

Russell as Industrial Democrat

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and John Hughes*

This paper was commissioned for a symposium published on Russell's centenary in 1972. Here it is slightly abridged. John Hughes, Principal of Ruskin College, was a founder member of the Institute for Workers' Control, with which Russell identified at the time of its formation in 1968.

The motive in exploring systematically Russell's views on socialism is to emphasise the continuing relevance of his views. Russell's writings on the subject – stretching over more than half a century – succeed in identifying the most critical problems both of theory and practice that beset socialist and labour movements. Moreover, there is a consistency and continuity of approach on his part that offers the material for a comprehensive view of what socialist objectives and labour movement practice should consist in ...

... Russell, who perceived what one might call the Englishness of much of Marx's analysis of capitalist economic relationships, was himself very concerned with events and movements of thought in Britain. He was, alas, sufficiently influenced by Sidney Webb to become for a brief time 'an imperialist, and even supported the Boer war'.¹ But his acquaintance with the theorists and practitioners of state socialism in Britain does not seem to have modified his earlier critical reaction to the same phenomenon in Marxist philosophical clothing. It is clear from his writings that the emergence of syndicalist, and in Britain 'guild' socialist, ideas of socialism and of the strategy required to reach a socialist society greatly extended his critical response to the growing debate on socialism. He joined the Labour Party in 1914, but by then his positive views on socialism and 'social reconstruction' already form a systematic whole whose reach far distanced orthodox British socialism. In 1915 he was writing lectures that provided the gist of his analysis (subsequently published as *Principles of Social Reconstruction*); the same analysis recurs – but with much more detailed reference across to Marxist, anarchist, syndicalist and guild socialist schools of thought – in *Roads to Freedom*, which was written later on in the course of the First World War and completed just before the unfreedom of a period of imprisonment.

Subsequent studies, not least *The Practice and Theory of Bolshevism* and *The Prospects of Industrial Civilisation*, fill out Russell's mature view of society and of the special problems of socialism in 'undeveloped' countries. In view of the elements both of continuity and repetition in all these writings, and in subsequent ones, we have attempted to distil from them in brief form the main arguments that Russell was accepting from socialist thought and practice, and the main, critical and positive contribution he was himself making.

Russell's acceptance of the socialist critique of capitalism

It is clear how completely Russell accepted the main critical arguments that socialist thought directed against capitalism as a social and economic system. He also added additional elements of his own. He took over from *The Communist Manifesto* ('this magnificent work' he called it in his first book, even while he was sharply challenging many aspects of Marxist orthodoxy) the recognition of the destructive and dynamic drive of industrial capitalism; he took over from Marxism also the notion of the permanent importance and irreversible nature of the internal drive of capitalist enterprise to concentration of large-scale production and an ever extending integration of production processes. If anything he extended traditional socialism's view of the alienating, de-humanising, and destructive nature of capitalism. In its shortest expression Russell puts his view of capitalism:

'Except slavery, the present industrial system is the most destructive of life that has ever existed. Machinery and large-scale production are ineradicable, and must survive in any better system.'²

It is particularly important for an understanding of his positive views on socialism to notice the emphasis Russell placed on the denial of *initiative* under capitalism to most people. In this he echoes Marx's point in the *Manifesto* that capitalism has expropriated most people's *property*³ but extends the point to emphasise the denial of a creative role in society:

'The chief defect of the present system is that work done for wages very seldom affords any outlet for the creative impulse. The man who works for wages has no choice as to what he shall make; the whole creativeness of the process is concentrated in the employer who orders the work to be done ... the work becomes a merely external means to a certain result, the earning of wages ... And so the process of production, which should form one instinctive cycle, becomes divided into separate purposes, which can no longer provide any satisfaction of instinct for those who do the work.'⁴

Beyond this, of course, Russell accepted the socialist argument that capitalism as a system of distribution denied any opportunity for justice and was 'indefensible from every point of view'. As he put it in a satirical passage:

'We may distinguish four chief sources of recognised legal rights to private property (1) a man's right to what he has made himself; (2) the right to interest on capital which has been lent; (3) the ownership of land; (4) inheritance. These form a crescendo of

respectability: capital is more respectable than labour, land is more respectable than capital, and any form of wealth is more respectable when it is inherited than when it has been acquired by our own exertions.⁵

It reads as a very English comment directed at the aristocratic society from which Russell had disengaged himself. But his further criticism of the nature and direction of capitalism has a more universal significance, and raised sixty years ago the issue that modern critics of capitalism are increasingly emphasising.

As Russell put it, one of the least questioned assumptions of capitalism was that production ought to be increased by every possible means; this belief in the importance of production had ‘a fanatical irrationality and ruthlessness’:

‘The purpose of maximizing production will not be achieved in the long run if our present industrial system continues. Our present system is wasteful of human material. The same is true of material resources; the minerals, the virgin forests, and the newly developed wheatfields of the world are being exhausted with a reckless prodigality which entails almost a certainty of hardship for future generations.’⁶

So, the final contradiction in capitalism is that in the name of ‘growth’ it strips and robs the human and material resources of the planet; the technical progress which is claimed as the contribution of capitalism operates within a destructive, robber economy which is bringing closer the prospect of decay and diminishing returns.⁷

The ‘philosophy of life’ which accompanies this worship of production is that what ‘matters most to a man’s happiness is his income’, a philosophy says Russell that is harmful because

‘it leads men to aim at a result rather than an activity, an enjoyment of material goods in which men are not differentiated, rather than a creative impulse which embodies each man’s individuality.’⁸

We do not think that later socialist writings on the distorting and manipulating effects of capitalist organised consumption have improved on that sentence of Russell which embodies both his criticism of capitalism and his social goal.

Russell’s critique of socialism

Russell did not move from acceptance of socialist criticism of capitalism (and his own further extension of that critique) to an acceptance of the social goals posed by the state socialists of his time. This arose partly from his sense of the *inadequacy* of socialist views of the principles and nature of a socialist society,⁹ partly it arose from a much more specific concern as to the implications of the extended role of the state that orthodox socialism appeared to be stressing. This critique of state socialism is particularly important in understanding Russell’s views on the political and economic development of the labour movement. For, as we shall see subsequently, the discussion of the *transition* to socialism posed for him not only the question of whether the agencies of social action and change could reach as far as the overcoming of capitalism, *but also* whether they offered a road to an adequate social system, to a socialism that would not contain its own

seeds of degeneration and denial of human creativity.

In various ways Russell sought to emphasise the achievement of human creativity as a necessary ingredient for post-capitalist society: ‘to promote all that is creative, and so to diminish the impulses and desires that centre round possession’.¹⁰ His concern about the role of the state was linked to his identification of the state so far as the embodiment of possessive forces, both internally and externally, and to the coercive role of the state (‘the repository of collective force’). Moreover he saw that a transfer of the property claims from the individual capitalist to the state could produce a perpetuation of the wages system, a kind of bureaucratised state capitalism. After the criticism of the wage-earner/employer relationship that was quoted earlier, he went on to say:

‘This result is due to our industrial system, but it would not be avoided, by state socialism. In a socialist community, the state would be the employer, and the individual workman would have almost as little control over his work as he has at present. Such control as he could exercise would be indirect, through political channels, and would be too slight and roundabout to afford any appreciable satisfaction. It is to be feared that instead of an increase of self-direction, there would only be an increase of mutual interference.’¹¹

That sounds all too accurately like an appraisal of British nationalised industries. His initial pessimistic view of the denial of creativity if state socialism produced an enforced discipline reads all too obviously like a prescient view of the Soviet Union, or Czechoslovakia, seventy-five years later:

‘State socialism means an increase of the powers of absolutism and police rule, and ... acquiescence in such a state, whatever bribes it may offer to labour, is acquiescence in the suppression of all free speech and all free thought, is acquiescence in intellectual stagnation and moral servility.’¹²

Russell’s underlying argument is that there are four requirements for a humanly adequate industrial system, four tests which can be applied to actual or proposed systems. They are (i) the maximising of production, (ii) justice in distribution, (iii) a tolerable existence for producers, and (iv) ‘the greatest possible freedom and stimulus to vitality and progress’. As we have seen, capitalism could only lay claim to an interest in the first of these goals, and in Russell’s view would by its nature fail to achieve it and instead bequeath a robbed and stripped planet to future generations. State socialism aimed primarily at the second and third objective; that is, it concentrates on justice, on the removal of inequality. But, says Russell, while justice may be a necessary principle it is not a *sufficient* one on which to base a social reconstruction. In its assertion of justice ‘the labour movement is morally irresistible ... all living thought is on its side’. But, justice ‘by itself, when once realised, contains no source of new life’.¹³

Russell’s concern is twofold. Partly, that there are tendencies in the evolution of the labour movement (and in the resistance it has to overcome to achieve its objectives) that might make it repressive and hostile to ‘the life of the mind’.¹⁴

(Interestingly, he is concerned that labour discipline and the requirement that all should contribute to society should not be pushed so far as to produce intolerance to those who might want to drop out, to make only a minimum contribution, in the pursuit of individual creativity). He is also concerned at the danger of conservatism in methods of production, since technical progress may involve permanent loss to wage-earners. But the way to overcome this, he argued, was to give to labour 'the direct interest in economical processes' which otherwise belongs to the employer, whether capitalist or state. The capitalist system has robbed most men of initiative; the danger of state socialism is that it might perpetuate this by taking over into the hands of a state bureaucracy the initiative, the power, and the autocracy that are the hallmarks of the industrial capitalist.

Russell does not seek to reduce the severity of the problem posed by the kind of retreat from large-scale industry that at least one school of British socialists had envisaged. We have seen that he postulates continued concentration of production into technically progressive large-scale industry. Instead he argues for the democratization of the industrial process:

'Economic organisations, in the pursuit of efficiency, grow larger and larger, and there is no possibility of reversing this process. The causes of their growth are technical, and large organisations must be accepted as an essential part of civilised society. But there is no reason why their government should be centralised and monarchical. The present economic system by robbing most men of initiative, is one of the causes of the universal weariness which devalues urban and industrial populations ... If we are to retain any capacity for new ideas ... the monarchical organisation of industry must be swept away. All large businesses must become democratic and federal in their government. The whole wage-earning system is an abomination, not only because of the social injustice which it causes and perpetuates, but also because it separates the man who does the work from the purpose for which the work is done.'¹⁵

So, 'industrial federal democracy' is the direction that has to be taken to reconstruct the industrial system. Industrial capitalism has separated the several interests of consumer, producer, capitalist, and the community. Co-operative systems offer some link between consumer and capitalist; syndicalism offers a link between producer and capital. No form of organisation links all these interests and makes them quite identical with the community's interest. Russell, in other words, envisages a pluralist society of participating democracies, although recognising that this still leaves the need to harmonise these differing organisations with their separate initiatives. The state appears, in this approach, as arbitrator and co-ordinator.

One advantage of this perspective is, as Russell puts it, that 'it is not a static or final system: it is hardly more than a framework for energy and initiative'. It offers the greater flexibility of combining geographical units of government with industrial democracies whose constituencies are trades and industries. Such an approach clearly begins to raise in a relevant way a socialist view of the future of what are already multi-national enterprises, and the need for an international as well as national framework for socialist societies. The sources of creative

initiative are multiplied in such federal and democratic framework; the opportunities for voluntary membership of industrial organisation, instead of legal or economic compulsion,¹⁶ are enhanced.

It becomes obvious at this point, that Russell is not only depicting the dynamic framework required for a creative form of socialism. He is also arguing for the development of this organisational base, particularly the development of the federal democracy of trade unions with an increased emphasis on encroaching control, as the way to strengthen the democratic and labour movement under capitalism. He is writing both about a socialism that does not rest on the worship of state power, and about the ‘roads to freedom’, about the transition to socialism. He is writing about a creative and dynamic form of socialism but also about the way to create a dynamic for change within capitalism. We need, therefore, to look more systematically at Russell’s critical appraisal of the operational experience of labour movements, and at his views of the organisational and policy requirements that these movements expressed.

Russell’s views on the transition to socialism

The conventional argument within the labour movement over several generations has been between reformist and revolutionary modes of progression. The concealed assumption, which Russell was critical of from the beginning, was the emphasis on political party organisation and activity and the devaluing of the role of trade union and industrial action. Russell’s analysis – both of German social democracy in its early days and of Lenin’s views – makes it clear that instead of Communist Party organisation in the advanced countries developing as the revolutionary polar opposite of earlier reformism, it tended to reproduce the oscillation between ostensible revolutionary ideology and practical ineffectiveness and political accommodation that he found in Germany in the 1890s. In our view, Russell offers the clues for a major reconsideration of the development of labour and socialist movements; the flaw in the pattern of socialist response Russell traced back to Marx himself. The outturn, as it appears to us, is either political compromise within advanced capitalist systems increasingly having recourse to a state apparatus with what one might call Bismarckian tendencies, or political revolution in less developed countries in periods of social breakdown with the likely outturn of a repressive state ‘socialism’.

Russell saw the transition to socialism as a compelling problem because it was not *simply* a matter of superseding capitalism; it was not true that we could rely on ‘living happily ever after’ by whatever road we came. There was also involved the wider struggle between the creative needs of humanity and the complex and potentially coercive nature of modern large-scale production (which, remember, Russell saw as common both to advanced capitalism and to post-capitalist society). The double requirement, to ask of socialist movements, therefore, was that they should be capable of transforming society instead of getting trapped *in* some accommodation within capitalism, and that they should at least begin to reflect the organization and attitudes needed to humanise the industrial society of the future.

It was therefore of the utmost importance for Russell that socialists followed a course that led to the actual liberation of man, not ‘proletarian revenge’:

‘While I am as convinced a socialist as the most ardent Marxian, I do not regard socialism as a gospel of proletarian revenge, nor even *primarily* as a means of securing economic justice. I regard it primarily as an adjustment to machine production demanded primarily by considerations of common sense, and calculated to increase the happiness not only of proletarians, but of all except a tiny minority of the human race!’¹⁷

Nor should the labour movement follow a course that produced a type of economic justice superimposed on the fabric of an authoritarian state.¹⁸

Russell’s first study of social democracy in Germany is relevant because for the first time he begins to express the nature of his concern about the transition as well as making a penetrating criticism of the philosophy and tactics of the most powerful political labour movement at that time (the 1890s).¹⁹ The Social Democrats were directly dependent on Marx’s analysis and ideology and were agitating for socialism in an industrially advanced (at least, rapidly advancing) country. Russell criticised the Social Democrats for dogmatically adhering to tenets of Marx some of which he thought held little validity for Germany at the time. More particularly he felt that they had uncritically accepted and then made more rigid Marx’s views on wages. Lassalle indeed injected into German Social Democracy his so-called ‘Iron Law’ of wages – what one might call an ultra-pessimistic view of the scope for trade union economic pressure. Russell unfortunately sometimes seems to transfer this rigid notion from Lassalle to Marx.

‘The Iron Law has for the moment a certain amount of validity. Marx’s doctrines have therefore a sufficient kernel of truth to make them seem self-evident to German workmen. It is unfortunate, however, that their apparent necessity, under a capitalistic regime, should make German labourers very lukewarm as to trade union and all non-political means of improving their condition. The exclusively political character of Social Democracy, which is mainly due to Marx, is thus of very doubtful validity.’²⁰

As early as 1896, then, Russell foresaw a distinctive role for unions in the development of a viable transition to socialism, and later he was to fault Lenin for his inability to comprehend the potential power of trade unions. Russell’s point is *both* that there may be distinct gains in terms of real wages and conditions to be secured from strong trade unions, *and* that the organisational experience (as he would have later put it, of ‘federal democracy’) and ability to advance the frontier of unionised control were additional gains of lasting significance.²¹ If, Russell felt, the trade unions were under-valued as a force for change, then the ability of the predominantly political-party organisation to break through beyond capitalism was reduced, and there might be little hope for the extended role of trade unions as an independent source of social initiative after any successful revolution, because the orthodox Marxist approach would invite greatly increased state power, would emerge as state socialism.

The view implicit in this, and advanced by Russell with more confidence once

syndicalist and guild socialist ideas became influential, is that a programme for the transition to socialism had to overcome the limitations of state socialism not least by acknowledging an extended role for trade unions.

Meanwhile, the Social Democrats, in Russell's view, were in difficulties in developing a coherent policy that attracted a mass base. On the one hand, recognition of gradations in class structure and the political attitudes of different social groups²² were causing the German Social Democrats to 'revise their beliefs and to adopt an evolutionary rather than revolutionary attitude ... Such doctrines diminish revolutionary ardour and tend to transform socialists into a left wing of the Liberal Party.'²³ On the other hand, the ruling class were able to separate them from the general public, mobilising 'popular enmity' against them by a distorted projection of their revolutionary philosophy and aspirations:

'When a party proclaims class-warfare as its fundamental principle, it must expect the principle to be taken up by the classes against which its war is directed. But the popular enmity which was necessary to the passing of the Law,²⁴ though in large measure due to misrepresentation of bourgeois press and bourgeois politicians, was also, and principally, a religious antagonism to the new philosophy of life which Marxianism had introduced.'²⁵

In fact, this combination of practical ineffectiveness and accommodation within the system together with an ostensible revolutionary philosophy and purpose seems to have dogged both social democratic and communist parties within advanced capitalist countries. In diluted form what was true of German social democracy in the 1890s appears relevant to the successive political failures of the British Labour Party, or is exemplified, too, in the French Communist Party.

Russell saw the need to remove the 'popular enmity' that reaction could mobilise against the socialist and labour movement, and to secure instead a mass base of popular support as the guarantee for a successful revolution. He was deeply conscious of the risks involved in an all out revolutionary confrontation in advanced countries:

'What was true of the late war' (ie, 1914-18) 'would be true in a far higher degree of a universal class war, because it would be longer, more desperate, and of greater extent. It may be taken as nearly certain that such a war would not end in the establishment of either capitalism or socialism, since both are forms of industrialism and both depend upon the existence of a more or less civilised community.'²⁶

Hence his emphasis on the need for popular support for a transition to socialism, and his recoil from revolutionary adventurism. His view was that political revolution was in fact less likely in the advanced countries and the opportunities greater in less developed ones, but this again led to further problems of the post-revolutionary transition.

In the specific case of Russia, Russell was conscious of the inadequacies of the Bolshevik programme. The continuous civil war and near world war after revolution brought about extreme poverty and the inability to inculcate

Communist ideals, and the seriousness of this situation led to the establishment of a despotic bureaucracy that could only be removed by a new revolution. The seizure of power by a few guaranteed the separation of these men from the genuine proletariat, and hence was the origin of a new ruling class. Russell did not believe that the Bolshevik model would produce the socialism that the Bolsheviks earlier aspired to.

The shock of this recognition was so great that Russell comments:

‘My first impulse was to abandon political thinking as a bad job, and to conclude that the strong and reckless must always exploit the weaker and kindlier sections of the population.’²⁷

Fortunately, hope and intellectual resilience being stronger, Russell continued to try to analyse the faults in the Bolshevik model.²⁸ He decided that the concentration on economic inequality, while accurate, avoided a problem of equal magnitude – the inequality of power. (As we have seen, in his writing during the First World War, Russell had seen this as a critical weakness in state socialism; thus he was not unprepared intellectually for this outcome).

Perhaps, Russell reasoned in *The Prospects of Industrial Civilisation*, the failure of the Bolsheviks was also connected with their attempt ‘to establish communism in a country almost untouched by capitalist industrialism’, thus raising the question of whether capitalism is a necessary stage on the road to socialism or whether industry can be developed ‘socialistically from the outset in a hitherto undeveloped country’. Significantly, he added that this was a question of vital importance ‘for the future of Russia and Asia’.²⁹

The undeveloped countries, in Russell’s view, have one major advantage in any attempted transition, favourable political conditions – they do not have a ruling élite of powerful capitalists, and their wage earners are not so bemused as the workers in advanced countries who ‘continue to elect as their chosen representatives men whose delight it is to oppress, starve and imprison all who advocate the interests of the wage-earners’.³⁰ But technical and economic conditions are a distinct disadvantage. The needed accumulation of capital seems to require that industrialism must be autocratically governed, and provide bare subsistence wages. Foreign capital and technology may also be important for an undeveloped country, and this interference by foreign capitalists leads to ‘loopholes for corruption’. Moreover, even if revolutionary ardour suffices during the first militant phase of the transition, the second ‘constructive’ phase is very long, and the revolutionary zeal will diminish. Pessimistically, Russell concludes:

‘there is, it would seem, only one force which could keep communism up to the necessary pitch of enthusiasm, and that is nationalism developing into imperialism as foreign aggressions are defeated.’³¹

Nevertheless, Russell conceded the possibility that the Bolsheviks might succeed, and ‘if they do, they may quite possibly become a model for China and India’. Another possibility was that of the Russian state replacing the foreign capitalist as

the exploiter; what Russell here envisages is Russia playing the role of provider of capital, goods, and technology to these countries in a state capitalist form, and help these countries to ‘escape ... private capitalism’.³²

Thus the cumulative problems of a political revolution as a major element in the transition to socialism were seen by Russell as the risk of material devastation, the special and protracted problems of an economic transition for undeveloped countries which offered the best hope of political transition, and the likelihood that these conditions would result in the wielding of power through a state bureaucracy with a resulting repression of human creativity.

Russell’s main hope of a transition to socialism therefore remained based on the possibilities within advanced countries, where the technical and economic conditions were most favourable, and combined with a wage-earning class not only educated and accustomed to industrial processes, but also capable of more developed trade union organisation. But this is to come back to the question of how to break out beyond the confined achievement of traditional political social democracy (and the latter-day repetition of the same process through traditional communist party activity).

Russell’s central idea is the importance to be attached to a persistent extension of the scope and direction of trade union organisation and power. The undervaluing of trade union organisation was one of the main criticisms directed at the German Social Democrats. It was the injection of this idea of the potential sweep of trade unionism in transforming industrial society – rather than the practicality of particular methods proposed – that he held to be the permanent achievement of syndicalism:

‘There is no doubt that the ideas which it’ (i.e. syndicalism) ‘has put into the world have done a great deal to revive the Labour Movement and to recall it to certain things of fundamental importance which it had been in danger of forgetting. Syndicalists consider man as producer rather than consumer. They are more concerned to procure freedom in work than to increase material well-being. They have revived the quest for liberty, which was growing somewhat dimmed under the regime of parliamentary socialism, and they have reminded men that what our modern society needs is not a little tinkering here and there, nor the kind of minor readjustments to which the existing holders of power may readily consent, but a fundamental reconstruction, a sweeping away of all the sources of oppression, a liberation of men’s constructive energies, and a wholly new way of conceiving and regulating production and economic relations. This merit is so great that, in view of it, all minor defects become insignificant, and this merit syndicalism will continue to possess even if, as a definite movement, it should be found to have passed away with the war.’³³

The sympathy that breathes through this passage is evident, and indeed the change of tone in the discussion of socialism as between the writing of *German Social Democracy* and the books he was writing from 1915 onwards seems to owe much to the increased confidence that a more realistic ‘road to freedom’ was being depicted, one that would be capable of leading to a humanised industrial society.

Thus, on one side, Russell defended syndicalism against the criticisms of

would-be revolutionary anarchism with its emphasis on the need for ‘armed insurrection and violent appropriation’:

‘Syndicalists might retort that when the movement is strong enough to win by armed insurrection it will be abundantly strong enough to win by the General Strike. In Labour movements generally, success through violence can hardly be expected except in circumstances where success without violence is attainable.’³⁴

Russell’s view is that better trade union organisation can establish the power base needed to ensure that the rights of labour are respected and to extend labour’s economic control.³⁵ Trade unionism and the accompanying reasoned propaganda of socialist opinion must not only win over ‘the less well-paid industrial workers’. In addition:

‘It is necessary to win over the technical staff ... It is necessary to win over a considerable proportion of the professional classes and of the intellectuals.’³⁶

Socialists, he says, have been ‘too impatient’ and this has inspired their emphasis on force instead of reason, and on ‘the dictatorship of the communist party’. But if ‘all who will really profit by socialism have become persuaded of the fact’ the force needed to take the capital from the capitalists ‘will be only a very little force’.

Moreover, trade unionism has been moving in the right direction in establishing increased control over work processes in ways which directly challenge the repressive production-worshipping values of capitalism:

‘The first steps towards a cure for these evils are being taken by the trade unions, in those parts of their policy which are most criticised, such as restriction of output, refusal to believe that the only necessity is more production, shortening of hours ... It is only by these methods that industrialism can be humanized ... It could be used to lighten physical labour, and to set men free for more agreeable activities ... The trade unions have clearly perceived this, and have persisted in spite of lectures from every kind of middle and upper-class pundit. This is one reason why there is more hope from self-government in industry than from State Socialism.’³⁷

Nor was Russell to be turned aside from this belief by the repudiation of self-government in industry by the Bolsheviks; they were opposing self-government in industry everywhere because it had failed in Russia and their self-esteem prevented them admitting that this was due to backwardness:

‘I would go so far as to say that the winning of self-government in such industries as railways and mining is an essential preliminary to complete Communism. In England, especially, this is the case. Trade unions can command whatever technical skill they may require; they are politically powerful; the demand for self-government is one for which there is widespread sympathy ... moreover (what is important with the British temperament) self-government can be brought about gradually by stages in each trade, and by extension from one trade to another.’³⁸

This broad sympathy of Russell for the advocates of self-government in industry shows through in his extensive discussion of Guild Socialist ideas (particularly in

Roads to Freedom). However, he did not believe that the Guild Socialists had in any way solved the problem of the institutional form that decision making, and the relations between ‘self-governing’ industries and the state, would take.³⁹ He thought also that they misrepresented in suggesting that the state would be the repository of consumer interests as against the producer interests centred in the guilds. ‘Neither the interests of the producer, nor those of the consumer, can be adequately represented except by ad hoc organizations ... If capitalism were eliminated, the political strength of production as against consumption might be greatly increased. If so, the need of organising consumers to protect their own interest would become greater’.⁴⁰

The warning seems justified, though the ever-more evident social costs attaching to capitalist production, the rapid emergence of major problems of ecology and pollution, may well be providing the stimulus that will accelerate the development of consumer interests and the greater recognition of these by local and national (and international?) government.

Russell clearly sees the extension of trade union organization and power, its developing interest in control, its assertion of a human scale of values, as critically important for the transition to socialism in mature countries. We should remember, though, that this is to him part of a more general advocacy of a pluralism of voluntary and autonomous organizations, acting as centres of creative initiative; that is, federal and democratic trade unionism is part of his general view of the structure of a democratic society:

‘It is not only geographical units, such as nations, that have a right, according to the true theory of democracy, to autonomy for certain purposes. Just the same principle applies to any group which has important internal concerns that affect the members of the group enormously more than they affect outsiders. The theory of democracy ... demands (1) division of the community into more or less autonomous groups; (2) delimitation of the powers of the autonomous groups by determining which of their concerns are so much more important to themselves than to others that others had better have no say in them ... In an ideal democracy, industries ... would be self-governing as regards almost everything except the price and quantity of their product ... Measures which they would then be able to adopt autonomously they are now justified in extorting from the Government by direct action.’⁴¹

In a way, Russell’s long-term belief in the reasonableness of his view of the progress of industrial society to communism is derived – as was Marx’s – from a sense of the incompatibility between private property claims (with a legal form relevant to a predominantly agrarian and handicraft economy) and the more and more extensive co-operation of productive forces required by modern industrial society.⁴² Looked at in that way, it is the capitalist form of industrial society that is temporary:

‘Capitalism is essentially transitional, the survival of private property in the means of production into the industrial era, which has no place for it owing to the fact that production has become co-operative. Capitalism, by being ill adapted to industrialism,

rouses an opposition which must in the end destroy it. The only question is whether labour will be strong enough to establish socialism upon the ruins of capitalism, or whether capitalism will be able to destroy our whole industrial civilization in the course of the struggle ...⁷⁴³

Reading Russell, one is struck, time and again, with his remarkable predictive abilities, his power of constructing an analysis of social and economic processes that describe with great accuracy the movement of history after he has written. That he bears comparison with Marx in this respect is no mere accident.

Russell was able to use his critical understanding of Marx to penetrate and comprehend the complex class and power relationships created by the development of capitalism; this understanding extended to the processes as they would affect undeveloped countries as well as the advanced industrial countries.

His analysis served a twofold purpose; first to inject the dialectic of social process with a new life, and give it more humanized form. Secondly, to give a direction to those processes that might break through the capitalist integument of industrial society – its values as well as its property relationships. Echoing Marx's *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*,⁴⁴ but in a far less abstract manner, Russell attempted to analyse the positive effects of industrialism. If wage-earners (and by extension, technical and professional workers) could gain control of the productive apparatus, then they could use the efficiency of the process for the development of human creativity. Through group autonomy and collective control the de-humanising aspects of the process could be overcome – partially even within capitalism, and completely after its demise (to which this control contributes).

Russell once commented that Marx was 'the last of the great system builders', but it is Russell's analysis of the whole process involved in the evolution of industrial society, not simply the economic process, that enabled him to be so prescient. Like Marx, there is tremendous consistency in the structure of his ideas, but like Marx we have to cull these from the writings of a lifetime. Like Marx, Russell's concern is with 'real men' in their real social and material relationships, and it was this concern that led him to regard authoritarian power structures as anathema to the development of the creative powers of man.

Hence his persistent criticisms of state socialism as the social goal, and his critical attack on representative formal political democracy as an inadequate defence against autocracy and the centralization of power. Participatory democracy, based particularly on trade unions and other functional organizations, is, in Russell's view, the way to release men's energy and creativity, the road to the harmonisation of the industrial system and its requirements with human needs, the 'road to freedom'.

Footnotes

1. B. Russell, 'My Mental Development', from *The Philosophy of Bertrand Russell*, sel. By P.A. Schilpp, 1951, reprinted in *The Basic Writings of Bertrand Russell*, ed. by R.E. Egner & L.E. Denonn, 1961.

2. *Principles of Social Reconstruction*, p.244.
3. *The Communist Manifesto*: ‘You are horrified at our intending to do away with private property. But in your existing society, private property is already done away with for nine-tenths of the population; its existence for the few is solely due to its non-existence in the hands of those nine-tenths.’
4. *Principles of Social Reconstruction*, p.136.
5. *Op. cit.* p.123.
6. *Op. cit.* p.123.
7. Besides, says Russell, the greater productivity arising from industrialism has ‘enabled us to devote more labour and capital to armies and navies for the protection of our wealth from envious neighbours, and for the exploitation of inferior races, which are ruthlessly wasted by the capitalist regime,’ *Op. cit.* p.119.
8. *Op. cit.* p.244.
9. Russell is scathing about ‘the old type of Marxian revolutionary socialist’ who never dwelt on the life of communities after the ‘millennium’: ‘He imagined that, like the prince and princess in a fairy story, they would live happily ever after.’
10. *Op. cit.* p.236.
11. *Op. cit.* p.137.
12. *German Social Democracy*, pp.113-114. See also, *Roads to Freedom* (1966 edn.) p.91-92: ‘State socialists argue as if there would be no danger to liberty in a State not based on capitalism. This seems to me an entire delusion.’ Russell’s argument rests in part on what he sees as inherent defects in the working of *representative* (as against more participatory) democratic institutions; cf. *Roads to Freedom*, p.93.
13. *Principles of Social Reconstruction*, pp.123-131.
14. This is expressed also in *Roads to Freedom*, where on pages 79 and 80 he expresses his fears of orthodox socialism, and in Ch.VIII (‘Science and Art under Socialism’) argues for tolerance for creative activity.
15. *Op. cit.* p.138.
16. *Op. cit.* p.139-142. ‘If organisation is not to crush individuality, membership of an organisation ought to be voluntary, not compulsory, and ought always to carry with it a voice in the management.’
17. Essay on ‘The Case for Socialism’, in *In Praise of Idleness* (first publ. 1935), 1970 edn. p.76.
18. Russell did not assume that the Russian revolution must of necessity lead to that. On his early hopes see *The Prospects of Industrial Civilisation*, 1923, p.8.
19. Subsequently, of course, Michels quarried in the same place. Although Russell grasped the oligarchical degeneration of representative political organisation and processes that Michels emphasised, Michels never appears to have seen the even more vital points that Russell goes on to make. Astonishingly, Michels in *Political Parties* shows no sign of knowing – he certainly does not refer to – Russell’s work.
20. *German Social Democracy*, 1896, pp.27-28.
21. In 1923 he wrote: ‘The iron law of wages, invented by orthodox economists to discourage trade unions, and accepted by Marx to encourage revolution, was an economic fallacy.’ (*Prospects of Industrial Civilisation*, pp.105-106) This aphorism of Russell’s distorts Marx’s views, although it is quite accurate when applied to most of the German ‘marxists’ at the time in question. Marx in fact combined pessimism about the possible economic achievements of trade unionism with understanding of the wider importance of their persistent organisation: ‘Now and then the workers are victorious,

- but only for a time. The real fruit of their battle lies not in the immediate result but in the ever expanding union of the workers,' but then by a curious elision goes on: 'This organisation of the proletarians into a class, and consequently into a political party ...' (*The Communist Manifesto*).
22. *Roads to Freedom*, pp34-35.
 23. *Op. cit.* p.35
 24. The 'Exceptional Law' which had deprived socialists of many of their rights.
 25. *German Social Democracy*, pp.92-93.
 26. *The Prospects of Industrial Civilisation*, p.128. See also *The Communist Manifesto*, 'The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles ... a fight that each time ended either in a revolutionary reconstruction of society at large, or in the common ruin of the contending classes.'
 27. *Practice and Theory of Bolshevism*, 1920, p.157.
 28. Russell saw this evaluation as imperative because: 'The civilised world seems almost certain, sooner or later, to follow the example of Russia in attempting a communist organisation of society. I believe that the attempt is essential to the happiness of mankind during the next few centuries, but I believe also that the transition has appalling dangers ... in the interests of communism, no less than in the interests of civilisation, I think it imperative that the Russian failure should be admitted and analysed.' *Practice and Theory of Bolshevism*, 1920, p.135.
 29. *Prospects of Industrial Civilisation*, pp.106-107.
 30. *Ibid.*, p.119.
 31. *The Prospects of Industrial Civilisation*, p.117.
 32. *Ibid.*, p.113.
 33. *Roads to Freedom*, pp.66-67.
 34. *Op. cit.* p.60.
 35. *Prospects of Industrial Civilisation*, pp.240-241.
 36. *Ibid.*, pp.138-139.
 37. *Prospects of Industrial Civilisation*, p.175.
 38. *Practice and Theory of Bolshevism*, pp.182-183.
 39. *Roads to Freedom*, pp.94-95.
 40. *Prospects of Industrial Civilisation*, p.238.
 41. 'Democracy and Direct Action', 1919, reprinted in *The Spokesman*, No.22, April 1972.
 42. This emphasis on the total productive process as the co-operative production of wealth seems to be the main force behind Russell's criticism of Marx's labour theory of value, or of the equivalent emphasis of pre-Marxist socialists on 'a man's right to the produce of his own labour'. This could not be used as 'the basis of a just system of distribution' says Russell for 'in the complication of modern industrial processes it is impossible to say what a man has produced'. (*Principles of Social Reconstruction*, p.124, and *German Social Democracy*, p.17).
 43. *The Prospects of Industrial Civilisation*, pp. 62-63.
 44. We are not implying that Russell used the *Manuscripts*, we have found no evidence that he used them (they were not published until 1932).