is an antidote to the cynicism of mind.... It is instinct that gives force, mind that gives the means of directing force to desired ends, and spirit that suggests impersonal uses for force of a kind that thought cannot discredit by criticism. This is an outline of the parts that instinct, mind, and spirit would play in a harmonious life.[41]

Like other political philosophers, Russell puts forth and builds upon his own conception of man. Hobbes sees man as an egoistic, selfish creature whose sole aim is to satisfy himself; this is why prudence becomes one of the greatest virtues for Hobbes. Bentham's view of man is largely similar. For Rousseau, man is essentially compassionate; and a reformation of present society is required precisely because it does not allow this inherent quality of man to work freely. Rousseau's ideal is very different from that of Hobbes and Bentham. It is "the common consciousness of the common good". For Hegel man is essentially a rational and moral being. Marx, on the other hand, thinks of man as mainly an economic being whose salvation lies in a classless society. Russell's view is distinguished by the point that man is a "semi-gregarious animal"[42] with impulses towards both solitariness and sociability.

Finally, in the true manner of a political philosopher, Russell deals with some of the fundamental problems of political thought, such as:

[40] *Ibid.*, p. 150.
[41] *Ibid.*, p. 145.
[42] *Human Society in Ethics and Politics*, p. 16.



the individual vs. authority, freedom in the midst of technology, and power as opposed to freedom. In *Roads to Freedom* he outlines the way to achieve the ideal of "production without possession; action without self-assertion; development without domination."[43] In *The Prospects of Industrial Civilization* he tries to solve the greatest problem of the future, namely "the adjustment of mechanical organization to minister to individual freedom and happiness." Russell's Reith lectures for 1948–49, published under the title *Authority and the Individual*, deal with a pressing present problem: "how ... [to] combine that degree of individual initiative which is necessary for progress with the degree of social cohesion that is necessary for survival".[44] Another work, *Human Society in Ethics and Politics*, shows Russell in a different light. There he seeks "to set forth an undogmatic ethic; and ... to apply this ethic to various current political problems."[45]

An emphasis on the ethical is indeed clear in Russell's political philosophy. As Benjamin R. Barber puts it, the main aim is to see how we could "generate a politics of love, of community and of justice that is immune both to anarchy and dominion—a politics that will neither permit power to overwhelm liberty, nor permit liberty to undermine mutuality."[46]

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[43] *Roads to Freedom*, title-page motto.
[44] *Authority and the Individual* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1965; 1st ed. 1949), p. 11.
[45] *Human Society in Ethics and Politics*, p. 7.
[46] "Solipsistic Politics: Russell's Empiricist Liberalism", *Political Studies*, 23 (1975): 27; reprinted in *Bertrand Russell Memorial Volume*, cited at n. 2.