

## RAY MONK AND THE POLITICS OF BERTRAND RUSSELL

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In his epic two-volume biography of Bertrand Russell,<sup>1</sup> Ray Monk discusses Russell's politics extensively. And throughout his discussion, he does little to hide his own views on the subject. Monk's opinion of Russell's politics is basically that of Russell's most famous student, Ludwig Wittgenstein. This should not come as a surprise, given that Monk also wrote an epic (and much more sympathetic) biography of Wittgenstein<sup>2</sup> before tackling Russell. Wittgenstein (a man no more inclined to pull punches than Monk) once famously remarked that Russell's books should be bound in two colours—"those dealing with math-

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<sup>1</sup> *Bertrand Russell: the Spirit of Solitude and Bertrand Russell: the Ghost of Madness.*

<sup>2</sup> *Ludwig Wittgenstein: the Duty of Genius* (New York: Free P., 1990).

ematical logic in red—and all students of philosophy should read them; those dealing with ethics and politics in blue—and no one should be allowed to read them” (Monk, 2: 278). From the start of the second volume, Monk echoes this sentiment. In the preface, he writes that “as I have worked on this volume, two thoughts have dominated my reactions” to Russell. “The first is just how *bad* most of his writing on political, social, and moral questions is” (2: xii).<sup>3</sup> Monk’s entire treatment of Russell’s political side unerringly follows the path laid out in this remark.

Monk may be harsh in his assessment of Russell’s politics, but is he wrong? In certain critical respects, I shall argue that he is. Monk makes criticisms of many sorts—indeed, he has few good things to say about Russell’s forays into politics at all—but a pattern underlies them all. Monk consistently evades direct engagement with Russell’s actual views on politics, preferring instead to attack them in less intellectually courageous ways. In this review, I shall offer some examples of this behaviour in the second volume of Monk’s biography of Russell. I shall then briefly speculate about the reasons why Monk would choose to engage Russell in this manner. In the process of doing so, I shall highlight the valid part of Monk’s critique, and suggest why Monk might have overextended the valid part in ways that do Russell an injustice. This approach clearly accentuates the negative things I have to say about Monk. This is justified, however, for two reasons. First, I think that overall Monk’s criticisms of the political Russell are unfair. Second, understanding why Monk makes so many unfair criticisms provides a key to seeing what Monk does right and where he goes wrong.

I wish to be up front about my criticisms of Monk. I share many, though not all, of Russell’s political convictions, and so in defending Russell against Monk I am defending the entire radical tradition into which Russell falls.<sup>4</sup> It may seem hypersensitive of me to treat Monk’s attack on Russell’s politics as an attack on the Left. However, the nature of Monk’s attack justifies this interpretation. I have said that Monk chooses not to engage Russell’s politics directly; this is a time-honoured practice many critics of left-wing arguments adopt. If you attack someone’s arguments directly, you have to show why they are wrong.

<sup>3</sup> Monk’s second thought is “how emotionally maimed Russell was” (Monk, 2: xii). I leave discussion of this topic to others.

<sup>4</sup> This assumes that Russell is properly classified as a left-wing or radical political thinker. Some, notably Phillip Ironside, would classify Russell as a liberal, in such a way as to play down Russell’s more radical commitments (his guild socialism and anti-imperialism, for example). See Ironside’s *The Social and Political Thought of Bertrand Russell: the Development of an Aristocratic Liberalism* (New York: Cambridge U. P., 1996). Since Monk does not seem to embrace this argument, I do not believe a full response is necessary here. For a critique of Ironside, see Charles R. Pigden’s review in *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, 75 (June 1997): 257–9.

Adopt a more circumspect tactic, however, and people may not notice you've dodged the questions at issue. This is the intellectual equivalent of the mythical advice given by one attorney to his partner, who was about to make opening arguments in an important case—"We have no case. Attack the other guy's lawyer."

Monk's treatment of Russell's politics avoids the arguments Russell makes in precisely this manner. He does not so much refute them as dodge them. In doing so, he employs a number of classic tactics that critics of the Left have employed for ages. These tactics assume there's no serious political position to which to respond. They assume this; they do not demonstrate that it is true. Any defender of the Left must thus point these tactics out wherever they are used, in hopes that eventually people will stop running afoul of them.

What sort of tactics do I have in mind? In describing Russell's turn from technical philosophy to social and political criticism, Monk makes the following point:

As a philosopher of mathematics, Russell had achieved rare greatness; as a journalist and political commentator, he was to produce a staggering amount of second-rate writing. The problem, as many of his friends identified, was partly that he approached politics with the logician's desire for absolute clarity, and thus, impatient with the messy realities of political life, was inclined to oversimplify every issue. (Monk, 2: 5)

This is an interesting argument, and one that has certainly been made before. Logan Pearsall Smith, brother of Russell's first wife, once remarked that "watching Russell engage in practical politics seemed to him 'like using a razor to chop wood'" (Monk, 1: 172). But what makes Monk's claim very odd is the passage which follows. Right after remarking that Russell was just too demanding in the logical standards he applied to politics, Monk writes,

But partly, also, it was, as Beatrice Webb saw, that he did *not* bring to politics the qualities that made him a great philosopher and logician. His best philosophical writing is subtle, nuanced, and unafraid of complexity. He supports his views with rigorous and sophisticated arguments, and deals with objections carefully and respectfully. In most of the journalism and political writing that he produced in the second half of his life, however, those qualities are absent, replaced with empty rhetoric, blind dogmatism, and a cavalier refusal to take the views of his opponents seriously. (Monk's emphasis; 2: 5-6)

Now this is also an interesting point with some validity, probably more in fact than the first point, for reasons I'll mention at the end. But there are clearly a few problems with this claim. One of them, to be blunt, is its source. Monk quotes Beatrice Webb several times in support of his dismissal of Russell, both

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personally and politically.<sup>5</sup> He describes her as “a perceptive chronicler of Russell’s changing personality” (2: 4). But how far should one trust the political judgments of a chronicler (perceptive or otherwise) who unabashedly hailed Stalin’s Russia as a model for the modern era?<sup>6</sup> Monk rarely gives the political Russell the benefit of a doubt, yet he seems quite content to rely on the opinions of others (like Webb) whose own political judgment left something to be desired.<sup>7</sup>

But there is a more telling criticism to be made of Monk’s treatment of Russell in the passages quoted above. On the one hand, according to Monk, Russell is too analytical, too much a mathematician, in his approach to politics. On the other hand, Russell is not being analytical enough, he’s not being careful enough with his political analysis. One could simply dismiss Monk as inconsistent here, but I believe that beneath the surface contradiction Monk is simply offering two versions of a single tried and true anti-Leftist attack—the “it’s not that simple” attack. When confronting radical social criticism using this tactic, the attacker does not claim that the facts underlying the criticism are false. Instead, the attacker merely points out that the world is a more complicated place than the criticism allows for, that if all the facts are considered the critique is unjustified. Rarely does the attacker bother to say which specific facts will void the critique, but the damage the attacker seeks to do rarely requires anything this rational.

Russell is a prime candidate for this kind of attack. Confronted, for example, with the fact that the US government was killing people in Vietnam for no remotely defensible purpose, Russell concluded (in good syllogistic style) that President Johnson and Defence Secretary Robert McNamara were mass murderers, and said so repeatedly. There’s no denying that the US did indeed kill a great many people in Vietnam, and few have bothered to offer less-than-embar-

<sup>5</sup> He quotes, for example, Beatrice Webb’s famously patronizing remark about the middle-aged Russell, “Poor Bertie; he had made a mess of his life and he knows it” (Monk, 2: 121). Webb’s disdainful attitude towards Russell reflects a certain ingratitude, given the generous support (financial and otherwise) Russell provided to the London School of Economics, which Beatrice co-founded (Monk, 1: 105–6; 2: 207).

<sup>6</sup> Whatever one thinks of Russell’s politics, he was one of the few public figures in the west to stand against capitalism without succumbing to illusions about Stalinist Russia. If for no other reason than this, Russell deserves some credit for his political instincts.

<sup>7</sup> Aside from Webb, the primary person of questionable political judgment upon whom Monk relies is D. H. Lawrence. Although Monk provides a striking portrayal of just how lunatic Lawrence’s political ideas were, he perceives great insight in Lawrence’s Nietzschean diatribes against Russell (Monk, 1: Chap. 14). See also Ray Monk, “The Tiger and the Machine: D. H. Lawrence and Bertrand Russell”, *Philosophy of the Social Sciences*, 26 (June 1996): 205–46; as well as my review of the symposium containing this article, “Russell the Political Theorist”, *Russell*, n.s. 20 (2000): 85–92.

rasing defences of the reasons for this killing. But “respectable” people learn to ignore this; they do not draw the obvious conclusion but accept the world as too complicated for meaningful ethical judgments like this one. Russell, whatever his faults as an analyst (more on this later), was too courageous an intellect to accept such conventionalities instead of the truth, and this intellectual courage does not invite popularity.

And so Monk finds fault with Russell for displaying this kind of courage, for failing to recognize that “it’s not that simple”, even though he is not quite sure why Russell does this. It could be that if he were thinking more rigorously, he’d draw more orthodox conclusions (much as the American people, according to Johnson’s apologists, would understand why the US was in Vietnam if only the facts were explained to them one more time). Or it could be that as a mathematician, Russell failed to buy the world-is-a-complicated-place line that “respectable” people recognize as an excuse to avoid drawing firm ethical conclusions about political issues. But whatever the reason for Russell’s unorthodox conclusions, Monk clearly recognizes them as “irresponsible”; he cannot be troubled to say why they are this way, only that a “sophisticated” person would have come up with a reason for not taking a position so hostile to the status quo.

The second classical anti-Left attack Monk employs is the reduction to psychology. This is another tactic with a long track record. After Leon Czolgosz was executed for assassinating William McKinley, his brain was examined to see what it was about his brain that would cause him to assassinate William McKinley.<sup>8</sup> This is quite typical of the way a lot of people approach radicals of any stripe. Rather than examine the arguments radicals produce, they assume there could not possibly have been a reason or argument underlying these arguments. Instead, they assume that some physiological or psychological abnormality must have been responsible for the bizarre Leftist behaviour. The alternative to this tactic is actually to look at radical arguments and answer them, and that’s sometimes impossible to do without raising truths about our social and political institutions few would publicly defend.

Now radicals have a long and valiant history of resistance to efforts at passing them off as psychological abnormalities. Emma Goldman, for example, wrote an essay in defence of Czolgosz’s motives, if not his tactics; at the heart of it was a plea that people look at the social injustices that inspire some people to commit political assassinations.<sup>9</sup> Nevertheless, the tactic persists, and Monk is

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<sup>8</sup> A similar fate apparently befell Ulrike Meinhof, of the Baader-Meinhof gang, after she committed suicide in 1976. Meinhof’s brain was studied for years in hopes of finding brain abnormalities that would explain her violent political career, until her daughter successfully sued to have the brain returned.

<sup>9</sup> “The Psychology of Political Violence”, in *Anarchism and Other Essays* (New York: Dover,

ready and willing to use it. Monk repeatedly provides psychological reasons for Russell's political interventions in such a way as to dismiss them. After all, if Russell was driven in his politics by some psychological need, rather than by good arguments, his positions do not merit attention. For example, when Monk discusses Russell's decision that the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND) was not working and that the more militant tactics of the Committee of 100 were needed, he ultimately locates the deciding factor in Russell's vanity (2: 407).<sup>10</sup> Monk attributes much of Russell's later political activity (his activism against the Vietnam War, etc.) to this factor. Vanity, of course, may have certainly played a role in Russell's behaviour during these years; Russell himself admitted as much in his final memorandum on his former secretary Ralph Schoenman.<sup>11</sup> But this is not to say, as Monk implies, that no sensible person, absent vanity, would take the positions Russell did. To claim otherwise is to employ psychological evaluation, rather than rational criticism, as a basis for dismissing Russell's political positions.

Another classic tactic used to dismiss Leftist opinion is the "harumph" tactic. This tactic is even easier than the first two—when confronted with a claim to which one would rather not respond, just act indignant that the claim was raised at all. Consider, for example, the following exchange between the BBC's Jeremy Paxman and former US Secretary of State/war criminal<sup>12</sup> Henry Kissinger:

PAXMAN: You don't deny [that the bombing of Cambodia] was secret though? ... this was a secret operation against a neutral country.

KISSINGER: Come on now Mr. Paxman, this was fifteen years ago, and you at least have the ability to educate yourself about a lie in your own program.

PAXMAN: What's factually inaccurate?

KISSINGER: That's outrageous.<sup>13</sup>

This tactic—dismissing arguments with a wave of the hand, or a line like "that's

1969).

<sup>10</sup> To his credit, Monk does consider why Russell's professed reasons for the change were implausible before considering psychological factors. However, he is quick to adopt a non-rational explanation, rather than simply accept the possibility that reasonable people might evaluate the same situation differently.

<sup>11</sup> See, e.g., Moorehead, pp. 539–40. Moorehead generally handles Russell's politics with more sensitivity and sympathy than Monk.

<sup>12</sup> For documentation of this aspect of Kissinger's career, see Christopher Hitchens, *The Trial of Henry Kissinger* (New York: Verso, 2002).

<sup>13</sup> Quoted in Noam Chomsky, *Chomsky on MisEducation* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000), p. 173. The same chapter offers a more extended example of the "harumph" tactic employed by John Silber against Chomsky.

so ridiculous”, or “that’s so absurd”—works best against claims that are not commonly or widely accepted, and thus is perfect for handling radical social criticism without stooping to actual argument. Most social critics—and certainly one as intelligent as Russell—deserve better.

Monk employs this tactic frequently when considering Russell’s political arguments, especially his anti-imperialist positions of the 1960s. He quotes, for example, from Russell’s famous leaflet published during the Cuban Missile Crisis. The leaflet in full reads as follows:

YOU ARE TO DIE Not in the course of nature, but within a few weeks. And not you alone, but your family, your friends, and all the inhabitants of Britain, together with many hundreds of millions of innocent people elsewhere.

WHY? Because rich Americans dislike the Government that Cubans prefer, and have used part of their wealth to spread lies about it.

WHAT CAN YOU DO? You can go out into the streets and into the market place, proclaiming: “Do not yield to ferocious and insane murderers. Do not imagine that it is your duty to die when your Prime Minister and the President of the United States tell you to do so. Remember rather your duty to your family, your friends, your country, the world you live in, and that future world which, if you so choose, may be glorious, happy, and free”.

AND REMEMBER: CONFORMITY MEANS DEATH. ONLY PROTEST GIVES A HOPE OF LIFE.<sup>14</sup>

According to Monk, the leaflet’s “oversimplification of the issues involved would have been startling had they come from a schoolboy; from one of the greatest thinkers of our age, they were truly astonishing” (2: 442).<sup>15</sup> For many of us on the Left, however, this leaflet pretty much sums up how the Cuban missile crisis happened and what the proper response to it was, about as well as could possibly be done in 156 words. But Monk can come up with no other response than a “harumph”. As noted before, Monk often says Russell’s political positions are “too simple”; in this instance he claims Russell is being “startlingly simple”, and his tone is supposed to be enough to convince.

To summarize, I believe that Monk employs against Russell several tactics

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<sup>14</sup> Monk’s quotations (2: 442) from the leaflet have been completed from a copy in the Russell Archives.

<sup>15</sup> For some reason, this leaflet seems to upset many people. William Poundstone describes it as “almost hysterical”. See Poundstone, *Prisoner’s Dilemma* (New York: Anchor Books, 2003), p. 206. The best response to this charge is probably that made by Russell in a letter to *The Times* on a related topic. “Nuclear war”, he writes, “is a matter about which I should have thought it obviously right to feel emotion. If you can contemplate without emotion the destruction of the human race or even of all the inhabitants of Britain, I can only congratulate you, without envy, on your stoicism.” See Ray Perkins, Jr., ed., *Yours Faithfully, Bertrand Russell: a Lifelong Fight for Peace, Justice, and Truth in Letters to the Editor* (Chicago: Open Court, 2002), p. 340.

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commonly used against radical social critics, tactics employed to dismiss critics without serious engagement with their arguments. These tactics dominate Monk's discussion of the political Russell. That still leaves one question unanswered, however—why does Monk pursue these tactics against Russell?

The simple and obvious answer is of course largely correct—Monk dislikes Russell's politics. While I seriously doubt he is conservative in his politics,<sup>16</sup> his distaste for Russell's radicalism, especially the anti-imperialism that dominated his last years in politics, is palpable at every turn. His dislike of the political Russell is, I believe, necessary but not sufficient as an explanation of the tactics he employs. The remainder of the explanation comes, not from malice (for I do not believe Monk is disingenuous in the tactics he chooses), but from a misunderstanding of the nature of Russell as a political figure.

Monk holds Russell to very high standards when examining his every remark about politics. Not just his political theory proper, but his every remark. And when he discusses Russell as an academic political theorist, his tactics seem somewhat easier to understand. When, for example, Monk takes up one of Russell's last works of ethical and political theory, *Human Society in Ethics and Politics*, he points out that the book divides neatly into two parts. The theory of ethics developed in the first part, he continues, is basically ignored in the second part, dealing with politics—even though Russell hoped the former would serve as a foundation for the latter. The book in effect turns from a theoretical work into an inspirational piece in support of some of Russell's most cherished causes (2: 353). I have little quarrel with this analysis; many commentators, including some more sympathetic to Russell than Monk, have similarly noted the oddly dichotomous nature of this work.<sup>17</sup> More generally, Monk takes Russell to task for failing to apply the same standards of rigor and analysis to questions of politics that he applied to the foundations of mathematics, as well as other areas in philosophy.<sup>18</sup> And by and large, Monk is correct, although the implications are widely different from what Monk apparently believes.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>16</sup> If Monk is indeed not conservative in his orientation, he should be more careful about the tactics he embraces. Some of the Left-bashing techniques he employs may well be employed against positions he himself may support.

<sup>17</sup> I have made my own efforts to analyze the work as a coherent whole in "Russell's Political Thought: What's Ethics Got to Do with It?" (paper presented at the 1997 annual meeting of the Bertrand Russell Society).

<sup>18</sup> One could easily include meta-ethics in the category of topics subjected to rigorous analysis by Russell. See Charles R. Pigden, "Bertrand Russell: Meta-Ethical Pioneer", *Philosophy of the Social Sciences*, 26 (June 1996): 181–204. Monk never really takes up the point.

<sup>19</sup> This is not to say that Russell did not float new and innovative ideas about political theory. Russell Hardin, for example, has argued that Russell's best insights into politics came precisely when he wandered astray from his announced goals into uncharted territories. See Hardin, "Russell's Power", *Philosophy of the Social Sciences*, 26 (Sept. 1996): 322–47.

Monk demands analytical rigour from Russell the political thinker. He parts company here from his preferred philosopher, Wittgenstein. Russell's student famously argued that ethics and politics fell into the realm of "that about which we could not speak", and therefore had to "remain silent". But Monk only wishes Russell to remain silent about politics as long as Russell refuses to write and speak about politics as he did about mathematics. Perhaps there is no real argument with Wittgenstein here. Stephen Toulmin and Allan Janik, after all, have argued that Wittgenstein's mature philosophy, the philosophy of the *Philosophical Investigations*, did not preclude argument on ethical and political issues.<sup>20</sup> But contradiction or not, Monk makes clear analytical demands of Russell, and takes him to task for not meeting them. Whether Russell's arguments were reasonable or not hardly matters so long as they are not made with the rigour of *Principia Mathematica*. This, I believe, is why Monk feels he can dismiss Russell's contributions to politics without doing him the courtesy of addressing the arguments he makes.

In attempting to hold Russell to such a high standard, Monk expresses a desire to see social and political theory conducted at a very high level of analysis. Recent work in the social sciences has certainly demonstrated that this goal is achievable,<sup>21</sup> and as noted before, I do not deny that Russell's political writings rarely measure up. However, there are many roles political writings can play; academic scholarship is just one of them. One can also write about politics in order to intervene on the political stage, so as to make the world a better place. And one need not be capable of mathematical analysis in order to make normative arguments in political debates. Russell's political writings typically serve the latter, not the former, purpose. In politics, he was an activist first, and a theorist second.<sup>22</sup>

Monk thus takes Russell's polemical interventions in politics, finds that they do not measure up to the standards of academic analytical philosophy, and so finds his work wanting. But this is to apply a standard out of place in the rough-and-ready world of political activism. Here again Stephen Toulmin is useful; no one has argued more forcefully than he that one must not export the standards of formal logic into realms of argument where it does not belong. Otherwise, one will find that nothing measures up to one's lofty criteria of

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<sup>20</sup> Allan Janik and Stephen Toulmin, *Wittgenstein's Vienna* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1996; 1st ed., 1973), Chap. 7.

<sup>21</sup> See, e.g., the analytical approach to Marxism developed over the past quarter century. Classics in this area include G. A. Cohen, *Karl Marx's Theory of History: a Defense* (Princeton: Princeton U. P., 1978); John Roemer, *A General Theory of Exploitation and Class* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard U. P., 1982); and Jon Elster, *Making Sense of Marx* (New York: Cambridge U. P., 1985).

<sup>22</sup> I develop this point in my "Russell the Political Theorist", *op cit*. Here I follow Alan Ryan, "Russell: the Last Great Radical?", *Philosophy of the Social Sciences*, 26 (June 1996): 247–66.

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judgement.<sup>23</sup> It is hard to imagine any successful political agitator living up to the standards of argument Monk would impose on Russell.<sup>24</sup>

Monk is welcome to dislike Russell's radicalism, as he clearly does. He can only justify employing his dismissive anti-Left tactics, however, if Russell's work can be held to a high standard of analytical rigour. If Russell's primary contribution to politics were as an academic philosopher, then this would make sense. But as Russell the activist clearly took prominence over Russell the theorist in the political realm, Monk's demands are simply unreasonable. In the rough-and-ready world of politics—particularly a world as hostile to radical ideas as the one we currently inhabit—Russell had far more to offer than Monk's harsh analysis would suggest.

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<sup>23</sup> See Stephen Toulmin, *The Uses of Argument* (New York: Cambridge U. P., 1958).

<sup>24</sup> Wittgenstein consciously avoided all things political, and thus gave Monk no opportunities to be disappointed by his political interventions. Perhaps this helps account for the preference Monk shows for Ludwig over Bertie.

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