

EDUCATION AS THE POWER OF INDEPENDENT THOUGHT

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Chris Shute. *Bertrand Russell: "Education as the Power of Independent Thought"*. Bramcote Hills, Nottingham, UK: Educational Heretics P., 2002. Pp. viii + 71. £8.50.

To read Chris Shute on education is to be carried back to the late 1960s and the free-school movement. John Holt, Paul Goodman, A. S. Neill, George Dennison, and Ivan Illich helped to build the case against compulsory state-controlled systems of mis-education. State schools prized uniformity and conformity and thus denied the creative impulse, all that is most "natural" and "human" in good teaching and happy learning. Free-school advocates therefore recommended revolt, either through student strikes and uprisings, or wholesale retreat into the regions of private schooling, based in the home if necessary.

Recent studies suggest that although the movement's life was short, lasting from about 1966 to 1973, its mystique has survived into the twenty-first century.¹ In publicity for home schooling, "charter" schooling, and private education in the 1990s and early 2000s—and in popular arguments against state control and national or international testing—the language of the 1960s has been revived. A small minority of parents and educationists talk this way, but it is a vocal minority.

All this is pertinent to a review of Shute's book, since he offers his readers an *adaptation* of Russell's educational theory of the 1920s and early 1930s. Shute's prior commitment to free education has led him to make additions to and subtractions from Russell's thought. He tells us about the additions, but not the subtractions. Shute wants to demonstrate the educational and "humanistic"

¹ See W. J. Reese, ed., "American Education in the Twentieth Century: Progressive Legacies", special issue of *Paedagogica Historica*, 39 (Aug. 2003), *passim*; and Ron Miller, *Free Schools, Free People. Education and Democracy after the 1960s* (Albany: State U. of New York P., 2002).

merit of Russell's ideas, but as part of a campaign for "free" home schooling, and possibly to promote his publisher's schemes and plans.

Bertrand Russell: "Education as the Power of Independent Thought" is one of 28 titles published by Educational Heretics Press, on natural learning, the evils of rules and regimentation, the compulsory schooling "disease", and the democratic advantages inherent in the organization of small, private schools. This is a press with a purpose, as the publisher's foreword to Chris Shute's book makes plain. Among its current titles are biographical studies of a select group of earlier reformers, mostly British, and who flourished between 1910 and 1930. They include Henry Morris, Margaret McMillan, Charlotte Mason, Edmond Holmes, and Bertrand Russell. The Educational Heretics Press quite rightly understands that the free school movement of the 1960s was not the first, nor perhaps the last of its kind.

Shute's book might not survive in a North American court, as its questions and argument would be thought to lead the witness. Yet on a short list of important educational questions, it is a moderately useful introduction to Russell's ideas (although not his practice as a parent after 1921, or as co-director of Beacon Hill School, 1927–32).

In Shute's view, Russell considered that (1) education is a life-long work-in-progress; (2) education and indoctrination are logically inconsistent; (3) educational thought should lead to practice, a linkage too often absent from large-scale state or private schooling—that is, one should practise what one preaches; and (4) compulsive and compulsory "head-stuffing" has impoverished the State system (p. 5), that is,

children need teaching far less than they need exposure to interesting new knowledge, and the opportunity to interact with it freely... "It is by what we do ourselves (and for our own reasons, C.R.S. [*sic*]) that we learn." (P. 17; this last a quotation from Russell's *On Education*, p. 65)

To the first three on the list, Russell would most likely have agreed. On the fourth, we cannot be sure, as Russell said little about the practices of state schools, if only because Russell had little first-hand experience of them. In his two big books on education (*On Education*, 1926; *Education and the Social Order*, 1932²), Russell takes aim at formal education in a general way, including the public grammar schools, higher elementary and technical schools, the universities, and the great "public" (that is, private) schools. It is unlikely Russell would have made so *particular* a claim about the work of Local Education

² Published respectively in the US as *Education and the Good Life* and *Education and the Modern World*, with Part 11 of the former later available as *Education of Character* (1961).

Authorities (that head-stuffing will impoverish—whatever that may mean—state-provided schooling).

Shute hopes to find clues in Russell “to creating a form of education which does not overwhelm and destroy the natural goodness and common-sense” (p. 9) of the very young. Putting aside Shute’s errors of omission and commission for the moment, one imagines Russell would sympathize with certain but not all of Shute’s chosen themes, and might even have applauded Shute’s way of writing about them. The difficulty is that Shute’s list goes beyond the four themes to which Russell would have assented in whole or part.

A fifth theme is everywhere in Shute’s book, but without benefit of sustained argument: that the conformity and uniformity prized by state schools and larger private schools are just plain bad. Shute says formal schooling rewards good behaviour and punishes all other behaviour. Alas, schools require conformity on mostly unwritten rules, in arbitrary fashion, and under a thoroughly authoritarian administrative regime. Formal schools thus become an instrument for oppression and repression.

Shute makes the case for schools as oppressors in two main ways.

First, he understands that in formal schooling, teachers must *necessarily be assumed* to be all-knowing. Teachers are sages on stages. Put another way, education-as-schooling is about instruction, not inquiry (Shute, p. 61). Shute reminds us (pp. 57ff.) that Russell thought the individual was valuable and deserving of what he called “reverence,” by contrast to the crowd or the herd; that children had a right to be told the truth at all times; and that organized inquiry was the natural creative outlet for a child’s curiosities. If we get out of the child’s way, all the while providing the necessary tools of inquiry, that child will become a scientist, historian, artist, technician, or explorer, in his or her own small way.

Russell might have agreed with some of these claims, but did not think instruction should be foresworn. His view was that to learn a language it made sense to live and breathe it, but also to be taught it. And Russell thought historians could not be educated without the help of at least some explicit and orderly instruction. There was room in Russell’s heart even for publicly organized examinations. On the question of teachers and instruction, Shute therefore intrigues and stimulates, but does not necessarily give a complete or exact treatment (if Russell is the subject).

Second, Shute asserts (p. 57) that schools “had one overriding purpose: to prepare young people to defend whatever the Government considered to be in the interests of the State, by being ready to become soldiers in time of war.” Shute then wanders off, claiming that nowadays, schools disguise this larger purpose as “sensitivity training”, “citizenship education”, “new patriotism”, and “multiculturalist understanding”. In the end, the result is the same, the

manipulation and indoctrination of young people. The teacher is always and endlessly the examiner and the authority, the pupils subject to each other's bullying and "anti-social" acts (problems that bothered Russell a good deal at the tiny and familial Beacon Hill School). It is all because education is imbued with nationalist-militarist goals.

To this Russell might object only that a teacher has an obligation to help children form their own opinions,³ always with "impartiality of judgment, the habit of searching for impersonal truth, and distrust of party catch-words" (*PIC*, p. 270). This is a big objection, as Shute has numerous opinions, and does not recommend impartiality on all of them.

Turning at last to matters of historical fact and judgment, Shute leaves readers occasionally confused. Take the question of Russell's early education at home. Shute claims (p. 6) the fifteen-year-old Russell later held his own in a London cramming school, by withdrawing from his fellow students and relying on his "clarity of intent" to become a mathematician. Given what we know of Russell's childhood and adolescence, how could one say home-schooling allowed Russell "to balance the strength of his intellectual needs with the undoubtedly corrosive surroundings in which he was obliged to satisfy them" (p. 7)?⁴ Russell himself said often that he could not recommend home schooling, one reason being precisely that it might lay a child open to a corrosive surrounding. He had been such a child.

Meanwhile, Shute wants us to think that Russell's

privileged early years, free as they were from the influence of harsh, authoritarian teaching and a rigid curriculum, allowed him to see with unique clarity how growing minds can be smothered and their ability to think largely destroyed by being made to adjust to a regime of enforced learning. (P. 2)

But Russell's *Autobiography* (see especially *Auto.*, 1: 19–25) plainly indicates that his education and upbringing at Pembroke Lodge, closely supervised as they were by his grandmother, were—in a moralizing sense—harsh, rigid, smothering, and enforced.

³ William Hare, "Russell's Contribution to Philosophy of Education", *Russell*, n.s. (1987): 25–41, but esp. 39.

⁴ Russell calls for compulsory attendance in "ordinary schools", explicitly preferring them to schooling at home (*Education and the Social Order* [London: Allen and Unwin, 1932], p. 42). Later (pp. 65–7) he gives seven knock-down reasons why home schooling is bad for urban children. Meanwhile he argues that rural children would be best served by experimental boarding-schools. Perhaps Beacon Hill School would be on his list of such places. Russell thought that the "education of the citizen" must take priority over education of the "individual" until such time as there is a world government and a world-wide system of schooling, as free as possible of parochial, dogmatic, and propagandistic teaching.

Whom should one believe about Russell's home schooling, Shute or Russell?

On another topic, Shute gives only a partial idea of Russell's political views. At page 47, Shute remarks that Russell "wanted England to become the sort of classless society which he thought post-revolutionary Russia was starting to be". But there was room in Russell's socialism for incentives (even cash incentives, as he allowed in *PSR*, p. 95). Russell's 1922 essay on "Motive in Industry"⁵ recommended guild socialism and abolition of economic competition, but allowed for stimulus to encourage the indolent and the recalcitrant who might refuse their fair share of labour. Shute is mostly right, but misses nuances in the politics of the middle-aged Russell,⁶ and, of course, the increasing uncertainties of the older Russell.⁷

Shute does not reveal his politics, but tells us he has been a French teacher in the schools (pp. 17, 18; state schools, one infers), and claims (p. 44) he is an open-minded evangelical Christian. His personal experience of teaching supplies evidence for several of his claims. But the matter of his religious persuasion is left hanging. We are, one supposes, to draw our own political inferences; I suspect that if centrist anarchism were possible, Shute might prefer that political position.

Because he writes vigorously for a cause or causes, and because he is unfailingly concise, Shute's book is highly readable. Shute implicitly asks readers, particularly those who know Russell's books well, to accept his selective recounting of "education as the power of independent thought". I was tempted to go along, if only because Shute suggested so often that he wants for education all the emotional, moral, and intellectual qualities Russell wanted—courage, vitality, love, respect for all persons, sensitiveness, and capable intelligence.⁸ Even so, the book must be characterized as a tract, and I did not go along.

⁵ Bertrand Russell, "Motive in Industry: a Reply to Professor Einstein", *Papers* 15: 383–7.

⁶ See Monk, 2: 166–8, on Russell's withdrawal from active politics, as he had "no clear idea of what the Labour Party should be urging the Government to do about the problems that beset it" (this in 1932, in the depths of the Great Depression).

⁷ In *Bertrand Russell Speaks His Mind* (Cleveland and New York: World Publishing, 1960) Russell says (pp. 69–70), "education" has permitted a recurrence of mass hysteria in public life. Just as hysterical public opinion pushed British Prime Minister Walpole into war with Spain two centuries before, it threatened to make the governments of the United States and Britain go to war with the Eastern Bloc. In short, universal education had not by 1960 produced the effects for which he hoped in the 1920s and 1930s. Similarly, in a passage on the effects of McCarthyism in the United States (p. 53), Russell says some university professors have caved in, becoming "spies" for the government. In *Education and the Social Order* (pp. 83–7), Russell described his preferred technique for educating bureaucrats, especially those people who would direct education systems in democratic nations. By 1960, he realized that his scheme might never work. Certainly, it hadn't been adopted in American educational bureaucracies.

⁸ Joe Park, *Bertrand Russell on Education* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1964), pp. 83–110.