

Bertrand Russell and the Land Question

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FOR its sheer incisive quality, there have been few minds in this century to equal that of the late Bertrand Russell. We are all the losers now that we shall be denied the writings of the man whose depth of wisdom added beacons of sanity to an age of darkness and despair.

Russell the man, was for at least half of his long life, consumed by the folly of his fellow creatures. Towards the end, one detected panic in his behaviour; not for fear of his own life, but for that of all humanity. His involvement with the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament sprang out of the frustrations of the '50's, engendered by the Cold War and the omnipresent threat of a nuclear confrontation between the Great Powers. His departure from the movement was the action of an impatient being who, perceiving the dangers and the solutions, was denied the direct opportunity of bringing his clear-sightedness to bear upon the society which he served.

The details of his life are now undoubtedly the subject of biographic endeavour. I would like here to take a fleeting look at Russell the economist and philosopher, and in particular at his views on property, Marx and Henry George.*

Russell was unequivocal in his condemnation of private property in land which "has no justification except historically through power of the sword". Such property was conceded because, in his view, this was regarded as the socially expedient thing to do. "There is no justification for private property in land, except the historical necessity to conciliate turbulent robbers who would not otherwise have obeyed the law."

That civilised man should have continued, over the centuries, to put up with "the tyranny and extortion which a small minority are able to inflict by their possession of the land" was an example, to Russell, of the "human inertia" with which we are afflicted.

The key passage in his essay on *Property* is worth quoting because it paraphrases a large slice of George's philosophy.

"The mere abolition of rent would not remove injustice, since it would confer a capricious advantage upon the occupiers of the best sites and the most fertile land. It is necessary that there should be rent, but it should be paid to the State or to some body which performs public services; or, if the total rental were more than is required for such purposes, it might be paid into a common fund and divided equally among the population. Such a method would be just, and would not only help to relieve poverty, but would prevent wasteful employment of land and the tyranny

of local magnates. Much that appears as the power of capital is really the power of the landowner—for example, the power of railway companies and mine-owners. The evil and injustice of the present system are glaring, but men's patience with preventable evils to which they are accustomed is so great that it is impossible to guess when they will put an end to this strange absurdity."

But, like George, Russell went further than attacking the institutional monopoly in land. All monopolies he argued, were evil. And so, in uncompromising terms he declared: "The conquest of economic power demands as its first step the ousting of the monopolists."

Monopoly power had to be destroyed. But how do you conceptualise that power? Russell compared Marx with George, and found in favour of the latter. "As regards the analysis of the power of money, I think that Henry George was more nearly right than Marx. Henry George, following Spence and the French Physiocrats, found the source of economic power in land, and held that the only necessary reform was the payment of rent to the State rather than to private landowners. This was also the view of Herbert Spencer until he became old and respected."

Russell argued that George's view contained a truth "which Marx unfortunately missed." Russell stated this important truth in what he considered to be suitable for modern conditions. This took the form of an analysis of both (i) monopoly rent: "Every improvement in industry, every increase in the population of cities, automatically augments what the landowner can exact in the form of rent. While others work

*Quotations are taken from two essays *Property* (1916) and *The Theory of Surplus Value* (1934), published in *The Basic Writings of Bertrand Russell*, George Allen & Unwin, 1961.

he remains idle; but their work enables him to grow richer and richer;" (ii) monopoly "capital" by which he meant cash or credit: "The owners of capital collectively, are monopolists as against borrowers; that is why they are able to charge interest. The control of credit is a form of monopoly quite as important as land."

George took an equally hostile view toward monopoly; but he would not have shared Russell's view on the ethics of capital ownership. Provided it was earned by individual effort, George demanded private ownership of produced wealth in whatever form its owner chose to use it—either for immediate personal consumption, or loaned out for others to use productively.

Russell, however, maintained that a measure of communal ownership in capital resources was important. He placed his faith in some form of syndicalism. Total abolition of private capitalistic enterprise after the manner of Marxism was, he conceded, "scarcely necessary". Why? Such a system would be rigid, providing a security of the sort that would be strangulating in its moribund effect. "Security is merely a refuge from fear; opportunity is the source of hope. The chief test of an economic system is not whether it makes men prosperous, or whether it secures distributive justice (though these are both very desirable), but whether it leaves men's instinctive growth unimpeded."

And so, on the question of capital ownership, he envisaged a dual form—some capital operated on the basis of syndicalism, the rest (and, one gathers, the smallest portion of total capital formation) being privately owned. This unwillingness to concede the need for a system under which all capital is publicly owned is an instructive point. Private capital, he said, would be "a competitor and a rival and would thus be insurance against the "democratic enterprises . . . sinking into sloth and technical conservatism."

George would not have accepted such an arrangement. But it is fair to point out that he was writing in the era before Ford's nut-and-bolt-turning conveyor belt system, the mass production techniques of the twentieth century which had a deadening effect on the workers in a society which militated against their deriving any release through creativity. When Russell was writing in the '30's, adult evening classes and the resources for sophisticated hobbies and holidays were less available to the people. And so Russell sought a

solution to the problem by assuming that, through his involvement with the management of an enterprise, the worker would receive stimulation. This in turn would offset the drudgery of normal mechanical work.

One presumes that he therefore found the British post-war tendency towards a "mixed economy" satisfactory, though this is not a foregone conclusion; for do workers really feel any diminution of the "alienation" emanating from their role in a nationalised industry *vis-a-vis* their counterparts in private industry?

Yet, in his despair, Russell did not react in the manner of Marx by claiming that all rich people, no matter how they came by their wealth, were necessarily evil exploiters of workers—and therefore the legitimate targets of execration.

Marx used trick methodology inexcusable in what purported to be a scientific technique, to condemn wholesale all income other than wages, i.e. the income of the "suppressed class". This he did with his labour theory of value derived from John Locke, who had justified ownership in land by saying that property accrued to the individual who fused his labour into natural resources.

In what was ostensibly an economic exercise, Marx dealt in ideology when he analysed the income of the farmer who owned both the land and the capital, and called all value other than wages (and materials "consumed" in the productive process) surplus value. The word surplus, is, of course, emotive, and was calculated to pinpoint the farmer as robber of other people's efforts. To this Russell points out a glaring weakness: does the farmer not contribute any of his own labour to the working of his enterprise? Is he not entitled to wages for that effort—distinct from income called rent and interest?

Marx was prepared to overlook this awkward point for, if conceded, the same question would have to be posed about the labour efforts of the owner of capital, as distinct from his returns to loaned capital; Russell was not. He saw the need to draw a distinction between the ethics of land ownership and returns to labour. That he should have expressed a mixed view on capital ownership, assuming monopoly conditions were destroyed, was derived from a compassion for the mass of workers who were visibly suffering, both materially and spiritually.

It was the burning desire to improve the social condition of mankind that dominated the efforts of Bertrand Russell. He had the facility for scorching through the welter of bogus intellectualism in order to expose the nub of an argument—whether to support or destroy it. It is this which I think we will miss most at a time when the social sciences need as their living conscience at least one man of the calibre of Bertrand Russell.