

# Russell's leviathan

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

BERTRAND RUSSELL'S POLITICAL thought underwent several metamorphoses in his nearly seventy years of political activism and writing. Indeed, many commentators on Russell take this as *the* overarching attribute of his politics. Alan Ryan writes that "Russell's career defies summary analysis; his life was much too long and his activities too various. His philosophical allegiances were no more stable than his emotional allegiances, and his political allegiances no more stable than either."<sup>1</sup> Likewise, Benjamin Barber suggests that "Russell had to contend with staying alive; and by the time he was ninety, consistency must have seemed to him less like the hobgoblin of little minds than the hallmark of a short life."<sup>2</sup>

Ryan, Barber and others come to different conclusions about Russell's engagements with pacifism, anarcho-syndicalism, socialism and liberalism, but their efforts, taken collectively, signal a growing appreciation for the fluidity of Russell's politics. This essay treats the diversity of Russell's "political allegiances" as a first step

toward a new understanding of his political thought. Yet, unlike so much commentary on Russell, the search for *the* overarching concept or unifying theme is eschewed. The core premise of the argument is that to understand the political Russell, it is necessary to suspend the urge to unify. What is crucial is an openness to the extraordinary variety and range of his political interests and reflections. Once this step is taken, it becomes possible to uncover the degree to which Russell's eclectic activism is reflected in his approach to political theory. It becomes possible to see that his statements on a particular political issue are embedded with concepts selected from various sources within the western tradition of political discourse. In addition, this approach highlights the conceptual background of some of Russell's more contentious political statements which seem so characteristically out of character.

The issue selected for this essay arises from one of the most controversial and least understood acts in Russell's life. It concerns his public statements following World War II that the United States might do well to use its monopoly of atomic bombs to force the Soviet Union into abandoning the development of its own atomic weapons. Past attempts to explain this episode range from cursory denials and dismissals of its importance, to assertions that it was the step-child of Russell's Russophobia.<sup>3</sup> If one examines these state-

3 The argument for threatening the Soviet Union into renouncing nuclear weapons is advanced by Russell in several public statements: "The Bomb and Civilization", *Forward*, 29 Sept. 1945; "Humanity's Last Chance", *Cavalcade*, 20 Oct. 1945; speech in the House of Lords, *Hansard*, 28 Nov. 1945; "The Atomic Bomb and the Prevention of War", *Polemic*, July-Aug. 1946; speech in the House of Lords, *Hansard*, 30 April 1947; "Still Time for Good Sense", *'47 Magazine of the Year*, Nov. 1947; "International Government", *The New Commonwealth*, Jan. 1948. Ronald Clark provides an important guide to Russell's statements during this period in *The Life of Bertrand Russell* (London: Cape/Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1975), but he does not examine the philosophical background. Alan Ryan comes closest to seeing Russell's theoretical link with Hobbes, but he leaves it as a passing remark about Russell's attitude towards world government during the First World War: "It is as if Russell had read Hobbes's *Leviathan* and been carried away by Hobbes's argument that the state of nature and the war of all against all was so dreadful that any rational man would fly to absolute monarchy for protection. Russell generalizes Hobbes's argument to the international sphere, but it fails to ask how men who get themselves into a 'war of all against all' can be expected to get themselves out again, and fails to show how they have done

1 Alan Ryan, *Bertrand Russell: a Political Life* (London: Allen Lane The Penguin Press, 1988), p. 1.

2 Benjamin R. Barber, "Solipsistic Politics: Bertrand Russell and Empiricist Liberalism", in his *The Conquest of Politics: Liberal Philosophy in Democratic Times* (Princeton: Princeton U. P., 1988), p. 25.

ments with an eye to Russell's eclectic incorporation of concepts from prior political theories, however, an unexplored substratum is disclosed. This substratum is Russell's appropriation of elements from Thomas Hobbes' theory of domestic peace—in particular, the image of a rational leviathan wielding an awe-inspiring monopoly of armed force. While this may seem even more incongruous than Russell's statements on nuclear blackmail, the main problem is one of perspective. It requires a perceptual shift that challenges many of our preconceptions of Russell and of the development of political concepts in general.

## 2. THE POLITICAL RUSSELL

That Russell saw his political writings as significantly different from his philosophical work is well known. This distinction is often taken to mean that the political works are either second-rate or too journalistic to warrant lasting attention. Russell lends credence to this view by calling some of these works "pot-boilers".<sup>4</sup> Yet, there is another essential difference that frequently passes unnoticed. The early philosophical works, in particular, are clearly more ground-breaking. In the political works, he often follows the lead of others.

The creative spark of the political Russell is eclectic, weaving together a variety of previously developed concepts and applying them in new situations. To push the point further, perhaps the renowned philosopher of logic allowed himself to become one of those rare political thinkers who did not worry about adherence to orthodoxy (self-defined or otherwise). Given his remarkable background, education and early philosophical successes, perhaps he was "freer" than many of us to allow his political imagination to "pick and choose" from the intellectual traditions that he so frequently saw himself as defending. This is not to deny his achievements but to cast them in a different light. Moreover, it is an approach to Russell that more closely parallels what he admired in empirical investigation—the slow process of collecting and testing evidence in particular contexts before the development of grandiose explanatory systems.

What is original in Russell's political works stems from his process of selection, refinement and recombination of a variety of previously developed concepts. Much of the rhetorical impact arises

from the sheer scope of the requisite background knowledge. There is also an obvious flair for making the theoretically problematic appear as common sense. For example, one of his most successful books, *A History of Western Philosophy* (1945), is also one of his most problematic. Much of the tradition from Plato to Hegel is presented as superstition, mysticism or nonsense, and the slightly veiled appeals to a form of empiricism often reveal more about Russell than western philosophy.

In more overtly political works, the same pattern appears. To take an obvious example, Russell's evaluation of Marxism is highly selective and frequently inadequate. Whereas Marx is praised for revealing the degrading exploitation of the working-class under capitalism, Russell rejects key concepts in the analysis of this exploitation (such as surplus value) as well as the dialectical framework. Furthermore, very little changes in Russell's estimation of Marxism. The general perspective is set by the time of his first book, *German Social Democracy* (1896), and only modified slightly in later years. Whereas other thinkers would be profoundly influenced by the succeeding waves of pro-Marxist and anti-Marxist scholarship, Russell's position remains relatively constant regarding the insights and limitations of Marx's thought.

With regard to Russell's general orientation to political theory, the manner of presentation provides an important guide. Whole chapters, full of concepts derived from others, develop without footnote or other direct attribution, followed by sections which abound in lengthy quotations. Yet, the quotations serve less as an occasion for reflection than as a form of intellectual shorthand—a handy encapsulation allowing him to move on to another issue or higher theoretical plane. What becomes apparent is that Russell saw himself as equal to the task of locating and representing the essence of a complex theory without the aid of explicit reference. Furthermore, in his public writings, there is a conspicuous absence of any sustained effort to locate his thought in relation to other traditions. The few times that he offers some form of political self-definition only reinforce the already confusing record of his shifting allegiances.<sup>5</sup> For example,

5 The mercurial nature of Russell's political self-definitions is a prominent theme in Ryan's book-length study of his "political life". Royden Harrison, in "Bertrand Russell: from Liberalism to Socialism?", *Russell*, n.s. 6 (1986): 5–38, gives a masterful overview of each important phase in Russell's politics and the underlying continuities behind Russell's often conflicting allegiances.

more than exchange the frying pan for the fire" (p. 80).

4 Quoted in Barber, p. 24.

in the *Autobiography* he writes: "I have imagined myself in turn a Liberal, a Socialist, or a Pacifist, but I have never been any of these things, in any profound sense. Always the sceptical intellect, when I have most wished it silent, has whispered doubts to me, has cut me off from the facile enthusiasms of others, and has transported me into a desolate solitude."<sup>6</sup>

There are recurrent themes and principles in his political works, but their precise content is not rigidly fixed. Freedom of conscience and expression figure prominently. As well, there is the repeated advocacy of the more general concept of "creative impulses". With each new evocation, however, there is a shift or differing emphasis. Moreover, there seem to be a principle or two for each of the major political traditions that Russell drew upon. Consequently, his unyielding criticisms of censorship are lauded by many liberals, while his critique of "possessive impulses" parallels certain democratic socialist and anarchist lines of thought.<sup>7</sup>

Another constant of the political Russell is the judgment of policies and actions by their consequences. Yet, whereas some commentators take this as a conclusion about Russell's politics, it is really only a beginning. A critical analysis of Russell's political thought demands attention to the *specific* consequences emphasized in each case. Russell's own assertions to the contrary, the particular consequences he foresaw are not always evident. More importantly, it is at this point where his principles and his estimation of consequences intersect. The general principles influence what are seen to be the most important consequences, and the consequences modify

6 *The Autobiography of Bertrand Russell*, Vol. 2: 1914-44 (London: Allen and Unwin, 1968), p. 38.

7 See *Principles of Social Reconstruction* (1916) and *Roads to Freedom* (1918) for the foundations of Russell's understanding of creative and possessive impulses and how they relate to politics. In the second volume of his *Autobiography*, Russell suggests that *Principles of Social Reconstruction* established his reputation as a social and political thinker: "In it I suggested a philosophy of politics based upon the belief that impulse has more effect than conscious purpose in moulding men's lives. I divided impulses into two groups, the possessive and the creative, considering the best life that which is most built on creative impulses.... Liberation of creativeness, I was convinced, should be the principle of reform.... To my surprise, it made an immediate success. I had written it with no expectation of its being read, merely as a profession of faith, but it brought me in a great deal of money, and laid the foundation for all my future earnings" (p. 20).

the specific application of the principles in any particular case.

This interaction between principles and consequences in Russell's political thought is filtered through concepts derived from his wide-ranging education in the major thinkers of western civilization. To simplify a complex and intuitive process, the general principles inform the search for applicable concepts in the works of others. These concepts are then employed both to ascertain the probable consequences and to modify the original principles (if necessary). It is as if Russell reserved for himself only two stages in a three-stage process of reflection. He trusted himself to know the perennially important principles and to assess the consequences of actions in an objective manner. These two stages are linked together, however, through the aid of concepts drafted by others and called into service by Russell. Viewed metaphorically, it is an endeavour to bring together the best aspects of many diverse strands of political composition in order to orchestrate a new resolution for a particular context. During the brief period of the American nuclear monopoly, the premier soloist in this orchestration is Thomas Hobbes. The awesome figure of the leviathan is called forth as a political image equal to the earth-shattering power unleashed through modern science over Nagasaki and Hiroshima.

### 3. THE HOBBSIAN PARALLEL

There is no direct mention of Hobbes in Russell's post-World War II statements, but the perspective is unmistakably Hobbesian. Or, more precisely, it is recognizable as such once one appreciates the degree to which Russell repeatedly incorporated key elements of prior political theories.<sup>8</sup> It is also necessary to shed certain preconceptions about Russell and Hobbes that make it appear that their politics must be *necessarily incompatible* in all respects. Unquestion-

8 Russell's study of Hobbes went back at least as far as his student days at Cambridge. Vol. 1, *Cambridge Essays, 1888-99* of *The Collected Papers of Bertrand Russell*, ed. K. Blackwell, A. Brink, N. Griffin, R.A. Rempel and J.G. Slater (London: Allen & Unwin, 1983), contains two important documents in this regard. Paper 28 is Russell's essay on Hobbes written for Stout's course on the history of philosophy; it was probably written in the spring of 1894. Appendix II, "What Shall I Read?", is Russell's reading list from February 1891 to March 1902. It contains two entries for Hobbes during January 1894, "Liberty and Necessity" and "Computation and Logic".

ably, there is much in the two approaches that is irreconcilable. For example, the “perpetuall and restlesse desire of Power after power”, which Hobbes takes to be an unalterable “generall inclination of all mankind”, is for Russell a perverse exaggeration of one side of our humanity which needs to be checked by fostering our “creative impulses”.<sup>9</sup> Nevertheless, both positions share a fixation with finding a means to stop a seemingly endless cycle of selfishly motivated but ultimately self-destructive violence. In Russell’s post-World War II statements and Hobbes’ *Leviathan* the key concept is the initial threat or use of a monopoly of coercive force in order to establish the necessary conditions for a new order of peace.

Hobbes paid little attention to war between nations, but his analysis of the causes of civil war would have been attractive to Russell for several reasons. For Hobbes, the prevention of civil war was *the* overriding purpose of political inquiry. “The utility of moral and political philosophy is to be estimated, not so much by the commodities we have by knowing these sciences, as by the calamities we receive by not knowing them. Now all such calamities as may be avoided by human industry arise from war.”<sup>10</sup> Russell not only shared this emphasis on the primacy of preventing war but he also frequently equated wars between “civilized” nations to civil wars. Writing publicly to Woodrow Wilson during the First World War, Russell suggested that if the President could force the conclusion of hostilities he would be “performing a signal service to mankind, surpassing even the service of Abraham Lincoln”. The comparison stemmed from Russell’s conviction that “a war among European nations” was “in essence a civil war”.<sup>11</sup>

The First World War was also the occasion for Russell’s initial systematic reflections on the appropriate role of force in the preven-

tion of international conflict. By mid-1916, Russell had drawn a crucial distinction between the use of national armed forces to secure peace and the creation of a truly international armed force. This distinction set him apart from and angered both absolute pacifists and supporters of the League to Enforce Peace. In a public debate with Goldsworthy Lowes Dickinson, a leading advocate of the League, Russell argued that he was not against the use of force *per se*. The main drawback to the League to Enforce Peace was its reliance on “national forces and national diplomacies”. Without the creation of a truly international government, sufficiently armed with enough force to overwhelm any nation or combination of nations, Russell suggested that the old pattern of national conflict would continue behind a veneer of internationalism. Furthermore, a League to Enforce Peace based on national policies and powers would become a threat to social progress, another “Holy Alliance”.

It is not, I think, always the case that the people who are on the defensive are in the right and those who are on the aggressive are wrong.... I believe that there have been occasions in the past, and may be again in the future, when the use of force is justifiable. I certainly think that it is sometimes justifiable in revolutions. But I do think that we run a very grave danger, *in the existing state of the whole diplomatic machinery and the foreign policies of the different States*, in setting up any kind of international government with national forces and national diplomaies.<sup>12</sup>

Russell has been repeatedly and rightly accused of vagueness in his prescriptions for world government. However, the need for this government to have an overpowering armed force to insure peace between nations was a constant theme for Russell after 1916. Furthermore, he did not expect its creation simply because it was in our rational interest to do so.<sup>13</sup> From the outset, Russell indicated that

9 Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (1651), Chap. XI, p. 161. All references are to the C.B. Macpherson edition (Harmondsworth, U.K.: Penguin Books, 1968).

10 Thomas Hobbes, *Elements of Philosophy* (1839), quoted in Macpherson’s edition of *Leviathan*, p. 9.

11 “To the President of the United States”, *New York Times*, 23 Dec. 1916. Russell draws his distinction between wars amongst civilized nations and colonial wars in explicitly imperialistic terms in “The Ethics of War”, *The International Journal of Ethics*, Jan. 1915, reprinted as Paper 14 in the *Collected Papers*, Vol. 13: *Prophecy and Dissent, 1914–16*, ed. R.A. Rempel with B. Frohmann, M. Lippincott, and M. Moran (London: Unwin Hyman, 1988), pp. 63–73.

12 “Two Ideals of Pacifism”, *War and Peace*, Jan. 1917. (All emphases in the quotations are mine unless otherwise indicated.) Shortly after the debate with Dickinson, Russell wrote to Catherine Marshall that “under the present circumstances” a League to Enforce Peace “would give a dangerous opportunity for disguised militarism” (25 Oct. 1916, RA). See discussion in *Collected Papers* 13: xl–xli.

13 For example, in “War and Non-Resistance” Russell writes that progress in international relations cannot be expected to develop through an adherence to passive resistance “because the imaginative effort required is too great. It is

it would most likely have to arise from the predominance of a single nation. This “midwife” of world government would have to possess tremendous military power and the rational self-interest to see the benefits of international peace.

Russell’s outline of the necessary steps towards world government parallels his understanding of Hobbes’ thesis for domestic peace. One notable example is Russell’s praise for particular aspects of Hobbes’ theory in the generally critical *A History of Western Philosophy* (1945).

The merits of Hobbes appear most clearly when he is contrasted with earlier political theorists. He is completely free from superstition.... He is clear and logical; his ethics, right or wrong, is completely intelligible, and does not involve the use of dubious concepts ... he is the first really modern writer on political theory.... *Every argument that he adduces in favour of government, in so far as it is valid at all, is valid in favour of international government.*<sup>14</sup>

This allusion to Hobbes’ prescription for domestic peace as an appropriate means for international peace is repeated throughout Russell’s political thought. A 1916 essay, for example, echoes the *Leviathan* in several areas—the description of state power, the role of passion, the nature of sound political investigation, and the necessary arrangements for security.

Any scientific treatment of political institutions must first endeavour to ascertain the impulses and passions for which they afford a vehicle ... *the chief passion actuating the ordinary citizen is the passion for security....* The essence of the State is the organization of force. Instead of each citizen exercising what force he can in accordance with his own initiative, the force of citizens is united, and exerted collectively.... *International law, like Municipal law, is nothing without a sanction ... unless it possesses sufficient armed force to be obviously capable of enforcing its decisions upon any recalcitrant nation.*<sup>15</sup>

much more likely that it will come, as the reign of law within the State has come, by the establishment of a central government of the world, able and willing to secure obedience by force” (*The Atlantic Monthly*, Aug. 1915; reprinted in *Collected Papers* 13: 168).

<sup>14</sup> New York: Simon and Schuster, 1945, pp. 540–1.

<sup>15</sup> “The Nature of the State in View of Its External Relations”, *Proceedings of*

Writing in response to an inquiry about the development of his “personal credo” in 1929, the Hobbesian overtones become even more pronounced.

... fear itself is one of the main reasons why human beings are formidable to each other. It is a recognized maxim that the best defence is attack; consequently people are continually attacking each other because they expect to be attacked.... Take, first, international government ... each nation is willing to fight till the last gasp to preserve its freedom. This, of course, is mere anarchy, and it leads to conditions exactly analogous to those in the feudal ages before the bold, bad barons were forced in the end to submit to the authority of the king.... When all the armed forces of the world are controlled by one world-wide authority, we shall have reached the stage in the relation of states which was reached centuries ago in the relations of individuals.<sup>16</sup>

Examples of this Hobbesian backdrop in Russell’s reflections on international affairs are plentiful. Yet, Hobbes’ perspective is most systematically present in Russell’s often neglected but seminal work *Power* (1938). Once again, two major caveats are crucial. Whereas Hobbes takes the competition for power to be an unalterable condition, Russell treats it as a description of how our flawed social, political and educational institutions encourage “possessive impulses” and thwart “creative impulses”. Hobbes’ “perpetuall and restlesse desire of Power after power, that ceaseth only in Death” is only one side of the human condition for Russell. Nevertheless, Russell takes it as an accurate description of present circumstances and, therefore, the starting-point for any “scientific” account of politics. The other major caveat is the degree to which Russell uses Hobbesian concepts without acknowledgement. Hobbes is mentioned in *Power*, but the most important aspects of his influence pass by as pure Russell.

The first paragraph of *Power* frames the essential issue in a decidedly Hobbesian fashion—“some human desires, unlike those of animals, are essentially boundless and incapable of complete satisfaction.” This is quickly followed by an even more Hobbesian view: “Of the infinite desires of man, the chief are the desires for power

*the Aristotelian Society*, 1915–16. Reprinted in *Collected Papers* 13: 363–7.

<sup>16</sup> “What I Believe”, in *Living Philosophies*, ed. H.G. Leach (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1931), pp. 16–19.

and glory.”<sup>17</sup> Even Russell’s statement of the central thesis echoes the opening chapters of *Leviathan*. “In the course of this book I shall be concerned to prove that the fundamental concept in social science is Power, in the same sense in which Energy is the fundamental concept in physics” (p. 10).

Like Hobbes, Russell emphasizes the role of fear in the creation of authoritarian power. “Whenever there is acute danger, the impulse of most people is to seek out Authority and submit to it” (p. 18).<sup>18</sup> While this is presented as a recurrent pattern, Russell also takes the Hobbesian vision of the movement from anarchy to authoritarian rule to be a necessary stage in the process of civilization. “After anarchy, the natural first step is despotism” (p. 23).<sup>19</sup> “Conquest by force of arms has had more to do with the spread of civilization than any other single agency” (p. 39). The founding act of all governments, which is often obscured, is force. Only gradually is this translated into the “psychological conquest” that allows for the rule of law (p. 85; see also p. 244).

The substitution of the republican form of government for hereditary monarchy, where it has been sudden, has usually led to various kinds of trouble, since a new constitution has no hold over men’s mental habits, and will only be respected, broadly speaking, *in so far as it accords with self-interest*. Ambitious men, therefore, will seek to become dictators, and will only desist after a considerable period of failure. If there is no such period, a republican constitution will fail to acquire *that hold over men’s thoughts that is necessary for stability*. (P. 83)

Although Russell implies that the need for despotism has been superseded in many western nations (p. 154), he also indicates areas in which despotic power is warranted still. “Mankind need govern-

ment, but in regions where anarchy has prevailed they will, at first, submit only to despotism. We must therefore seek first to secure government, even though despotic, and only when government has become habitual can we hope successfully to make it democratic.” Furthermore, one of the most important “regions” for the application of despotic power is not geographical. Rather, it is a level of politics—international relations. War between nations “is likely to be solved, if at all, by an initial despotism of some one nation” (p. 25).

The dominance of one nation as the most likely catalyst for the development of world government is repeated throughout *Power*. “A World State is now a technical possibility, and might be established by a victor in some really serious world-war, or, more probably, by the most powerful of the neutrals” (p. 173). “The most important form of competition, at the present day, is between States ... the only way of ending this competition is the abolition of national sovereignty and national armed forces, and the substitution of a single international government *with a monopoly of armed force*” (p. 227). Once again, the perspective transposes several significant dimensions of Hobbes’ argument in *Leviathan* to the realm of international politics.

Like Hobbes’ general acceptance of any form of sovereign power that can prevent civil war, one level of Russell’s argument suggests that it does not matter which nation imposes its will first. The minimum requirement is that it be strong enough to prevent international warfare. At different points in *Power*, it is implied that both the United States and the Soviet Union are acceptable contenders for the role, but only lacked sufficient power to seize the opportunity following World War I (pp. 98, 180). Up to a point, Hobbes and Russell follow the same logic. War is the essential evil (civil war for Hobbes, international war for Russell). Fear of attack and the desire for security are the driving motivations that sustain the threat of the “war of all against all” (individuals for Hobbes, nations for Russell). Any form of power which can break this seemingly omnipresent cycle of violence is better than the original condition. Hence, for Russell, a single despotic nation which prevents international warfare is preferable to what he sees as the present situation—recurrent world-wide wars followed by brief periods of rearmament.

Unlike Hobbes, however, Russell’s acceptance of any government capable of stopping international anarchy is based on the premise that it will be a transitional phase. “I believe that, if once the world were freed from the fear of war, *under no matter what form of*

17 *Power: a New Social Analysis* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1938), pp. 7 and 9.

18 Russell also follows one of the most subtle distinctions in the *Leviathan*—the idea of a social contract as merely a useful conceptual device to rationally convince us of the desirability of what could only be established initially by force. “The ‘social contract’, in the only sense in which it is not *completely* mythical, is a contract among conquerors ... fear, rather than consent, is the original cause of submission to a king whose power extends beyond a single tribe” (p.190).

19 Russell describes a state of *complete* anarchy as “a war of all against all” (p. 126), a familiar rendering of Hobbes’ state of nature.

government or what economic system, it would in time find ways of curbing the ferocity of its rulers" (pp. 309–10). In addition, Russell disagrees with Hobbes' suggestion that the threat of other nations may act as a check on the sovereign's ability to abuse its domestic power. For Hobbes, it is in the sovereign's self-interest to increase the collective powers of the state to preserve itself against other sovereigns. For Russell, the threat or actuality of international war is a chief cause of domestic despotism. "War is the chief promoter of despotism.... The prevention of war is therefore an essential part of our problem—I should say, the most essential ... all war, but especially modern war, promotes dictatorship" (pp. 309–10).

As in the *Leviathan*, there is a partially hidden preference behind the general advocacy of any government capable of preventing war. Hobbes clearly prefers a hereditary monarchy. Furthermore, as C.B. Macpherson demonstrates, Hobbes assumes the presence and superiority of a competitive market society.<sup>20</sup> Russell's preference from World War I to the 1950s is for the "market-republic" of the United States to act as the medium for international government. In 1931, Russell writes that "the most important thing is the establishment of an international government—a measure which I expect to be brought about through the world government of the United States."<sup>21</sup> The roots of this preference, particularly in relation to his changing views of the Soviet Union, are important factors in Russell's brief post-World War II advocacy of a "nuclear leviathan".

The United States played a prominent, albeit ambivalent, role in Russell's political thought. Although his last works castigated American imperialism, the United States frequently appeared as a source of hope in the pre-1960s writings. During the First World War, he wrote numerous articles (including the open letter to President Wilson) urging the United States to use its economic might to force an end to the conflict by cutting off supplies to all belligerents.<sup>22</sup> As American economic and military strength grew during the interwar period, the United States figured even more prominently for Russell as the source for a new world order. Moreover, Russell's sense of an American mission in the world rose as his estimation of Europe and

the Soviet Union fell. Whatever faults he found with the United States, it was a society which had the necessary force and potential rationality to successfully combat the irrational and rabidly nationalistic forces of Nazism, Fascism and Stalinism.<sup>23</sup>

To a large extent, Russell treated the United States as if he were educating a very powerful and dynamic child in the more civilized (i.e. liberal and democratic socialist) traditions of western Europe. The young and powerful Soviet Union had not been as fortunate in its historical development or its choice of a revolutionary ideology. According to Russell, the barbaric excesses and mysticism of the Tsarist regime lived on in Stalinism.<sup>24</sup> Not surprisingly, he viewed the regime against which the American revolutionaries struggled to be more benign. The American revolution had been relatively short and bloodless. Most importantly, the young republic had been fortunate in that two leaders who could have become dictators, George Washington and Abraham Lincoln, upheld the Constitution.<sup>25</sup> Russell perceived an American proclivity for xenophobia, crass materialism and simple-minded religion, but he believed that many of these vices could be held in check by American respect for the rule of law, rational self-interest and pragmatism. It was this perceived continuity in liberal ideology that underpinned Russell's

23 See B. Feinberg and R. Kasrils, *Bertrand Russell's America*, Vol. 1: 1896–1945 (New York: Viking Press, 1973) and *Mortals and Others: Bertrand Russell's American Essays, 1931–1935*, ed. Harry Ruja, Vol. 1 (London: Allen and Unwin, 1975).

24 References to the enduring legacy of Tsarist oppression and mysticism figure prominently in many of Russell's writings on the Soviet Union, from the journals of his 1920 visit (in the Russell Archives) to his autobiography. For example, in *The Practice and Theory of Bolshevism* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1920), Russell differentiates Bolshevism from communism in relation to the Tsarist heritage of the former: "... as a national Government, stripped of their camouflage, regarded as the successors of Peter the Great, they are performing a necessary though unamiable task.... It may be that Russia needs sternness and discipline more than anything else; it may be that a revival of Peter the Great's methods is essential to progress. From this point of view, much of what is natural to criticize in the Bolsheviks becomes defensible; but this point of view has little affinity to Communism" (pp. 69 and 118). R. Harrison gives an excellent overview in "Bertrand Russell: from Liberalism to Socialism?".

25 Russell's lack of concern for Lincoln's suspension of the Constitution during the Civil War is noteworthy in this instance.

20 See Macpherson's introduction to the *Leviathan*, pp. 9–12 and 45–60, and his *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism: Hobbes to Locke* (Oxford: Oxford U. P., 1964), pp. 53–69 and 87–100.

21 *Living Philosophies*, p. 19.

22 See *Collected Papers* 13: xxxviii–xlvi.

praise of the United States as "almost the only example of a new republic which has been stable from the beginning".<sup>26</sup>

#### 4. THE NUCLEAR LEVIATHAN

When the United States achieved a monopoly of nuclear weapons, Russell's long-held aspirations for America and his hostility to Stalinism combined to activate the Hobbesian vision of peace. Whereas his First World War solicitations to America may be seen as the promotion of an "economic leviathan", the immediate post-World War II period offered a unique historical possibility in international relations. One nation possessed a weapon of such devastating potential that it might impose its will on all others and, thereby, initiate the process through which world government could be achieved. Even more fortuitously, for Russell, this monopoly of destructive power was controlled by a nation that harboured the requisite rationality and individualism to make the necessarily despotic transition to world government more benign.

Russell believed that three aspects of this unparalleled historical opportunity called for immediate drastic action. First, the American nuclear monopoly would be temporary. As soon as the Soviet Union acquired the atomic bomb, the possibility of a Hobbesian short-cut to world government would be lost. The cycle of warring nationalisms would continue with even more deadly weapons. Furthermore, the threat of nuclear warfare would push the internal politics of each nation further along the path of increasing despotism. Second, Russell's knowledge of atomic physics granted him a frightening but accurate glimpse into the future of nuclear weapons. As early as 28 November 1945, he foretold the development of the hydrogen bomb in an address to the House of Lords. Third, Russell believed that

<sup>26</sup> *Power*, p. 83. Also see, *Bertrand Russell's America*, I: 245 and 252. From a different perspective, R. Harrison encapsulates Russell's position with precision: "Those who reproach Russell with failing to deal with the oppressions, failings, and aggressions of the Russians and Americans evenly and with a due sense of proportion forget that for Bertrand America was the land of *missed* opportunity. Uniquely blessed by geography and by history, the Americans, when they looked up from the trough, addressed their fellow creatures with a boundless insolence and an ignorant self-righteousness. It was because they were so unnecessary that the persecutions of the McCarthy period were so unforgivable" ("Bertrand Russell", p. 32).

some of the very qualities which made the United States a good vehicle for the eventual establishment of a world government might also inhibit its ability to assume such a historic role. In suggesting reasons why it would be extremely unlikely that a lasting world peace could be achieved through U.S.-Soviet agreements following the war, Russell wrote:

If America were more imperialistic, there would be another possibility, less Utopian and less desirable, but still preferable to the total obliteration of civilised life. It would be possible for Americans to use their position of temporary superiority to insist upon disarmament, not only in Germany and Japan, but everywhere except in the United States, or at any rate in every country not prepared to enter into a close military alliance with the United States, involving compulsory sharing of military secrets.

During the next few years this policy could be enforced; if one or two wars were necessary, they would be brief, and would soon end in decisive American victory. In this way a new League of Nations could be formed under American leadership, and the peace of the world could be securely established. But I fear that respect for international justice will prevent Washington from adopting this policy.<sup>27</sup>

Some commentators have taken Russell's concern for too much American respect for international law as ironic,<sup>28</sup> but other comments from the same period point in the opposite direction.

There is one thing and one only which could save the world, and that is a thing which I should not dream of advocating. It is, that America should make war on Russia during the next two years, and establish a world empire by means of the atomic bomb. This will not be done.<sup>29</sup>

Writing against a proposal to make the United Nations the sole repository of nuclear weapons, Russell's critique resembles Hobbes' earlier arguments that the sovereign power cannot be divided and must be all-powerful.

I do not think that there is very much hope in that, because the United

<sup>27</sup> "The Bomb and Civilization", *Forward*, 29 Sept. 1945.

<sup>28</sup> For example, see R. Clark, *The Life of Bertrand Russell*, p. 518.

<sup>29</sup> Letter from Russell to Gamel Brenan, 1 Sept. 1945 (RA).



Nations, at any rate at present, are not a strong military body, capable of waging war against a great Power; and whoever is ultimately to be the possessor of the atomic bomb will have to be strong enough to fight a great Power.<sup>30</sup>

If the international "state of nature" was to be transcended, America must use its monopoly of fear to force disarmament. In a letter to Einstein, Russell wrote:

I think the only hope of peace (and that a slender one) lies in frightening Russia.... Generally, I think it useless to make any attempt whatsoever to conciliate Russia. The hope of achieving anything by this method seems to me "wishful thinking".<sup>31</sup>

Even when Russell considers the possibility of an international nuclear alliance, as opposed to the exclusive dominance of the United States, the argument is framed by the idea of a unified sovereign power.

I think you could get so powerful an alliance that you could turn to Russia and say, "it is open to you to join this alliance if you will agree to the terms; if you will not join us we shall go to war with you." I am inclined to think that Russia would acquiesce; if not, provided this is done soon, the world might survive the resulting war and emerge with a single government such as the world needs.<sup>32</sup>

An appreciation of the Hobbesian background to this argument also helps to explain Russell's highly provocative calculation of the "acceptable" consequences of a pre-emptive nuclear war. Indeed, his consequentialist approach appears utterly insane if it is divorced from the general project of creating an "international leviathan".

Russell undoubtedly believed that the most likely consequence of an American threat to use nuclear weapons would be Soviet disarmament. Yet, he was also willing to speculate about the benefits of a short, one-sided nuclear war. At first he believed that it would only be necessary to bomb a few Soviet cities, like Moscow and

Leningrad. As he became less sanguine about American military capabilities, he foresaw a war that would engulf most of Europe for a short time. This would entail, he speculated, approximately 500,000,000 dead and it would set back European civilization by five centuries.<sup>33</sup> Nevertheless, the war was still worth waging if the Soviet Union refused to renounce the development of its own atomic arsenal and, thereby, impeded the creation of a world government. As Russell put it in another article, "The argument that I have been developing is as simple and as inescapable as a mathematical demonstration."<sup>34</sup> Such brutal logic brought on the wrath of many liberals and socialists, but it would have cheered the equally provocative and mathematically minded Hobbes.<sup>35</sup>

Behind this dispassionate calculation of the acceptable casualties for peace there is another much more significant parallel between the arguments of Russell and Hobbes. Both thinkers use a very powerful image of human destructiveness to heighten their perceived audience's awareness of the inherent dangers and instability of the prevailing political order. For Hobbes it is the murderous anarchy of the state of nature. As Russell's description of the Hobbesian social contract implies, there is more metaphor than history in Hobbes' purported descriptions: it is "irrelevant to the argument to think" of the end of the state of nature "as a definite historical event.... It is an explanatory myth, used to explain why men submit, and should submit, to the limitations on personal freedom entailed in submission to authority."<sup>36</sup>

The logic of Hobbes' argument for an absolute sovereign in the *Leviathan* is already complete before the introduction of his night-

33 *Bertrand Russell's America*, Vol. 2: 1945-70 (Boston: South End Press, 1983), p. 11, and Ryan, p. 179.

34 "International Government", *The New Commonwealth*, Jan. 1948.

35 Harrison writes: "What Russell failed to understand is that most people can't associate all this rational calculation, in which the sums come out differently at different times, with moral passion. If J.D. Bernal and J.B.S. Haldane turned their backs on him at parties, if G.D.H. Cole and he stood eyeball to eyeball glaring at each other, it might be because they were a gang of red professors, but Russell's sang-froid attitude was widely rejected. You don't pay tributes to your heroic ally one day and threaten to kill him the next. You don't expect a country which has lost 20,000,000 people defending its national independence to submit to a *pax Americana*" ("Bertrand Russell", p. 30).

36 *A History of Western Philosophy*, p. 535.

30 Speech to the House of Lords, 28 Nov. 1945, *Hansard*.

31 Russell to Einstein, 24 Nov. 1947 (RA).

32 Speech to the Royal Empire Society, 3 Dec. 1947, and published in *United Empire*, Jan.-Feb. 1948.

marish state of nature. The real threat for Hobbes is not the war "of every man, against every man"<sup>37</sup> but rather civil war. Similarly, Hobbes' objective is not the *tabula rasa* creation of a new sovereign but a radical strengthening of the existing order.<sup>38</sup> Hobbes knows, however, that logic is not enough. The image of a world of "continually feare, and danger of violent death" is designed to win the psychological battle against our unwillingness to accept absolute authority as a precondition to peace.<sup>39</sup> Russell adopts a similar approach in his argument for world government. Only later is he confronted with the decisive flaw in the analogy: a world suddenly devoid of all law, government, culture and science is no longer an "explanatory myth" but a very real post-nuclear war possibility.

In light of Russell's later denials that he advocated a pre-emptive nuclear war,<sup>40</sup> his icy calculations of acceptable casualties may have been designed to win a Hobbesian-style psychological victory against our resistance to world government. A careful reading of his post-World War II statements reveals that Russell's later disclaimers are inadequate as a full explanation. Nevertheless, there is an important element of truth in statements like his March 1959 interview on the B.B.C.:

What I thought all along was that a nuclear war in which both sides had nuclear weapons would be an utter and absolute disaster.... At that time nuclear weapons existed only on one side, and therefore the odds were the Russians would have given way.... I thought then, and hoped, that the Russians would give way, but of course you can't threaten unless you're prepared to have your bluff called.<sup>41</sup>

The crucial point is Russell's belief that Soviet fear of the temporary American nuclear monopoly would break the cycle of international

<sup>37</sup> Hobbes, *Leviathan*, p. 185.

<sup>38</sup> See T. Heinrichs, "Coercion, Maintenance and Education in Hobbes' *Leviathan*" (forthcoming).

<sup>39</sup> See Norman Jacobson, *Pride and Solace: the Functions and Limits of Political Theory* (Berkeley: U. of California P., 1978), pp. 51-92, and Sheldon Wolin, *Politics and Vision: Continuity and Innovation in Western Political Thought* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1960), pp. 239-85.

<sup>40</sup> R. Clark gives a good overview of Russell's later denials and dismissals in Chap. 19 of *The Life of Bertrand Russell*.

<sup>41</sup> Quoted in Clark, p. 528.

conflict. However misguided this belief may have been, it illuminates the degree to which Russell incorporates a Hobbesian dimension in his arguments for world government.

The central problem that Russell perceives in the immediate postwar period is similar to the dilemma confronted by Hobbes: how can people be convinced that the familiar pattern of politics is self-destructive and, simultaneously, be induced to concentrate political power even further? Russell takes the Hobbesian gamble that the psychological barrier to peace could only be overcome by an even greater application of fear. Yet, like the fabled sorcerer's apprentice, Russell quickly finds himself swept along in the vortex of the argument's ruthless logic.

As Russell's perception of the American potential for world dominance declines, the logic of the argument requires even more extreme visions of the perils of indecision. The benefits of a short, one-sided nuclear war are increasingly juxtaposed to a world ravaged by international wars fought with atomic weapons. Russell also uses the imminent development of the hydrogen bomb as the ultimate threat. Unless America acts upon the transient historical opportunity of world dominance, there is the possibility of global extinction. As the inevitable paranoia of each nuclear power escalates, the mathematical probability of an accidental nuclear war rises exponentially.<sup>42</sup>

Once the Soviet Union exploded its own atomic bomb, Russell was released from the vision of a Hobbesian mechanism for world government by the argument's own internal logic. Although America retained a lead in both atomic weapons and in the development of the hydrogen bomb, the equation of fear had shifted decisively. With each new stage in the nuclear arms race, Russell pulled back from his advocacy of American hegemony as a catalyst for a lasting peace and drew closer to the nuclear disarmament positions for which he is so well remembered. What had begun as a vague possibility during the First World War ended on a remote Siberian test-range in August 1949.<sup>43</sup>

<sup>42</sup> Ryan, pp. 183-4.

<sup>43</sup> Although this event foreclosed the possibility of a Hobbesian mechanism for world government, Russell continued to hold to his general perspective on the need for international government even if it was oppressive. In "Ideas That Have Helped Mankind" in *Unpopular Essays* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1950), he wrote: "In the history of social evolution it will be found that almost

## 5. CONCLUDING REMARKS

The suggestion of any link between Hobbes and Russell will undoubtedly disturb the scholars and followers of either thinker. Even if one discounts popular misconceptions of both thinkers, numerous areas of severe disagreement in their political theories remain. The large extent of this disagreement is incontestable. It is absurd to think of Russell as a latter-day Hobbes, but it is equally mistaken to ignore those few areas of significant agreement. In this sense, the following remarks are not intended as a summary of a decisive argument. Rather, they are an invitation to rethink Russell's often shifting politics from a perspective that emphasizes the residual power of particular images or "solutions" in the western political imagination. By way of concluding, therefore, it may be helpful to indicate some of the more general reasons why this perspective does not necessarily exclude other interpretations.

One of the strongest alternative interpretations of Russell's post-World War II statements emphasizes his hatred of Stalinist Russia. To some extent, this perspective has merit. Russell's sustained critique of Marxist ideology is evident in many works, including several inflammatory remarks about the Soviet Union during the postwar period. It is a serious error, however, to confuse Russell's position with the more virulent forms of anti-communism that continue to advocate war with the "evil Empire".

Although a full discussion of Russell's critique of Marxism is beyond the limits of this paper, it is important to understand that the critique was developed early and remained immune from the later hysterias of the McCarthy era. Having never been an uncritical

invariably the establishment of some sort of government has come first and attempts to make government compatible with personal liberty have come later.... I find it often urged that an international government would be oppressive, and I do not deny that this might be the case, at any rate for a time, but national governments were oppressive when they were new and are still oppressive in most countries, and yet hardly anybody would on this ground advocate anarchy within a nation ... we must learn to submit to an international government. Any such government, whether good, bad or indifferent, will make the continuation of the human species possible.... Perhaps, though I scarcely dare to hope it, the hydrogen bomb will terrify mankind into sanity and tolerance. If this should happen we shall have reason to bless its inventors" (pp. 142-3 and 165).

admirer of Marxism, Russell did not experience "the God that failed".<sup>44</sup> Furthermore, most of Russell's severest criticisms of the Soviet system were based on his perception that it nurtured some of the worst aspects of the Tsarist regime. Unlike other postwar critics, Russell understood Soviet "totalitarianism" as a combination of rabid nationalism and a mystical faith in the Party. For this reason, Russell saw very little difference between the regimes of Hitler and Stalin. Russell held Marxist ideology to be partially responsible for Stalin, but the Tsarist regime and western counterrevolutionary reactions were also found to be important factors.

Although some of Russell's statements from the interwar period indicate that he was willing to consider the spread of international communism as an alternative path to world government, his postwar position clearly rejected this option. In other words, even if the Soviet Union had developed the bomb first, it is difficult to imagine that Russell would have advocated a "Russian leviathan". To this extent he would have deviated from the strict logic of Hobbes' argument. Yet, the Soviet Union would not have been discounted because it was communist. Similarly, American dominance was not promoted because it was capitalist. The essential problem, as Russell saw it, was that the Soviet system harboured all of the vices of a fanatical religious tyranny. In short, it lacked the requisite rationality of self-preservation. The end result would be endless persecutions and nuclear wars waged against heretical nations.<sup>45</sup> Beginning with the rise of McCarthyism, Russell increasingly applied the same criticisms to the United States.<sup>46</sup>

Since Russell clearly feared one form of world domination, it is also appropriate to speculate about why this fear did not become more generalized for Russell and, thereby, preclude the Hobbesian project. As previously indicated, Russell explicitly states that the rule of a despotic government is both a probable and a necessary stage towards world peace. Despite this sobering observation, Russell suggests that there are few other workable alternatives for the creation of world government in several works spanning thirty years.

A key to unravelling Russell's acceptance of international despotism is again provided by his often neglected work, *Power*. For

44 John Passmore made this point about Russell's critique of Marxism in a conversation at the Bertrand Russell Editorial Project.

45 "Philosophy and Politics", *Unpopular Essays*, p. 17.

46 *Bertrand Russell's America*, 2: 350-60.

Russell there is a permanent dimension of human nature that works against the long-term stability of any autocratic regime. The “psychological conquest” of citizens is never decisive. The more a government plays upon the fears and passions of its citizens, the more ineffective its propaganda becomes. Governments may deaden their citizens’ impulses, but this process also makes them incapable of the sacrifices and emotional allegiances necessary to sustain despotism over the long term. Most importantly, for Russell, the removal of the fear of other nations also undermines the major psychological pillar of despotic rule (pp. 207, 309–10).

In light of this position, it might be asked why Russell would not apply the same reasoning to the possibility of an international order based on Soviet hegemony? The answer is that he did, up to the time of the first atomic explosion. He also saw the Third Reich as susceptible to the same enervation.

If the world, in the near future, becomes divided between Communists and Fascists, the final victory will go to neither.... The ultimate limit to the power of creeds is set by boredom, weariness, and love of ease. (*Ibid.*, p. 161)

Again, the point for Russell was that both regimes were so irrationally self-destructive (i.e. fanatical) that they could not act as the despotic vehicle for world government. When nuclear weapons were introduced, the possibility of the long-term erosion of these types of regimes became untenable.

Russell’s position on the instability of despotic regimes also points to what will be taken as, potentially, the most serious criticism of an implicit Hobbesian dimension in his work. The political Russell is a rebel and a dissenter—the very type of individual that Hobbes’ leviathan would be compelled to silence and, if need be, kill. Consequently, it seems next to impossible that Russell could be influenced, even indirectly, by a theory so fundamentally opposed to his own political existence.

As indicated earlier, Russell believed that the time for national leviathans had passed for most western countries. He cherished many of the civil liberties that he attributed to the triumph of liberalism and looked forward to their incorporation into the emerging socialist tradition. Yet, the major cause of Russell’s most extreme acts of civil disobedience was not outside Hobbes’ universe; it went to its core.

Russell defied the law and encouraged others to do likewise on the basis that the existing political order was blindly annihilating its citizens. From the killing fields of the First World War to the nuclear threat of global extinction, the fundamental basis of political legitimacy had been broken. The only basis for disobedience to Hobbes’ leviathan had become a universal condition. For Russell, as for Hobbes, all other political issues paled before the threat to self-preservation.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> This article would not be complete without acknowledging the advice of Richard Rempel and Terry Heinrichs, generous experts about Russell and Hobbes, respectively. Bernd Frohmann and Alkis Kontos “ignited” the discussion which led to the above speculations. As with all else, Rona Achilles provides the continuity of incentive and critical insight.