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Bertrand Russell on Essentials for a Stable World

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Bertrand Russell on Essentials for a Stable World

As a scientist, Bertrand Russell (1872–1970) made fundamental contributions in mathematics and philosophy. But Russell's long career was also notable for his active interest and engagement in public issues and political causes. Population issues are a case in point: they were frequently addressed in those of his writings intended for a wide readership, most extensively in his 1916 lectures collected in the book Principles of Social Reconstruction *and in his* Marriage and Morals, *a book first published in 1929. The article reproduced below in full is one of a number of shorter pieces in which population problems are given prominence. It appeared in the August 3rd, 1952 issue of the magazine section of* The New York Times *under the title ''Three essentials for a stable world.'' At that time, and for decades afterward, the antagonism between the Soviet Union and the West overshadowed all other issues as a source of international tension. Although Russell was preoccupied with the danger of nuclear conflict inherent in that antagonism, in this essay he directs attention to major problems that would remain even if the East–West conflict were solved. Now that the time has come when, as conjectured by Russell, ''Russia has visibly ceased to have the power to be a menace'' to world peace, this focus on long-term conditions for stability lends fresh interest to this 40-year-old article. Russell's ideas on the triple conditions for a stable world are set out in bold strokes and without much elaboration or consideration of counterarguments. They are ''world government with a monopoly of armed force,'' ''approximate equality as regards standards of life in different parts of the world,'' and ''a population either stationary or very slowly increasing.'' As the turn of the millennium approaches, these conditions stand as far from being satisfied as ever; Russell's urging of the necessity to take active steps to bring them about now appears more relevant to the contemporary debate about how to create a peaceful world than was the case in 1952. It is notable that Russell sees the essential conditions for stability as linked. In particular, he says, ''checking unduly rapid growth of population'' is dependent on raising the standard of living in the economically backward countries.*

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Thought about public affairs in recent years has been so completely absorbed by the problem of relations between Russia and the West that various other problems, which would remain even if that one were solved, have not received as much attention as they deserve. The world during the last one hundred and fifty years has been undergoing transformations so rapid that ideas and institutions have been unable to keep pace with modern needs. And, what is proving in some ways even more serious, ideas which might be beneficent if they spread slowly have spread with the rapidity and destructiveness of a prairie fire.

When Rousseau preached democracy, it appeared after some two hundred pages of rhetoric that there was only one small corner of the world where democracy could be successfully practiced, namely, the city of Geneva. His disciples gave it a somewhat wider extension: it was permitted in America and for a few bloodstained years in France. Very slowly it was adopted in England. By this time Rousseau's moderation and caution had been forgotten. Democracy was to be a panacea for all the ills of all the countries in the world.

But somehow it looked a little different when it acquired new habitats. In a certain Balkan country, where the elections had produced an almost even balance, one party came into the chamber with loaded revolvers and shot enough of the other party to secure a working majority. Neither Locke nor Rousseau had thought of this method. In Latin America, where the original insurgents against the power of Spain were fervent disciples of Rousseau, there was a system of checks and balances quite different from that advocated by Montesquieu. The party in power falsified the register, and after a while the party out of power conducted a successful revolution.

In the period of United States imperialism after the Spanish-American War, this system was upset by the intrusion of Jeffersonian legality. The falsification of the register was still tolerated; but revolution was frowned upon. In various ways, in various regions that lay outside the purview of eighteenth century liberals, the orderly process of parliamentary government, in accordance with general elections, broke down. The idea of democracy persisted, but the practice encountered unforeseen difficulties.

The same kind of thing happened with the idea of nationality. When one reads the works of Mazzini, one finds one's self in a tidy little world which he imagines to be the cosmos. There are about a dozen European nations, each with a soul which, once liberated, will be noble. The noblest, of course, is Italy, which will be the conductor of the wholly harmonious orchestra. It is only tyrants, so Mazzini thought, that cause nations to hate one another. In a world of freedom they will be filled with brotherly love.

There was only one exception and that was Ireland, because the Irish supported the Pope in his opposition to Italian unity. But except for this tiny chink, the light of reality was not permitted to penetrate the dim halls of his

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utopia. But in regard to nationality, as in regard to democracy, although the reality has offered unpleasant problems to traditional liberalism, the ideal has remained unchallenged and none of us can resist the appeal of a nation rightly struggling to be free, whatever oppressions and barbarities may be the goals for which freedom is desired.

Scientific technique is another of these ideals that seem to have gone astray. The world has not developed as Cobden imagined that it would. He imagined two industrial nations, America and Britain, supplying by machine production a great wealth of goods to grateful agriculturists distributed throughout the less civilized parts of the world. Commerce and division of labor were to secure universal peace; and each nation would love every other, since each would be the customer of every other.

But, alas, this dream proved as utopian as Mazzini's. As soon as the power of machine industry had been demonstrated, other countries than those in which it had originated decided to become competitors. Germany, Japan, and Russia, each in turn, have developed large-scale industry. And every nation which has the faintest chance of following their example attempts to do so. The consequence is that a very large part of the productive capacity of every advanced nation is devoted to the production of engines for the destruction of the inhabitants of other advanced nations. So long as this system persists, every improvement in technique is a misfortune, since it enables nations to set aside a larger proportion of the population for the purpose of mutual extermination.

Owing to the spread of education, Western ideals have come to be accepted, though often in distorted forms, in parts of the world that have not had the previous history needed to make these ideals beneficent. Old-style imperialism has become very difficult, because those who are subjected to it know much better than they formerly did what it is that their imperialistic masters are keeping to themselves. And the formerly imperialistic nations themselves have so far accepted the watchwords of liberalism that they cannot practice old-style imperialism without a bad conscience, even when it is obvious that its sudden cessation will bring chaos.

When the Romans taught military discipline to the barbarians the result was the fall of Rome. We have taught industrial discipline to the barbarians of our time; but we do not wish to suffer the fate of Rome. Our world inevitably includes self-determining nations whom the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries never thought of as independent powers. We cannot return to the security and stability that was enjoyed by our grandfathers until a way has been found of satisfying the claim of hitherto subject peoples without, in the process, producing universal chaos. If this is to be achieved, the ideals of liberalism, however valid they may remain, are insufficient, since they offer no obstacle to anarchical disaster.

There are three things that must be achieved before stability can be

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recovered: the first of these is a world government with a monopoly of armed force; the second is an approximate equality as regards standards of life in different parts of the world; the third is a population either stationary or very slowly increasing. I do not say that these three things will be achieved. What I do say is that unless they are, the present intolerable insecurity will continue. There are those who imagine that, if once we had defeated the Russians, all would be well. In 1914–18, they thought this about the Germans. Ten years ago they thought it about the Germans and Japanese. But no sooner were they defeated than we had to set to work to restore their power. Defeat of enemies in war, however necessary, is not a constructive solution of social problems.

A monopoly of armed force is quite obviously the only method by which the world can be secure against war. In the short run, any single Government of the world, however oppressive, would secure this result; but it cannot do so in the long run unless it wins the acquiescence of the governed. I find a curious reluctance to acquiesce in the idea of world government. People use arguments against it which are, equally, arguments against government in general. It is of course true that Governments exist to limit freedom, but if we are to achieve the security at which we aim when we establish a police force, we must be as ready to suppress nations that indulge in murder or burglary as we are to suppress individuals who do so.

Economic equality in the different parts of the world may seem a very distant idea, and it would be folly to approach it too suddenly. There would be no gain to mankind if Western nations had their standard of life reduced to equality with the standard in China or India. Equality must be approached not by lowering the standards of the fortunate but by raising the standards of the others. In the nineteenth century the arguments for raising the standard of life in backward countries would have been merely humanitarian. Now they involve our own self-preservation. So long as some nations are very much poorer than others the poorer nations will inevitably feel envy and will be a source of unrest. It is no longer possible, as it was formerly, to go on living in the kind of world in which we are living now, in which from day to day we can have no assurance against vast disaster.

If there is to be secure peace two things are necessary: first, that no important group of nations should have any just grievance against any other; and second, that there should not be opportunities for military conquest by predatory nations. I do not think that these conditions can be fulfilled until approximate economic justice has been established throughout the world. I do not pretend that this is easy. It must be a long time before India and China can achieve the diffused prosperity of the United States. And perhaps in Africa the time required will be even longer.

The third requisite of stability—namely, an approximately stationary population—is intimately bound up with the second. So long as all im-

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provements in the technique of production are swallowed up by an increasing population, money spent in the development of backward areas might just as well be thrown into the sea. In India this has been recognized by Nehru; and I think that general recognition need not take so long as is sometimes supposed. In the meantime raising the standard of life will probably prove in the East, as it has proved in the West, a powerful means of checking unduly rapid growth of population.

I do not wish to be thought discouraging in suggesting the necessity of these large and difficult reforms. It is not necessary that they should be all achieved at once. It will be enough if their necessity is recognized and active steps are taken to bring them about.

Real stability such as the world imagined itself to be enjoying before 1914, is not to be achieved quickly. But if the way to achieve it is realized, and if it is clear that the world is moving in the right direction, confidence in the future will revive and the danger of a paralysis of hope will disappear. It is obvious that the first necessity is the strengthening of Western armament to the point where a Russian attack will be no longer a pressing danger. But this is only the first step. Asia and Africa will remain to be dealt with and the aim must be to find ways of admitting them to equality without anarchy. I do not suggest that this is easy, but it will become gradually possible when Russia has visibly ceased to have the power to be a menace. For it will then be possible, in spite of Russian propaganda to the contrary, to persuade Asia and Africa that we have both the power and the will to benefit them.

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