

BERTRAND RUSSELL AS A
“PUBLIC INTELLECTUAL”

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Tim Madigan and Peter Stone, eds. *Bertrand Russell: Public Intellectual*. Rochester, NY: Tiger Bark P., 2016. Pp. 241. US\$20.95. ISBN-13: 978-0-9976305-0-3.

It is unusual for me to review a book consisting mainly of essays by authors I know and have met once a year—more or less—for the last thirty years. This makes me positively inclined even before reading anything.

This collection has two competent Russell fans and scholars as editors: Tim Madigan, associate professor of philosophy at St. John Fisher College in Rochester, New York, and president of the Bertrand Russell Society, who is the author of three essays in this collection: “Six Degrees of Bertrand Russell”,¹ “Russell and Dewey on Education: Similarities and Differences” and “Russell in Popular Culture”; and Peter Stone, Ussher assistant professor of political science at Trinity College Dublin, who serves on the BRS board, founded two of its local chapters, was recently its vice-president, and also is the author of three essays: “Introduction: Who Was Bertrand Russell?”, “Russell the Political Activist” and “The Logic of Storytelling and the Storytelling of Logic” (on *Logicomix*).

To begin with, we need some idea of the meaning of the term “public intellectual”, which *sounds* pretty clear but has no clear Swedish or German equivalents, and that’s not because we don’t have *intellectuals* in Sweden or Germany, but because the subset *public intellectuals* has no clear definition and therefore lacks unambiguous examples as members.

Russell’s Swedish disciple Ingemar Hedenius,² Professor in Practical Philosophy at Uppsala 1947–73, became a well-known intellectual person, when he attacked Swedish theology from a more or less Russellian view in *Tro och Vetande* [Faith and Knowledge], first published in 1949. The debate went on for years and divided the Swedish general population into two groups, much

¹ Reprinted from *Russell* 30 (2010): 63–7.

² See my “Russell’s Influence on Ingemar Hidenius” (2005).

as the American certified *public intellectual* Noam Chomsky has his admirers as well as critics. A *public intellectual* does not necessarily have to be an *academic*, but usually *he* is (there are very few female public intellectuals, at least in Sweden).

Russell, Hedenius and Chomsky are to me clear examples of *public intellectuals*, but what did the editors have in mind when they put together a collection of essays about Russell as a *public intellectual* and how did this *social role* differ and overlap with other social roles that Russell took: academic, philosopher, political philosopher, political activist, etc? We don't know because the editors have not supplied an introduction where one would expect these questions to be introduced and discussed. However, taken together the essays provide a good picture of different aspects of Russell as a public intellectual.

The second-best way to find out what the essays collected have as a common denominator is to look at the titles. There are fourteen essays, but only the first, BRS award-winner Michael Ruse's foreword, "Bertrand Russell as Public Intellectual: a Personal Reflection", and David Blitz's "A Public Intellectual on War and Peace" contain the expression "public intellectual" in the title. However, Ruse does not discuss the meaning of "public intellectual", and nor does Blitz. They seem to assume it is well known, which it isn't.

The only essay that actually is about Russell as a *public intellectual* and discusses its varieties is John Lenz's "How Bertrand Russell Became a New Kind of Intellectual during World War I". Lenz is associate professor at the department of classics at Drew University, a long-time member of the BRS, has served as board chair, and was co-chair of the fourth annual Harvard Conference on Public Intellectuals.

He should know what he's talking about—he does, in fact, and refers to relevant literature about this special group, which existed long before someone came up with the idea of referring to them as *public intellectuals*.³

Lenz traces the origins of the idea of being an *intellectual* to the French utopian socialist Henri de Saint-Simon (1760–1825) and to the Dreyfus affair at the end of the nineteenth century. He then makes a distinction between two models of *intellectuals*: dissenters (with Socrates in mind), and those involved as citizens or social-scientific experts. He goes on to differentiate between

³ There are many books containing the word "intellectuals" and even "public intellectuals", and many of those I've looked at contain at least one reference to Bertrand Russell. However, I will just mention one in which Russell's development from taking a pacifist attitude towards Hitler and later a very aggressive one towards Stalin is highlighted in THOMAS SOWELL's *Intellectuals and Society* (2009) with the unfair remark "Who, besides professional philosophers and mathematicians would have heard of Bertrand Russell, if he had not become a public intellectual, making inflammatory comments on things for which he had no qualifications? Similarly for linguist Noam Chomsky ..." (p. 287).

intellectuals who operate from without or from within the dominating ideology, and those who reinforce the ideology and those who offer alternatives to it. He places Bertrand Russell and John Dewey (1859–1952) in the last group (pp. 31–2).

Lenz's essay attempts to illustrate two different types of public intellectuals, which give an interesting historical example of intellectuals fighting a war on the plane of ideas, because behind this dispute lies an important philosophical difference about the relation of ideas to life—Dewey's pragmatism versus Russell's philosophy of detachment. First Lenz talks about Dewey's book *German Philosophy and Politics* (1915) and a similar book by Santayana. Then he presents Russell's more high-minded and cosmopolitan point of view and concludes with a brief word about two Frenchmen, Romain Rolland and Julien Benda, and Russell's legacy.

The essay is full of interesting information, but he hasn't convinced me that Russell was cool and detached in his protests against the organized madness he had to observe. I'm particularly thinking of a quotation from Russell that shows this, which Lenz supplies. Russell says in the second part of his *Autobiography*:

I have at times been paralyzed by scepticism, at times I have been cynical, at other times indifferent, but when the War came I felt as if I heard the voice of God [italics mine]. I knew that it was my business to protest, however futile protest might be. My whole nature was involved. As a lover of truth, the national propaganda of all the belligerent nations sickened me. As a lover of civilization, the return to barbarism appalled me.... [T]he massacre of the young wrung my heart. (2: 18)

This doesn't sound very detached to me. As a matter of fact, Bertie seems to have become quite upset by the outbreak of the Great War, and the fact that he put his comfortable academic life aside and wrote articles, gave lectures to encourage a peaceful solution to the conflict, and worked long hours for the conscientious objectors rather evinces the opposite attitude of a compassionate public intellectual dissenter. This is a man who wanted to retain as much of his original infatuation with pacifism which dawned upon him in his famous mystical experience in early 1901 as he could, and still be reasonable about it.

Compared to Gandhi for example, Russell was never a *bona fide* pacifist, since he was not against all wars and armed conflicts, like the conquest of the American continents by a "superior" European civilization, the resistance against Adolf Hitler and the Nazis during the Second World War and the Vietnamese defence against American aggression. Russell preferred peace to armed conflicts, but that's not enough to qualify him as a pacifist according to the way most scholars use the word. I say this because I find it misleading to say that a person who thinks that justice demands the use of violence to

counterbalance a greater evil is a full-fledged *pacifist*, no matter what qualifications you add, such as “non-absolute” or “relative political” pacifism.⁴

Before I come to David Blitz’s essay, in which he talks about Russell’s different versions of pacifism, I will say something about the other essays.

What about the editors’ contributions? Madigan’s short chapter on Russell in popular culture deliberately contrasts him with Russell the public intellectual (p. 166). Stone’s writings are more foundational. In the long paper on Russell the political activist, we get first a critical examination of whether he was a political philosopher or was confined to being an activist. As such, Stone concludes, “Russell the political activist was a public intellectual of the first order” (p. 130). Then Stone compares Russell to Chomsky testifying in Turkey, likening him to Russell identifying himself as the author of a “seditious” leaflet in a 1916 letter to the *Times*.

Cara Rice’s “Somewhere in England: Voluntary Education at Beacon Hill and Summerhill” is about Russell as *radical educator*. She makes an interesting comparison between Russell’s and A. S. Neill’s educational philosophies, but she doesn’t really compare them as public intellectuals. However, as a parent and educator herself—she has taught inner-city high school in Philadelphia and in a juvenile detention centre—she knows what she’s talking about, which is notable in her many wise comments.

David White, who has completed a 40-year career of teaching philosophy, primarily at St. John Fisher College, says in “Russell in the Jazz Age” that Horace Liveright “was a key player in the development of Russell as a popular philosopher and public intellectual” (p. 75). White’s essay is mainly concerned with Russell’s personal and professional dealings with the man who published three of Russell’s more popular books: *Education and the Good Life* (1926), *Marriage and Morals* (1929) and *The Conquest of Happiness* (1930).

Thom Weidlich has supplied a revised version of an already published book, “A Chair of Indecency: the Bertrand Russell/City College Case”, which illustrates what a dissenting *public intellectual* can have to go through. I suggest that the interested reader turn to Weidlich’s book, which won him the BRS Book Award in 2001.

Robert Heineman, who is professor of political science at Alfred University, is the only contributor whom I’ve not met. He has supplied “*The World as I Found It: Twentieth Century British Philosophy through a Literary Prism*”, which is an interesting review of what seems to be an interesting book.

Chad Trainer, who is married to Cara Rice, is, like his wife and myself, an independent scholar. His contribution “Would Russell Have Used E-Mail? A Continuing Perplexity” is full of intriguing speculations and useful references to books about cyberspace and the Internet and its consequences for our lives.

⁴ See my review, “Russell’s Attitude towards War” (2009).

Trainer makes several interesting references to Noam Chomsky, who admires Russell as a philosopher, political activist and *public intellectual* and can be considered Russell's primary heir. Chomsky uses the Internet to communicate with the general public, including inquisitive high school students. To him it is part of his responsibility as a public intellectual, and he sees it as a privilege to be able to communicate this way. It's as natural to him as letter writing was to Russell, who answered almost every letter he received. I think that Russell would not have denied himself the communicative advantages that modern technology can supply. Why would he have?

I come finally to Blitz's essay, "A Public Intellectual on War and Peace: Russell 'Little Books' during the Great War and the Cold War". He is a faculty member at Central Connecticut State University and has published several well-argued articles about Russell's views on war and peace and related topics and is working on a monograph on that subject.

Blitz starts out by saying that Bertrand Russell was "like few others before him, and even fewer after him, a public intellectual, concerned with bringing intellectual acumen to bear on policy issues" (p. 133). He compares him with Noam Chomsky, who, like Russell, has done ground-breaking work in a particular field of scientific research but at the same has been an ardent critic of American foreign policy and the military-industrial-academic complex.

Blitz distinguishes between Russell's "big" books about mathematical logic, in which he defends one version of logicism, and his "little" books, like *War: the Offspring of Fear* (1914) and *Principles of Social Reconstruction* (1916), in which he writes about public policy issues related to war and peace and how they are related to each other. Unlike Wittgenstein and Monk, who see no value in Russell's popular writings, Blitz says that Russell's little books are "just as important, in terms of Russell's life and perhaps our own, as his big books" (p. 134). I couldn't agree more.

There are today very few, except some experts, who know anything about Russell's paradox, his different type theories and his version of logicism, but his name and his work for peace, justice and respect for humanitarian law (the law of armed conflict) will be remembered as long as there are any specimens of *homo sapiens* left. This is thanks to the launching of the Bertrand Russell Peace Foundation in September 1963 and, not least, the creation of the International War Crimes Tribunal on American war crimes committed in Southeast Asia, otherwise known as the Russell Tribunal—or the Russell–Sartre Tribunal (because of the important part played by the French writer, philosopher and *public intellectual* Jean-Paul Sartre).

One of the more important members of the Russell Tribunal, the Italian lawyer and politician Lelio Basso, thought that the idea of creating an *ad hoc* people's court to secure justice in cases where the United Nation was not interested was so good that a Permanent Peoples' Tribunal was set up in 1979

out of the Lelio Basso International Foundation for the Rights and Liberation of Peoples, established in 1976 and inspired by the Universal Declaration of the Rights of Peoples at Algiers (also called the Algiers Declaration). These tribunals are often referred to as the Russell Tribunals, the latest being one on the situation in Palestine.⁵ These tribunals will guarantee that Russell and his legacy will be remembered.

Blitz identifies two significant periods of conflict in world history that concerned Russell: the Great War of 1914–18 and the arms race at its height from 1958 to 1967. It's true that Russell got engaged in the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament and the Committee of 100, which both centred around the questions of nuclear weapons, but from 1963 to the end of his life it was the war in Vietnam that concerned Russell most. It can be seen as a third distinct period.

The question whether the United States was seriously contemplating the use of nuclear weapons in the Vietnam War is discussed in Burr and Kimball's excellent *Nixon's Nuclear Specter* (2015).⁶ They come to the conclusion that the *politruks* in Moscow saw through the "Madman's" unpredictability ruse, and when Nixon and Kissinger realized that their bluff had been called, they increased the regular bombings instead to force the enemy to come to the negotiating table and shorten the war with honour intact, if possible.⁷

⁵ See my review article, "Behind the Scenes at the BRPF, the Vietnam Solidarity Campaign, and the Russell Tribunal" (2014).

⁶ The book has received many reviews. I have consulted Michael Krepon's in *Arms Control Today* 45 (Dec. 2015): 33–6. See also H. R. (Bob) Haldeman's *The Ends of Power* (New York: Times Books, 1978), in which Nixon explains his "Madman Theory"; Nina Tannenwald's article "Nuclear Weapons and the Vietnam War", *The Journal of Strategic Studies* 29 (Aug. 2006): 675–722, and her book *The Nuclear Taboo: the United States and the Non-Use of Nuclear Weapons since 1945* (New York: Cambridge U. P., 2008); and Annie Jacobsen's *The Pentagon's Brain: an Uncensored History of DARPA, America's Top-Secret Military Research Agency*, Part II (New York: Little, Brown, 2015).

⁷ Nixon firmly denied that his decisions regarding the war in Indochina were in any way influenced by student protests or public protest in general. I sent my review to Noam Chomsky, who responded: "I haven't yet had a chance to read Burr–Kimball, but I did talk to Dan Ellsberg about it. He seems to think it confirms his own thesis that the huge national mobilization in Washington (Moratorium to End the War in Vietnam, October 15, 1969) was a factor in Nixon–Kissinger's decision to refrain from using the bomb." I asked Fredrik Logevall if he had written anything about the possible use of nuclear weapons in Vietnam, and he sent me a link to a very interesting article of his about the "rumour" about Dulles' offer to the French to give them a few bombs, which Dulles later denied but which is supported by several other sources. See LOGEVALL, "‘We Might Give Them a Few.’ Did the US Offer to Drop Atom Bombs at Dien Bien Phu?" (2016). Russell was aware of Dulles' offer much earlier, in "War and Atrocity in Vietnam" (1964). See *War Crimes in Vietnam*, p. 44.

In the section “From Absolute to Relative Pacifism”, Blitz describes how Russell changed his mind regarding his pacifism and how this was reflected in his vocabulary. Russell’s infatuation with radical pacifism was a transient love story, which is supported by the fact that after the publication of *Which Way to Peace?* in 1936 he gave up the idea and never allowed the book to be reprinted.

Blitz devotes only one page to Russell’s last published book, *War Crimes in Vietnam* (1967), and his main concern seems to be how much of the book was Russell’s and how much was due to his assistants, including Ralph Schoenman. The latter wrote the appendix “Report from North Vietnam”, which amounts to almost 50 pages and is the longest part of the book. I have myself, with the help of Ken Blackwell’s annotations in his copy of *War Crimes in Vietnam*, tried to identify the authors of the different parts. Apart from Schoenman, the Acknowledgements point in the direction of Christopher Farley and Russell Stetler as possible authors of some of the writings.

One can hope that the book will attract readers who are not very familiar with one of the greatest *public intellectuals* the world has seen, one as important as Socrates, Voltaire and—perhaps—Noam Chomsky.

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