

## WHAT IS WRONG WITH AMERICA<sup>1</sup>

BERTRAND RUSSELL

“Editor’s Note [by International News Service]—Bertrand Russell, distinguished English philosopher and scholar, recently returned to England from a visit to the United States. In articles written for the press of the English intelligentsia he intimated that he did not think all was well with the United States, and he was invited to write for the International News Service his views on ‘What Is Wrong with America’. He has written here a frank statement of his views.”

This subject is not of my choice. It is the one that I have been asked to discuss. Every nation has characteristic merits and characteristic defects; in what follows, I am not to mention America’s characteristic merits—for example, that the average level of happiness is almost certainly higher than in any other white country. It is what seems to me the characteristic defects that I am to mention; but I do not wish the reader to think that I am expressing my total judgment.

I think America’s defects are traceable, in the main, to three sources: first, mixture of races; secondly, the fact that the immigrants have been largely ignorant peasants; thirdly, the absence of a fixed social structure. The first of these three causes is, to my mind, the most important.

<sup>1</sup> The text of this “new” article was discovered only in December 2020 in searching [newspaperarchive.com](http://newspaperarchive.com). The commissioning letter of 14 October 1924 from International News Services (RA1 410) reveals Russell wanting to wait until after the UK general election (on 29 October) before writing it. He noted on the letter: “700 words 7.7.0” (i.e. seven guineas). Just three days before the I.N.S. letter, Russell had published “The American Intelligentsia”, *The Nation and the Athenaeum* 36 (11 Oct. 1924): 50–1; reprinted in *A Book of American Shams* (Girard, KS: Haldeman-Julius, 1926), *BR&A* 1 and in *Papers* 16 (forthcoming). The two articles are companion pieces.

Mixture of races is probably the reason for the much greater violence of life in America, as compared with England. Murders are much more frequent; so are civil disturbances. There is much less reluctance to employ armed forces in labour disputes than there is in this country. "Radicals" have much more to suffer, both at the hands of the law and through the hooliganism of "good citizens". All these phenomena I attribute to the fact that there is, as a rule, a racial separation between the upholders of "law and order" and those who are in the other camp.

The more extreme forms of reactionary violence have spread from the South, where contact with the negro has had the effects which it always does have upon white men—effects of which we have had abundant experience in certain portions of the British Empire.

The emotions of the American aristocracy (for you have an aristocracy) toward "Reds", Jews, "Dagoes", etc., are psychologically derivative from those of the Southern gentleman toward liberated slaves.

As for the quality of the immigrants, the building of the transcontinental railways in America and Canada had a very depressing effect upon European agriculture and caused immense numbers of European peasants to emigrate.

The civilization of Europe ever since early Greek times has been urban. The rural districts have been abandoned to ignorant landowners and ignorant serfs. This state of affairs has changed, or is changing, everywhere; but the mental qualities of the serf survive in a large proportion of the immigrants. Consequently, they support a system directed against themselves, under the impression that they are supporting the Catholic faith.

Their prejudices are only allowed free play in the direction of theological superstition, to which the plutocracy does not object. The result is that the intellectual atmosphere of America is curiously old-fashioned, and the traveller from Europe often feels as if he were listening to his great-grandfather.

On the other hand, one large group of immigrants, the Jews, have an outlook entirely different from that of the South European peasants. Urban radicalism largely depends upon them. Among them is to be found a great deal of the best intellect of modern America. When they become rich, they are often intelligent patrons of the arts. But even when they are rich they fail to win the complete approval of conservative purists.

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The absence of a fixed social system is a characteristic which is rapidly spreading from America to the rest of the world. It is an inevitable result of the changes arising from industrialism, and its ultimate developments are likely to be good. But at the moment it intensifies material competition, damages art and attracts many of the best brains from science to business. I attribute mainly to this cause the meagreness of the American output in art and science, in spite of immense endowments.

In conclusion, I wish to say that the causes of what is least admirable in America seem to me to be all transitory, with the exception of the negro question. And when that stands alone, it is permissible to hope that some humane way of solving it may be found. It is much to be feared, however, that the violent spirit which at present exists in America may lead to painful and difficult times before your troubles are finally solved. Radicalism is likely to grow, and as it grows it will be increasingly oppressed, because it will rouse increasing fear. Respect for minorities is an important element in any sound democratic theory, but it is an element which I find somewhat lacking in the American conception of democracy. It is, above all, a spirit of tolerance on all sides that is needed for the orderly and peaceful development of American life.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> The earliest known of at least thirteen appearances of the article was "What's Wrong with U.S.? Bertrand Russell Foresees Radicalism Much Oppressed", *The Canonsburg Daily Notes*, Canonsburg, PA, 22 Nov. 1924, p. 6, where the article is datelined "London, Nov. 22". Russell was identified in each paper as a "Noted English Philosopher and Scholar". The newspaper chosen for the copytext (*Defiance Crescent-News*, Defiance, OH, 24 Nov. 1924, p. 1), headed the article thus: "Toleration Now Greatest Need of This Nation | Noted British Writer Sees Most of America's Troubles Migratory | Believes Negro Question, With Persecution, Will Lead to Difficulty". Most papers published a variation on the commissioned title. (K.B.)

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