

**MR. RUSSELL AND
THE RECONSTRUCTION OF
SOCIETY**

*Review on
the “ Principles of Social Reconstruction ”
by
the Hon’ble Mr. Bertrand Russell*

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The “Principles of Social Reconstruction”¹ by the Honourable Mr. Bertrand Russell is a war book. Bellicose literature, on the whole, is either propagandist or preventive. Mr. Russell’s book, though it falls under the latter, must be distinguished from the rest of the same class. Of the preventive books some argue against the unnatural geographical barriers within which have been impounded some unwilling nations by their masterful conquerors : others like Mr. Angell’s *Great Illusion*, attempt to show that in the calculus of war loss prevails over gain even to the victor. Mr. Russell’s however, is a diagnosis, altogether different. Wars, he believes, cannot be banished by rationalistic appeals such as above, “It is not by reason alone” he says “that wars can be prevented but by a positive life of impulses and passions antagonistic to those that lead to war. It is the life of impulse that needs to be changed, not only the life of conscious thought”.² As his diagnosis is different so is his social philosophy. To him, “the chief thing to be learned through the war has been a certain view of the springs of human action what they are, and what we may legitimately hope that they will become. This view, if it is true, seems to afford a basis for political philosophy more capable of standing erect in a time of crisis than the philosophy of traditional liberalism has shown itself to be.”³

In consonance with this attitude he adopts the standpoint of the behaviouristic psychology.⁴ A most important contribution of this new development in the Science of Psychology consists in a novel view of the springs of human action. It has overthrown the doctrine that external

1. London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd. 1917, 6/—net.

2. *Principles of Social Reconstruction*, p. 13.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 9.

4. Readers of Mr. Russell will do well to acquaint themselves with Prof. E. L. Thorndike’s “*Educational Psychology*”, Vol. I, “On the Original Nature of Man”.

circumstances are responsible for man's activity. If it were so, contends the behaviourist, it would presuppose a quiescent being which is a biological untruth. Man, it propounds, has the springs of action within him for he is born with certain tendencies to act. External circumstances do not induce activity. They only re-direct it. These tendencies to act, further says the behaviourist, in their working, become modified by the effect of the Social *milieu* in which they function. The modifications which these original tendencies undergo are of the highest importance. They constitute Education in the broadest sense of the word. All modifications, however, are not equally valuable and it is the business of the reformer to eliminate the circumstances and institutions that modify these tendencies for the socially worse and preserve and introduce those that will modify them for the socially better. Whatever that may be, it is of immense social value that these tendencies are capable of indefinite modifications. This is possible only because as Mr. Russell says "Man's impulses are not fixed from the beginning by his native dispositions. Within certain limits, they are profoundly modified by his circumstances and his way of life. The nature of these modifications ought to be studied, and the results of his study ought to be taken account of in judging the good or harm that is done by political and social institutions."⁵

In six illuminating chapters Mr. Russell studies the modifications that human nature has undergone under the institutions of State, War, Property, Education, Marriage and Religion. It is impossible to give an adequate idea of Mr. Russell's social philosophy by summarizing the contents of each one of these chapters. They are living contributions to the literature of the several subjects they deal with. Full of suggestions, they provoke thought and ought therefore to be read from the original. This might be unconventional so far as reviewing is concerned but is justified by the fact that this review is meant for an economic journal for the purposes of which, we need only attend to the analysis of the institution of Property and the modifications it is alleged by Mr. Russell to produce in human nature.

Before, however, proceeding to the task, it may be worth while discussing how the philosophy of war is related to the principles of growth as expounded by Mr. Russell.

At the outset it must be said that, because his is an anti-war book, those who read in him the philosophy of quieticism will have read him all wrong. For, though Mr. Russell is anxious for the abolition of war, he explicitly states that "in spite of all the destruction which is wrought by the impulses that lead to war, there is more hope for a nation which has these impulses

5. Principles of Social Reconstruction, p. 19.

than for a nation in which all impulse is dead. Impulse is the expression of life and while it exists, there is hope of its turning towards life instead of towards death ; but lack of impulse is death, and out of death no new life will come.”⁶ He further acknowledges that “a great many of the impulses which now lead nations to go to war are themselves essential to any vigorous or progressive life. Without imagination and love of adventure a society becomes stagnant and begins to decay. Conflict, provided it is not destructive and brutal, is necessary in order to stimulate men’s activities and to secure the victory of what is living over what is dead and merely traditional. The wish for the triumph of one’s cause, the sense of solidarity with large bodies of men, are not things which a wise man will wish to destroy. It is only the outcome in death and destruction and hatred that is evil. The problem is to keep these impulses without making war the outlet for them.”⁷

The gist of it all is that *activity is the condition of growth*. Mr. Russell, it must be emphasized, is against war but is not for quieticism ; for, according to him, activity leads to growth and quieticism is but another name for death. To express it in the language of Professor Dewey he is only against “force as violence” but is all for “force as energy.” It must be remembered by those who are opposed to force that without the use of it all ideals will remain empty just as without some ideal or purpose (conscious or otherwise) all activity will be no more than mere fruitless fooling. Ends and means (= force in operation) are therefore concomitants and the common adage that the end justifies the means contains a profound truth which is perverted simply because it is misunderstood. For if the end does not justify the means what else will? The difficulty is that we do not sufficiently control the operations of the means once employed for the achieving of some end. For a means when once employed liberates *many* ends—a fact scarcely recognised—and not the one only we wish it to produce. However, in our fanaticism for achievement we attach the article “the” to the end we cherish and pay no heed to the ends simultaneously liberated. Of course for the exigencies of an eminently practical life we must set an absolute value on some one end. But in doing this we must take precaution that the other ends involved are not sacrificed. Thus, the problem is that if we are to use force, as we must, to achieve something, we must see that while working for one end we do not destroy, in the process, other ends equally worthy of maintenance. Applying this to the present war, no justification. I think, is needed for the use of force. What needs to the justified is the destructive violence. The justification must satisfy the world that the ends given prominence to by one or other of

6. Principles of Social Reconstruction, p. 21.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 93.

the combatants could not be achieved otherwise than by violence, i.e., without involving the sacrifice of other ends equally valuable for the stability of the world. True enough that violence cannot always be avoided and non-resistance can be adopted only when it is a better way of resistance. But the responsibility for an intelligent control of force rests on us all. In short, the point is that to achieve anything we must use force : only we must use it constructively as energy and not destructively as violence.

The length of this discussion of the philosophy of war as related to the principles of growth can be justified, if need be, by more extenuating circumstances than one. The present European war has brought into unmeasured and even thoughtless censure the philosophy of force and has ushered to the forefront the gospel of quieticism and the doctrine of non-resistance. The fact that Mr. Russell's is an anti-war book, the author of which was sentenced to six months' goal, not for writing the book under review but for being a pacifist crank, will be construed to lend its support to the lurking desire in many a mind for a passive life as a natural reaction from the turmoil of war. It was therefore necessary to know how far Mr. Russell shared in this condemnation of force. A second justifying circumstance is furnished by the bias in the minds of the Indian readers of Mr. Russell. It will be realized that what is advocated to take the place of the philosophy of force is essentially an Eastern philosophy or to be specific, Indian philosophy. It was therefore much more important to present Indian readers of Mr. Russell with a correct interpretation of his attitude. Their innate craving for a pacific life and their philosophic bias for the doctrine of non-resistance, I am afraid, might lead them to read in Mr. Russell a justification of their view of life, if not guarded against.

Is the Indian view of life a practicable view ? Nietzsche in his cynical mood said of Christianity that there was only one Christian and he was crucified—implying the impracticability of the Christian view of life. This remark, if it is true of the Christian, must be true, in a larger degree, of the Eastern view of life as well: for, though regionally Western yet Christianity in its origin as well in its content is essentially Eastern. Equally condemnatory, though not so severely, as shown above, is the attitude of Mr. Russell towards this philosophy of quieticism. One cannot however, fail to notice with dismay the persistence of this attitude towards life on the part of Indians notwithstanding its theoretical impossibility and the many vicissitudes through which the country has passed. Nay, in the present days of Indian Nationalism—which sadly enough is tantamount to justifying everything Indian—the attitude is likely to be upheld and continued. Note, that of the stock contrasts between the East and the West, thrown in relief by the war, the East is ever eager to give prominence in terms of self-glorification to one—that of its being free from the extreme

materialism of the West leading to war and devastation. There is however no justification for setting the West in such a cruel contrast. The East is too prone to forget that materialist we all are ; even the East in spite of itself. Regarding the war, perhaps, the West may be blamed. But it can retort and say, "not to act is to be dead. Life consists in activity: It is better to act even violently as in war than not at all for only when we act that we may hope to act well." Thus, surprising as it may be, the pacifist Mr. Russell thinks even war as an activity leading to the growth of the individual and condemns it only because it results in death and destruction. He would welcome milder forms of war for according to him, "Every man needs some kind of contest, some sense of resistance overcome, in order to feel that he is exercising his faculties",⁸ in other words to feel that he is growing.

Of the many reasons urged in support the Indian view of life one is that it is chiefly owing to its influence that India alone of all the oldest countries has survived to this day. This is a statement that is often heard and even from persons whose opinions cannot be too easily set aside. With the proof or disproof however of this statement I do not wish to concern myself. Granting the fact of survival I mean to make a statement yet more important. It is this; there are many modes of survival and not all are equally commendable. For instance, mobility to beat a timely retreat may allow weaker varieties of people to survive. So the capacity to grovel or lie low may equally as the power of rising to the occasion be the condition of the survival of a people. Consequently, it cannot be granted—as is usually supposed—that because a people have survived through ages that therefore they have been growing and improving through ages. Thus it is not survival but the quality, the plane of survival, that is important. If the Indian readers of Mr. Russell probe into the quality of their survival and not remain contented merely with having survived I feel confident that they will be convinced of the necessity of a revaluation of their values of life.

This much for Mr. Russell's outlook towards the philosophy of war. We will now turn to his analysis of the effects of property. Mr. Russell passes in review the various existing economic organizations of society, the social ills they produce and the remedies put forth. His critique is summarized by himself as follows:

"The evils of present system result from the separation between the several interests of consumer, producer and capitalist. No one of these three has the same interests as the community or as either of the other two. The co-operative system amalgamates the interests of consumer and

8. Principles of Social Reconstruction, p. 96.

capitalist; syndicalism would amalgamate the interests of producer and capitalists. Neither amalgamates all three, or makes the interests of those who direct industry quite identical with those of the community. Neither, therefore, would wholly prevent industrial strife or obviate the need of the State as arbitrator. But either would be better than the present system, and probably a mixture of both would cure most of the evils of industrialism as it exists now. It is surprising that, while men and women have struggled to achieve political democracy, so little has been done to introduce democracy in industry. I believe incalculable benefits might result from industrial democracy either on the co-operative model or with recognition of a trade or industry as a unit for purposes of Government, with some kind of Home Rule such as syndicalism aims at securing. There is no reason why all Governmental units should be geographical. The system was necessary in the past because of the slowness of means of communication, but it is not necessary now. By some such system many men might come to feel again a pride in their work and to find again that outlet for the creative impulse which is now denied to all but a fortunate few. Such a system requires the abolition of the land owner and the restriction of the Capitalist, but does not entail equality of earnings. And unlike Socialism, it is not a static or final system; it is hardly more than a frame-work for energy and initiative. It is only by some such method, I believe that the free growth of the individual can be reconciled with the huge technical organizations which have been rendered necessary by industrialism".⁹

It is a common place criticism of the industrial system that it gives rise to compartmental ethics, dwarfs the personality and makes slaves of the workers. To obviate such a result Mr. Russell approaches with a cautious spirit, a breadth of outlook and philosophic grasp of the social effects of the Economic Institutions. I wish the same could be said of his analysis of the mental effects of property. On the other hand his discussion of this aspect of property is marked by certain misconceptions which it is necessary to expose.

The first misconception is embodied in a statement about the "love of money" in which he says "it leads men to mutilate their own nature from a mistaken theory of what constitutes success and to give admiration to enterprises which add nothing to human welfare. It promotes a dead uniformity of character and purpose, a diminution in the joy of life, and a stress and strain which leaves whole communities weary, discouraged, and disillusioned."¹⁰ This is a sentiment that smacks of the antique and

9. Principles of Social Reconstruction, pp. 141-42.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 113.

once served as a basic philosophy of life, probably with justification. The economic life and the philosophic outlook of a society are more intimately connected than is commonly supposed¹¹ and chipped off its exaggerations, the Economical Interpretation of History holds true. This time-honoured complaint of the moralists against "love of money" is only a part of their general complaint against the goods of the world and finds its justification in the economic circumstances which gave rise to this particular belief. Bearing this in mind, it becomes easy to understand why the philosophy of sour grapes, of the have-nots, is the most human of all beliefs and why it so largely pervades our values about things which we can and things which we cannot possess in spite of our efforts to have them. When we cannot have a thing we argue that it is not worth having. There is thus a genuine difference between the outlooks of the "haves" and the "have-nots" towards worldly goods as there is between the religions of the down-cast and the successful. Each one in obedience to its profoundly moral nature—moral even in its immorality in that it seeks justification for everything it does—idealises its own attitude. At a time when the whole world was living in "pain economy" as did the ancient world and when the productivity of human labour was extremely low and when no efforts could augment its return, in short, when the whole world was living in poverty it is but natural that moralists should have preached the gospel of poverty and renunciation of worldly pleasures only because they were not to be had. The belief of a society of "pain economy" is that a thing must be bad if it cannot be had just as a society of "pleasure economy" addicted to "conspicuous consumption" believes that a thing must be nasty if it is cheap. Neither does the re-statement of the evils of "love of money" by Mr. Russell add any philosophic weight to its historic value. The misconception arises from the fact that he criticises the love of money without inquiring into the purpose of it. In a healthy mind, it may be urged, there is no such thing as a love of money in the abstract. Love of money is always *for something* and it is the purpose embodied in that "for something" that will endow it with credit or cover it with shame. Having regard to this, there can be no "dead uniformity of character" among the individual for, though actuated by love of money, their purposes on different occasions are likely to be different. Thus even love of money as a pursuit may result in a variety of character.

If Mr. Russell's thesis is shaky when looked at from the production side of our life, it entirely falls to the ground when looked at from the consumption side. Really to prove that human nature mutilates itself by feeding, exclusively, some one appetite we shall have to find our support by scrutinizing not the production but the consumption side of life. Now

11. Cf James Bonar "Philosophy in its Relation to Political Economy", more particularly, Achille Lorla, "Economic Foundations of Society".

knowing as we do the laws of consumption¹² is there a possibility of such mutilation? The answer, as we shall see, is in the negative.

The laws of consumption, it may be noted, are simply certain deductions from the economic doctrine of the utility theory of value Formulated, as a reaction to the classical theory by Cournot, Gossen, Walres Menger and Jevons, it no longer thinks of utility as a quality inherent in the objective thing or condition but as dependent upon the capacity it possesses to satisfy human wants. This being so, the utility of an object varies according to the varying condition of the organism needing satisfaction. Even an object of our strongest desire like food may please or disgust, according as we are hungry or have over-indulged the appetite. Thus utility diminishes as satisfaction increases. In other words as satisfaction is the pleasurable activity of a particular organ or a group of them, the curve representing the relation of the organ to the object of its satisfaction varies inversely with the condition of the organ.

If Mr. Russell had carefully gone into the implications of this psychological analysis, he would certainly have avoided the misconception in question. For what does the psychological analysis really mean ? Why does the utility of an object tend to be zero or even negative ? This takes place it may be argued either (1) because at some point in the process of satisfaction the particular organ irritated ceases to derive any further satisfaction by feeding itself on the object of its craving or (2) because other organs needing a *different* kind of satisfaction clamour against the over-indulgence of some one organ at their expense. Prof. Giddings holding the latter view says “ if the cravings of a particular organ or a group of organs are being liberally met with appropriate satisfactions, while other organs suffer deprivation, the neglected organs set up a protest, which is usually sufficiently importunate to compel us to attempt their appeasing. The hunger of the neglected parts of our nature normally takes possession of consciousness, and diverts our attention and our efforts from the organ which is receiving more than its due share of indulgence”.¹³ Of the two alternative explanations that of Prof. Giddings is probably the more correct. Having regard to the behaviouristic hypothesis, of the organism as an active entity, it is but proper to suppose that there does exist this hunger of the entire organism for a varied satisfaction appropriate to each of its organ which would engender such a protest. It is this protest that compels obedience to what is called the law of *variety in consumption*. If this is a fact it is difficult to understand how one organ by perpetual dominance can mutilate the whole organism. On the other hand, though one at a time, all the appetites have their turn. Human nature is, thus, fortunately, provided by its very make-up against a one-sided development leaving no doubt as to its promise for an all-round development in a congenial environment. Whether it will be able to obtain the miscellaneous

12. For a brilliant discussion of them C/o. Prof. S. N. Patten's "A Theory of Consumption".

13. Democracy and Empire, p. 19.

food-material, intellectual or spiritual it craves for is a matter beyond its control. If it is mutilated by the lack of variety of food, it will be through social default and not its own.

Another allegations of Mr. Russell is that property as the embodiment of the possessive instinct leads to war. One may agree with Mr. Russell and yet say that Fredric Nietzsche understood the effects of property better than Mr. Russell. This effect is well summed up in a story which Thucydides relates somewhere. He depicts a farmer who having gathered his harvest was sitting by the side of the heap brooding over the market and the gains of his business; while deeply engrossed in his reverie he was surprised by a robber. Thus aroused, the farmer, without even uttering a word of protest, at once consented to share his pile and thanked heavens for having escaped with the loss only of a half. Whether the above is a fact or a fable, it contains a kernel of truth not always perceived. How much man is tamed of his wild nature by his acquisitions through the course of time it is not possible to measure. But that it is so is beyond doubt. Nietzsche was perfectly aware of this and would not therefore let his Superman hold any property lest he (the Superman) might not play the havoc Nietzsche wanted him to play for the fear of losing his acquisitions in the bargain. The trouble therefore one might say, is not with property but with the unequal distribution of it; for those who have none of it are prone to perpetrate more destruction for its possession than, those who have. An industrial dispute of the modern time is another illustration and that workers, in a strike, use more violence than their employers can only be understood in the light of the above remarks. It is the existence of the stake that blunts the sword and it is the non-existence thereof that sharpens it. Thus property may be aggressive. Yet it is not without its compensating effects.

It would be unjust to pass over silently a most fundamental notion that pervades the whole outlook of Mr. Russell. He says that "men's impulses and desires may be divided into those that are creative and those that are possessive. Some of our activities are directed to creating what would not otherwise exist, others towards acquiring or retaining what exists already. The best life is that in which creative impulses play the largest part and possessive impulses the smallest."¹⁴ Is it possible so to divide the impulses? Is there such a thing as an impulse to appropriate? It is beyond the scope of this review to discuss this large question. I simply intend to raise a query because I feel, that by making the distinction as one of instinct, Mr. Russell is not quite on safe ground. Every impulse if uninhibited, will lead to some creative act. Whether the product will be appropriated or not is a matter wholly different from any act of impulse or instinct. It depends, I submit, upon the method of its production—whether individualistic or otherwise—and upon the nature of its use—whether communal or otherwise. No one sets

14. Principles of Social Reconstruction, p. 234.

up a right of appropriation to anything that is produced by common efforts nor to anything that is of joint use. Of the former one may cite the game of a communal hunt of the primitive folks. For an example of the latter the situation in a family presents a happy illustration. No member, it can be said without fear of being challenged, will ever set up a right of private appropriation to the articles of the Table or to the articles of decoration just as nobody will ever set up a right of exclusive ownership regarding public monuments. They are *of the house*. But every one of the family will surely set up a right to the exclusive use of his or her clothes. They are *of the Individual*. It is therefore, just a question of production and use and not of impulse that a thing is appropriated. Thus the creative and the possessive are on different levels and the methods of augmenting the former as of diminishing the latter are bound to be different. The more of one will not ensure the less of the latter.

With this we must close the review of Mr. Russell's book. There is much in it that can be laid at the foundation of the future reconstruction of Society. Mr. Russell deserves full credit for having emphasized the psychic basis of social life. Social reconstruction depends upon the right understanding of the relation of individual to society—a problem which has eluded the grasp of many sociologists. Mr. Russell's conception of the relation—as being of impulse to institution is, beyond doubt the truest. However, to understand this and many other problems the book touches I will strongly recommend the reader to go to the original. I have confined myself to putting Mr. Russell in his right place where I thought he was likely to be misunderstood and to guarding his uncritical readers against certain misconceptions that may pass off unnoticed. In both cases I have attempted to do my duty to Mr. Russell and to his readers.

