

Review of Ironside, Philip *The Social and Political Thought of Bertrand Russell*, (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1996) pp. xi, 280. (some cuts restored)

This book appears in the 'Ideas in Context' series under the general editorship of Quentin Skinner. Skinner believes that ideas can only be understood in context. (This had better be '*fully* understood' on pain of vicious regress.) He scorns Plamenatz's suggestion that we should simply read the great texts of political philosophy 'over and over again' and recommends that we read around among lesser writers in order to determine the what the author is *doing* - what his 'problematic' is and what he is arguing against. We cannot hope to understand the Hamlets of intellectual history without taking the attendant lords into account, since without the attendant lords the conversation of the Hamlets does not make much sense.

Ironside's book exemplifies Skinner's method. Russell's political and social writings, unlike those of his contemporaries, continue to be widely read. Yet they are not taken seriously by philosophers or political theorists. This raises two obvious questions: 1) What is the secret of Russell's continued success? And 2) are the academics right and the reading public wrong or vice versa? Ironside ignores both questions. His aim is to 'place' Russell as a Victorian/Edwardian intellectual in the 'clerisy' tradition of Coleridge, Mill, Matthew Arnold, and Leavis. Russell, he claims, was an 'aristocratic liberal'. By this Ironside does not simply mean that Russell was a) an aristocrat and b) a liberal (though of course he was both of these things) nor even that Russell's liberalism (like Kropotkin's anarchism) sometimes bears the traces of his aristocratic origins. No, Russell's liberalism was aristocratic because 'he was concerned above all with the role in society of the exceptional individual', the artist, the writer or the creative scientist. 'Always a democrat with elitist preferences, Russell sought ... to ensure that democracy produced a culture of which he could approve' i.e. one which preserved its intellectual vitality by making room for the exceptional individuals and their cultural achievements. ('Culturally elitist liberalism' would thus be a better label.) Ironside suggests that Russell had little interest in or sympathy for working class political demands for economic justice and social security. Before 1914, at any rate, Russell's 'fellow-travelling with the Fabians' and other left-liberal groups was a tactical concession to what he saw as

an inevitable trend. Since the working-class were going to win in the end, they had to be won over to civilized values.

Skinner's method carries with it certain dangers. The first is that the subject's *personal* intellectual context may differ considerably from the *contemporary* context. A thinker may be more preoccupied with a great name from the past than with lesser writers who happen to share his time-frame. Hence the Skinnerite historian may misread the allusions and misconstrue the text. The danger is particularly acute in the case of Russell who took a dim view of what he called 'being modern-minded' and deliberately set out to be a temporal cosmopolitan. Ironside succumbs to this danger. On p. 95 he quotes a passage from *The Principles of Social Reconstruction* on the role of reason and impulse and speculates learnedly on the influence of Graham Wallas and McDougall. I do not wish to deny the influence of Wallas, but it is simply obtuse not to notice that Russell's doctrines and even his phraseology are largely derived from Hume. Moreover the view of the passions advanced in the *Principles* is very similar to that of 'Cleopatra or Maggie Tulliver', an apostolic paper which Russell had written over twenty years previously, long before the publication of Wallas's book.

A second risk is that the historian may so 'contextualize' a problem as not to notice that it might arise for us as well as for the benighted inhabitants of a bygone era. Thus Ironside treats Russell's interest in eugenics merely as an Edwardian fad. But isn't there a genuine problem here? In the societies in which human beings evolved, intelligence must have conferred a selective advantage on those who had more of it than others. They must have been more likely to survive or more likely to beget. But does intelligence (conceived as a collection of heritable traits) confer a selective advantage in modern societies? If not, the march of mind is presumably at a standstill. Anyone interested in enhancing human intelligence will naturally wonder whether there is anything humane that can be done about this. Of course, Ironside might reply that he is a historian not a philosopher and that his aim is only to understand Russell's thought, not to evaluate it. But aside from the fact that he *does* implicitly evaluate Russell's thought (and can hardly help doing so), taking the problem seriously would have helped him *as a historian*. He would have been able to give a more fine-grained account of what is rational in Russell's eugenics and

what has to be put down to racism, class prejudice and an antiquated understanding of evolution.

A similar point can be made with respect to Russell's 'aristocratic liberalism'. Isn't it possible for a democratic welfarist society to be inimical to intellectual excellence and the 'exceptional individual'? Yes - as anyone who has encountered the frightful scourge of bloke-ishness can testify. Would not such a society be better if it were otherwise? Again, yes. Russell's concern, therefore, seems thoroughly rational, one that he might have arrived at without the aid of Coleridge or Matthew Arnold. Since rationality would have sufficed for these ideas, there is nothing to be gained by invoking - or perhaps inventing - a context. There are very few references to either Arnold or Coleridge in Russell's writings and none that I have been able to find to their political or social thought.

A final danger for the Skinnerite historian is that he will become so preoccupied with constructing agendas, identifying influences and detecting elective affinities that he loses interest in his subject's *arguments*. This danger can be avoided - Skinner himself always uses the context to illuminate the argument - but once again Ironside succumbs. What, for example, has Russell got against Marx's labour theory of value and are his arguments any good? Ironside does not say. He might reply that he is 'approaching Russell as an intellectual historian [not as] a philosopher or political scientist' (p. 7). But as an intellectual historian it is his business to understand a sequence of argumentative acts - and this cannot be done without understanding the arguments. Thus the intellectual historian must be a bit of a philosopher if he wishes to succeed *as a historian*.

But most of the defects in this book cannot be put down to misadventures in Skinnerian method. They are due rather to historical insensitivity and philosophical ignorance.

1. Russell was for most of his life a fallibilist with respect to science and philosophy and at various times an emotivist and an error-theorist in ethics. Ironside cannot tell the difference between these positions and lumps them all together as instances of relativism. Four mistakes in one.

2. Ironside believes that the Victorian/Edwardian Russell had little real interest in working class political demands and little real sympathy for them either. But these two claims are distinct and the one does not follow from the other. While the first may be true - after all his principal preoccupations during the period were not political - the second seems to me false. Ironside cites in his support *German Social Democracy* (1896). In this book Russell advocates a reformist rather than a revolutionary program for the Social Democrats in which class-war is played down and trade unionism is played up. But this is pretty much the program of Bernstein, who can hardly be accused of indifference to the cause of the working-class, and this program was adopted in practice, if not in theory, by the Social Democratic Party. Russell's first political act as an adult was an anonymous donation to a miners strike fund. He was in favour of Trade Union rights, the Lloyd George budget (including old age pensions), unemployment and sickness benefits and minimum wage legislation (an issue on which he would have been prepared to desert the Liberals for Labour had he been in Parliament). Finally he left the middle-class suffragist movement of Millicent Fawcett for the Adult Suffrage group of Margaret Llewellyn Davies because 'even *poor* women are human beings' and hence deserved the vote. I don't want to force a cloth cap onto the Edwardian Russell's head. But all this suggests that his concern for the working classes was genuine even if distant and a trifle patronising. If this is correct, then some of Ironside's later claims (eg. that 'empathy with the masses was never a feature of his socialism' and that his attack on Bolshevism was not 'engendered by his deep concern for the Russian people') are also called into question.

3. On p. 147 Ironside quotes Russell's remark that Bolshevik Russia was 'like an asylum of homicidal lunatics where the warders [were] the worst lunatics' and gently censures him for his 'extreme reaction'. Wells and Brailsford, by contrast, did not entirely lose a proper 'sense of proportion'. Indeed Russell was not merely unbalanced but paranoid. 'Our conversations were continually spied upon,' he wrote. 'In the middle of the night one would hear shots, and know that idealists were being killed in prison.' Ironside disdainfully remarks that 'the dangers were doubtless real, though not for Russell - his paranoia flourished without an enemy in sight.' But there is nothing in the passage cited to suggest that Russell believed

himself to be personally at risk. And as for the spies and the shootings they were undoubtedly real. Lenin issued instructions that the Labour delegation was 'never to be left out of the sight by a staff of "reliable" interpreters, though Russell did his best to escape them. During the period of the Terror between 50,000 and 140,000 people (idealists and others) were murdered by the Cheka and at least a further 200,000 were killed in the course of subsequent peasant revolts. The total number of deaths caused by the Bolshevik revolution, their economic mismanagement and the subsequent wars and famines was between 10 and 23 million souls - and this in the first five years of Bolshevik rule! In the face of such extreme phenomena surely an extreme reaction is justified. It is the balanced judgment of Brailsford and Wells - and of Russell himself in some of his official pronouncements - that argues a lack of moral imagination. Ironside does not see any of this since his authority on the Bolsheviks is not Pipes or Conquest (those unbalanced reactionaries) nor Emma Goldman (an anarchist fanatic) nor even Solzhenitsyn. The source he prefers is E.H. Carr, a historian now universally discredited for his credulous reliance on Bolshevik sources.

4. Ironside insists that Russell '*was* a late Victorian/Edwardian figure' and that the modernity of his later writings is 'spurious'. But since Russell was also an intellectual of the forties, why assume that the one phase was more 'real' than the other? It would be absurd to contend that Russell was *really* an idealist or a platonic atomist despite his successive conversions to logical atomism, neutral monism and an idiosyncratic scientific realism. So why isn't Ironside's parallel thesis equally dotty? The reply would have to be that Russell's political outlook was formed in the Edwardian era (the period of his life during which he took the least interest in politics) and did not change much thereafter. The problem is that this is manifestly false. The Great War marked an epoch in Russell's political thinking which continued to evolve as time went on. For example the casual racism of his early works is repudiated in *New Hopes for a Changing World*. Thus the central claim of Ironside's book can only be cleared of intellectual confusion by basing it on a falsehood.

Skinner should keep a tighter rein on the products of his school, otherwise his method will fall into disrepute.