



Russell

Power

Bertrand
Russell

Power

A new social analysis

With a new preface by Samuel Brittan

With an introduction by Kirk Willis



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Power

'Extremely penetrating analysis of human nature in politics.'

Sunday Times

'An acute and learned study.'

The Economist



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PREFACE TO THE ROUTLEDGE CLASSICS EDITION

When asked by the publishers to write an introduction to this new edition I agreed with alacrity. The request was not only an honour; it also stirred my curiosity. For although I have long been an unapologetic fan of Russell's later and less technical writings on political and social questions, I had not read this particular book; and to read something from Russell's pen for the first time was a source of pleasurable anticipation.

I already knew enough about the book not to expect the key to social science or political theory which Russell had originally hoped to provide. It is not easy for even the greatest philosopher to outline from scratch a new system of social science or of social relations. In his introduction to an earlier reprint (Routledge, 1995) Professor Kirk Willis maintains that the book presents 'an abundance of sheer good sense and plain speaking', even if no over-arching theory. It can also be read as an enjoyable romp through history, in part anticipating some of the 1945 *History of Western Philosophy*, but ranging wider. Unfortunately, it was prepared without an index.

Russell has no illusions about philosopher kings—or any other kind of intellectual or artist. He cannot resist reminding us that in the High Renaissance philosophers and political theorists admired the Borgias while Leonardo designed fortifications for unpleasant despots. Earlier on Plato's pupils were associated with some of the worst Greek tyrants. Mercifully, he does not ponder what would have happened if Richard Wagner, who regarded himself as a disciple of Schopenhauer, had ever come within a mile of political power.

THE BOOK

Even if it falls short of a general theory of human behaviour—as nearly all books on similar themes do—*Power* still makes fascinating reading. Readers of Hume or Gibbon will delight in a similar irony, which the author occasionally uses against himself. The very occasional digressions into political philosophy proper are always enlightening. For instance Russell believes that the doctrine of the Rights of Man is philosophically indefensible. But the doctrine was historically useful and helped to win many of our current freedoms. A utilitarian can restate it in the following terms: 'The general happiness is increased if a certain sphere is defined in which each individual is free to act as he chooses without the interference of any external authority'. This is not the last word, but at least it takes the discussion further.

An early twenty-first century reader has obviously to allow for the fact that *Power* was written in the late 1930s in the age of the great dictators, Hitler and Stalin, as well as smaller fry, such as Mussolini and Franco, and appeared a month after the now notorious 1938 Munich Agreement. Indeed part of the fascination for the modern reader is to assess for himself or herself how much the world has changed and how much it has essentially remained the same.

Russell himself goes back much further for his examples. Predictably, he provides many examples of religion standing in the way of humane reform. In the sixth century BC, when Greek opinion was moving away from human sacrifice, the oracle of Delphi tried to retard this reform and keep alive the old traditions. Moving ahead in time, he readily accepts that men of impressive holiness—Hildebrand, St Bernard and St Francis—postponed the moral discredit that later befell the Roman Catholic Church. But an organization which has ideal ends, and therefore an excuse for love of power, is sure in the long run to produce only a superiority in unscrupulous ruthlessness.

Writing before the advent of political and religious correctness, Russell was able to say at the beginning of Chapter 10 that the classic example of power through fanaticism was the rise of Islam. When his followers were reluctant to march against the Byzantine Empire, complaining among other things of the intolerable heat of the summer, Mohammed responded: 'Hell is much hotter'.

Russell also manages a dig at German philosophical idealism. He states that Fichte was the first of the modern philosophers who veiled their own love of power beneath a garment of metaphysics. Fichte believed that the ego was the sole existing phenomenon in the world. But he also managed to argue that it was the duty of Germans to fight Napoleon. 'Both the Germans and the French, of course, are only emanations of Fichte, but the Germans are a higher emanation, that is to say they are nearer to the one ultimate reality, which is Fichte's own'. There is here a foretaste of the iconoclasm towards some revered thinkers which later so shocked the high-minded in his *History of Western Philosophy*.

Russell's sense of humour never deserts him. For example 'the archetypal American executive impresses others as a man of rapid decision, quick insight into character and an iron will; he

must have a firm jaw, tightly closed lips, and a habit of brief and incisive speech'. Today someone more touchy-feely, spouting management consultant jargon, would meet the bill. There are also some bitter-sweet remarks such as 'the more I thought a book of mine was worth, the less I was paid for it'. The contemporary role of 'spin doctors' would not have surprised Russell, who writes eloquently about power behind the scenes: courtiers, intriguers, spies and wire-pullers. The system in which they reign supreme, he observes, is unlikely to promote the general welfare.

Readers new to Russell may be shocked at how cynical some of his remarks seem to be. But it is the kind of cynicism which often marks the frustrated idealist. Russell needs to show that his hopes for a better future take into account the wickedness and hypocrisy of the world and the knocks that he himself suffered in his campaigns for peace.

As usual those who look in Russell's pronouncements for dotty opinions will be able to find a few; for instance, instead of different partisan newspapers, he advocates 'a single newspaper in which all parties are represented'. Then we really would see the abuse of power.

KEY CONTENDERS

Coming to the main theme of *Power*: there have been several contenders for the key human drives which can explain wars, revolutions, dictatorships and the propensity of human beings to treat outsiders badly. When Russell was writing in the 1930s the two main contenders were the economic motive and the sexual one. The economic motive was then largely represented by Karl Marx, whose ideology acquired a striking hold over the broad mass of intellectual opinion, a hold which continued surprisingly far into the post-war decades, especially in continental Europe.

Economic interpretations of history are still alive; but to some extent Marxist ones have been superseded—although only in minority intellectual circles—by an ‘imperialist’ form of classical economics which seeks to explain wide areas of human behaviour, from family relationships to wars of conquest, in terms of rational behaviour by utility-seeking maximizing individuals. These attempts have probably also passed their high-water mark. Their problem has been that they are false: self-interested individuals would not engage in total war. As Russell himself explained in a later book:

If men were activated by self interest, which they are not—except in the case of a few saints—there would be no wars, no more armies, no more navies, no more atom bombs. There are few occasions upon which large bodies of men, such as politics is concerned with, can rise above selfishness, while on the other hand there are very great many circumstances in which populations will fall below selfishness, if selfishness is interpreted as enlightened self interest.

(Human Society in Ethics and Politics, 1954)

The economic interpretation can be salvaged, but at the cost of making it tautologous, e.g. putting the desire for world domination into Hitler’s utility function or the pleasures of paradise into the corresponding function of Muslim suicide bombers.

The main rival interpretation in the 1930s when Russell was writing *Power*, was the sexual drive, as promulgated in the teachings of Sigmund Freud and his followers. This too is not quite so fashionable, partly because of the difficulties of stating Freudian doctrines in a form open to empirical testing. In a way their intellectual descendants are the modern neo-Darwinian school. Some evolutionary psychologists attempt to explain as much as they can of human behaviour in terms of the competitive attempts of genes to reproduce and replicate themselves.

No one suggests that genes can have even unconscious motivation. The new evolutionary school must be judged in terms of its explanatory and predictive power and may ultimately be vindicated through molecular biology going well beyond the study of the DNA molecule. But to put it mildly, it still has a long way to go.

Russell had a third idea. It was that the 'power' motive was more likely to be the key to human social activity even though it was spread more unevenly than either the economic or the sexual one. Many decades after Russell wrote, no one key to human behaviour in society has yet been discovered. The power motive is still in the running; but it cannot be claimed that Russell established it as supreme above the others.

POWER

A large part of this book is concerned with the classification of different sources of power, such as priestly, kingly, revolutionary or economic power. Russell's aim is to investigate how we can enjoy the advantages of state power, to prevent the Hobbesian war of all against all, while taming its excesses.

Few people will go to Russell for illumination on economic matters. But even here he provides a healthy reminder that the right to ownership is ultimately based on violence, or if you like, legitimate violence. This is something that mainstream economists, in their absorption with soluble models, are in danger not so much of disputing as of overlooking.

A little bit of political economy might have helped Russell in his prime object of analysing power. In a competitive free enterprise democracy a wealthy man has the power to obtain a goat if he wishes. Power in this sense is virtually synonymous with wealth. But he cannot force a particular human being to hand over a particular animal. He must go to the market place and find a willing seller. There is here a vital difference between power

over commodities and power over human beings. As Keynes put it at the end of his *General Theory* (which appeared in 1936): it is better that a rich man should tyrannize over his bank balance than over his fellow men.

Russell nearly arrives at this point when he states that oligarchies of the rich have on the whole been enlightened and astute, citing in particular the Republic of Venice: 'Money made in commerce is made by cleverness which is not dictatorial, and this characteristic is displayed by governments composed by successful merchants'. But he then throws the argument away by moving over to the modern industrial magnate, supposedly leading armies of employees who need to be coerced. Russell was influenced by the widespread belief in the 1930s that the way ahead in capitalist countries was through larger and larger business trusts and that technology and nationalism were eroding old-fashioned competition. Writing when he did he had more excuse than today's anti-globalizers, who have failed to appreciate the half century of increased competition and the erosion of barriers to international trade in the aftermath of the Second World War.

Like Hobbes, Russell is convinced that political force is required to protect people from tearing each other to pieces; but unlike him, he regards the best bet as democracy. He is not starry-eyed about it and disputes the now fashionable, wrong-headed doctrine that democracies never wage aggressive war. Democracy has the limited virtue of making governments pay some attention to the welfare of their subjects—only some. But he shows the temper of his time in suggesting that democracy has little chance of becoming entrenched in Eastern Europe and Asia.

WORLD GOVERNMENT

Writing when he was, Russell was understandably haunted by the gathering international storm. The only satisfactory way ahead was 'the abolition of national sovereignty and national armed forces and the substitution of a single international government with a monopoly of armed force'. The alternative to this move was, he wrote, 'the death of a large percentage of the population of civilized countries and the reduction of the remainder to destitution and semi-barbarism'. It will need a much longer period without nuclear warfare to undermine his warning.

I had myself been expecting the book to end on this world government theme. In fact the author ends with the need for improving and humanizing education. He had already discussed the road to world government in past books and was to do so again in the future; some readers may even feel relieved that he has for once not gone to town on this familiar theme. But I would have been curious to see what he regarded at this stage in his life as the most likely route towards its achievement. He correctly observes that nationalism 'is a stupid ideal' which was bringing Europe to ruin but he shows no sign either in his book, or (as far as I know) anywhere else, of seeing European federalism as a useful halfway house to world government.

If there is one persistent weakness in Russell's warnings of doom it is that he underrates the resilience of the human race. For instance: 'If it were Berlin and Rome . . . that were destroyed by the thunderbolts of the new Gods [bombers], could any humanity survive in the destroyers after such a deed?' Another over-pessimistic prophecy was that the next great war (which came in 1939–45) would end with a crop of revolutions under which our rulers would run a greater risk of being put to death by the mob than their soldiers would of death at the hands of the enemy.

THE CLARION CALL

Russell was a member of the Labour Party when he wrote this book; he joined it during the First World War, deciding to put up with socialism for the sake of peace. But at heart he always remained a classical liberal, who 'retains even when in power a certain suspicion of governmental action'.

For me the clarion call is the statement in the penultimate chapter: 'For my part, I consider that whatever is good or bad is embodied in individuals, not primarily in communities'. This is a refreshing antidote to the communitarianism of so many on the centre-left. The statement needs also to be pondered by those on the right who are over-fond of Burke's 'little platoons' or who preach the gospel of civic conservatism.

As Russell elaborates a few pages later: 'The really valuable things in human life are individual, not such things that happen on a battlefield or in the clash of politics or in the regimented march of masses of men towards an externally imposed goal. The organized life of a community is necessary, but it is necessary as a mechanism, not something to be valued on its own account'.

SAMUEL BRITTAN

INTRODUCTION

To the end of his days, Bertrand Russell remained an unrepentant Victorian. Proud of his lineage in one of Britain's most distinguished aristocratic families, he was equally boastful of his nearly thirty years as a subject of the grim-faced monarch who gave her name to the age. To be a true Victorian, Russell maintained repeatedly in his many autobiographical reflections, was not simply to share an accident of chronology but also to embody a set of values and an attitude of mind which he judged to be at once estimable and preferable to those of any other age. Prosperous, high-principled, and self-assured, Victorian Britain attained remarkable progress in virtually every aspect of human endeavour; indeed, over the course of the nineteenth century, Russell argued contentiously, politics had advanced from oligarchy to democracy, morals had improved from barbarism to civility, ideas had progressed from superstition to science, and wealth had spread from kings to commoners. To be sure, Russell recognized, all had not been unrelieved improvement, and he was quick to confess that his own privileged social and academic

positions had been restricted to a very few. None the less, to the last Russell remained adamant that Victorian Britain had been a society of great achievement, high ideals, and broad enlightenment—a culture vastly superior to any which had succeeded it and into which he was unashamedly proud to have been born.

Such a prelapsarian age of progress, optimism, and accomplishment came to its unhappy end, in Russell's eyes, not on the royal death bed at Osborne but in the mud of Flanders. For Russell, as for many contemporaries as well as not a few later historians, the Great War marked the true end of the liberal world of Gladstone in which he had grown to maturity. Whatever the truth of his broader claims concerning the nature of Victorian society, Russell was quite right to recognize that at the very least the First World War utterly transformed his own life. Not merely did it alter the nature of his daily routine and adjust his immediate scholarly preoccupations, but it rechannelled his intellectual energies, galvanized his political passions, and tarnished his public reputation. In particular, the war—or, more accurately, Russell's bitter and unyielding opposition to it—provoked him both to abandon the cloistered life of an academic scholar for the noisy existence of a committed activist and to turn his intellectual attention away from narrow issues of philosophy and logic and towards broader concerns of politics, education, and history. And these wider concerns, in their turn, would culminate, in 1938, with *Power*—a book for which Russell had grandiose ambitions and brave hopes.

The outbreak of the Great War had found Russell at Cambridge, just returned from a six-month stay at Harvard and at the peak of his intellectual reputation. Secure in a Cambridge lectureship in logic and the philosophy of mathematics which had been created especially for him, he had enjoyed two decades of uninterrupted intellectual achievement. With works ranging from *An Essay on the Foundations of Geometry* (1897), to *A Critical Exposition of the Philosophy of Leibniz* (1900), to *The Principles of*

Mathematics (1903), to *The Problems of Philosophy* (1912), to *Principia Mathematica* (3 vols, 1910–13), to over two dozen major articles in British, French, Italian, German, and American journals, Russell had won renown not simply as an incomparably sophisticated logician, but as the chief proponent of a new and powerful technique of intellectual discourse—analytic philosophy. Honours, such as election to the Royal Society and to the presidency of the Aristotelian Society, had pressed upon him yearly, as did talented pupils from all reaches of Britain, Europe, and North America—men such as Ludwig Wittgenstein, Norbert Wiener, and Jean Nicod. By the summer of 1914 Russell was indisputably the most celebrated and influential philosopher in the English-speaking world.

The Balkan crisis of that fateful summer and the general European war which grew out of it transformed Russell's life and reshaped his opinions. Although never a stereotypically remote and ineffectual don—he had been active in the tariff reform campaign in 1903 and the women's suffrage movement from 1907 and had toyed with standing for Parliament in 1910—Russell had none the less not been a public man. Nor had his political opinions undergone much evolution or self-examination. Sharing unreflectively the hereditary Liberalism of his family, Russell stood on the eve of the war as an orthodox adherent of the self-professed 'New Liberalism' of David Lloyd George—identifying himself so unquestioningly with the governing elite of Britain, indeed, that his friends mocked his unconscious but telling habit of always referring to the government in power as 'we'.

But as Britain marched remorselessly to war in the late summer of 1914, Russell felt the irresistible call to dissent. Never a pacifist in the strict modern sense of that term, Russell passionately believed that this particular war—not all war—was an abomination; indeed, it offended his every moral precept and political instinct. He therefore threw himself first into the