

NEGATIVE PRESENTATION ADDRESS

BERTRAND -RUSSELL

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THE CHAIRMAN : I confess to a certain discomfort at these prophecies that Mr. Nearing so eloquently put. But those of us who have advanced along the road in life have still something to hope for in an early death. (Laughter.) I am also hoping that the great logician from whom you are now to hear will have something to say on this subject, and may have a prophecy of his own from which we may get a little more comfort, even though we don't get any more knowledge. (Applause.)

MR. BERTRAND RUSSELL : Ladies and Gentlemen : It is a serious task which Mr. Nearing has set me, the task not only of trying to cheer up your spirits, but to try to prove that possibly there may be some reason for hope that we may survive the dangers which he portrays and which I regret to say, as he pointed out, I have myself on occasions portrayed in somewhat similar colours. (Laughter.)

Now the question, to my mind, is not : Do we run a risk of destructive wars, do we

run a risk of the collapse of our Western civilization? I am prepared to concede to him that we do run that risk, that there is a real danger, if we do not learn to control our warlike activities, there is a real danger that this civilization that we have inherited may perish. That, to my mind, is not the question that we have to debate.

The question we have to debate is this: Are we likely either through a cataclysm or in any other way to see a Soviet form of Government adopted in our Western countries? I believe myself that whether we have a cataclysm or whether we do not, in either event we shall not have a Government analogous to the Soviet Government of Russia.

Now I might argue that, if I liked, upon Mr. Nearing's own premises. I do not wholly accept his premises; but since they will allow my conclusion, I will accept them for a moment.

Mr. Nearing told you, following the teaching of Karl Marx, that the form of industry in any society determines the form of Government. Well, the form of industry in Russia at the time of the Bolshevik revolution was exceedingly different from the form of industry in this country or in my own—exceedingly different. You had capitalism only in its infancy, capitalism just

beginning. You had peasant industries. You had handicrafts. You had a whole primitive system.

I don't ask you to believe me. Read the words of Lenin in advocating the new economic policy. Read how he sets forth what a progress Russia would make from the condition it was in in 1921 if it advanced to the stage of capitalism. Those are the words of Lenin.

Now he is pointing out how much primitive industry, how much handicrafts, how much peasant proprietorship and the rest there is in Russia. He is pointing out how far Russia is from the technical development that you have in Western countries. And, therefore, if we accept Mr. Nearing's principles, we should expect to find that the form of Government suited to Russia would be something quite different from the form of Government suited to ourselves.

And, in fact, you do find that. The Soviet form of Government is almost exactly the same, down to the minutest particular, as the form of Government established in England by Cromwell in the seventeenth century. That form of Government in England belonged to a somewhat similar stage of economic development.

It is true you did not have, as you have in Russia, certain beginnings of modern capitalism. You did not have railways, you did not have oil or mines. Those things developed at a later date. But you did have a population, most of whom could not read and write. You had a feudal system in decay. You had a middle class gradually arising. And you had in the Government established by Cromwell the very thing which is typical of the Bolshevik revolution. You had what Cromwell called an army of saints. That army has been called in Russia the Red Army. It is the same thing.

I am not maintaining that every soldier in the Red Army is a saint. But I do say they have this in common with the army of saints: They were in their origin chosen for their opinions. You have now in the Red Army men of all opinions, but you have them controlled by men who belong to the communist party. And in the origin of the Red Army it was the communist party which made the nucleus of it, just as in Cromwell's army it was the convinced Puritans: And the whole movement of the Bolsheviks in Russia is, to my mind, quite extraordinarily analogous to the movement of the Puritans in England in the

seventeenth century, arising in the same way, because it arose at a certain economic stage to upset a system more archaic than any capitalist aristocracy.

Now that seems to me what you would expect on Mr. Nearing's principles. You would expect that the form that would arise in a Russian revolution would be quite different from that which would arise in a revolution in this country or my own. I am not saying that it is impossible that we shall have a revolution here or in my country. Under the circumstances set forth by Mr. Nearing, I think it extremely probable. A revolution occurs in a country when its Government is defeated in war. Now I don't think your Government is very likely to be defeated in war. But you can't tell. My Government, of course, might be. (Laughter.) In that case a revolution would occur. But I do not believe that the revolution would lead to a Government at all analogous to that of Soviet Russia.

Mr. Nearing described the form of Government in Soviet Russia in terms which I partially accept, but not wholly and entirely. He spoke of a centralized dictatorship by delegates from peasants and workers, dominated by the communist party. Well, these delegates from peasants and

workers do not really count in the Government. The essential thing in the Russian Government is that it is a Government by the communist party, just as Cromwell's Government was a Government by the Puritan party. It is a Government, that is to say, by people having certain opinions.

There is a form of election which is gone through occasionally. But that is an empty form. You have open voting. And everybody has to vote or, if he doesn't vote, he has to put up his hand to show that he is not voting. And as the Government watches the proceedings, it is a difficult matter to go against the Government. Moreover, propaganda against the Government or for an opposition candidate is not permitted. That is to say, the opposition cannot speak in halls or have literature.

Therefore, in effect, these elections do not count. What you have in effect is a Government of the communist party. Mind you, I am not criticizing what is done in Russia. I do not want to put this argument on the basis: Are the Russians right or are they wrong? I want to put it on the basis: Is the right thing for them the same as the right thing for us? That is quite a different question. And I should like to associate myself most whole-



heartedly with the words of the Chairman in regard to the recognition of the Russian Government and the right of the Russians to choose their own Government as they like. I am glad that that was said from the Chair in order to make it clear that that is no part of the matter in debate this afternoon.

The matter in debate this afternoon is simply this question : Can we regard what has happened in Russia as a model for what is to happen in the West? I think there are a great many reasons why we cannot. I have spoken about the reason which I think Mr. Nearing ought to accept, the fact that Russia is at a different stage of economic development. But there are, to my mind, other reasons.

Mr. Nearing accepts the position, which I suppose one must regard as orthodox in the Marxian world, namely, the position that economic causes alone determine the form of a society. I cannot myself admit that for one moment. I think that religious causes, ethnic causes, causes of inherited culture count for a very great deal in regard to the form of society.

If you compare the civilization of Russia with the civilization of China, you find practically no economic causes of difference

whatsoever. I am talking of their traditional civilizations as they existed until recently. Yet, in spite of that absence of economic causes of difference, you find the most profound differences of civilization in the two countries. The Russian civilization is religious, persecuting, centralized. The Chinese civilization is free-thinking, decentralized and quite unpersecuting. You have a profound difference resulting, to my mind, from a difference of tradition and a difference of temperament. And I think the difference between the Russian tradition and the Western would always make it very difficult for us here in the West to adopt anything that had been adopted in Russia.

In the past, as I was saying before, two hundred and fifty years ago, we could try the things they are now trying in Russia. A long tradition has accumulated over us since that time. The whole of the eighteenth century with its scepticism, its criticism, the whole of the nineteenth century with its optimism—all those things have gone over us. They have altered our outlook. They have made us quite different in our ways of viewing things from the Russians.

Now it is one of the common boasts of the Bolsheviks, and it is repeated by their admirers, that they are scientific. It is

impossible to imagine anything more totally false. A man of science is a man who is—I don't mean each particular man of science, for there are many of them who are not scientific—but the man of science as he should be is a man who is careful, cautious, piecemeal, empirical in his conclusions, who is not ready with sweeping generalizations, who will not accept some large doctrine merely because it is fine and symmetrical and synthetic, but will examine it in its detail and its application.

Now that is not the way with those who follow Marx on the question of the economic determination of history. There is dogma, a dogma set up in the name of science. It reminds me extremely of the dogma set up by Comte under the name of positivism, also under the name of science. August Comte, as you all know, proved that the whole world would adopt his doctrines before the end of the nineteenth century. Well, as a matter of fact, the nineteenth century was just about finishing when the last of his followers died. (Laughter.)

Marx's fate has been more fortunate than that. But I am not at all sure that the world is going to develop on the lines which Marx laid down, lines of schematic simplicity more simple than any human affairs

ever are, leaving out a vast complexity of human material, leaving out the quality of slow growth in societies.

After all, we know that one individual is different from another individual. Two men will grow up in exactly the same environment. One will adopt one occupation, and another will adopt another. One will succeed; another will fail. So with nations. They may have the same economic environments and yet they may differ very profoundly.

The Marxian formula is too simple. The world is not made so simply as that. And when you hear anything sweeping, when you hear anything catastrophic, when you hear anything that projects a glorious future in some golden age, well, I think it is well to be reminded that such doctrines are by no means new. There have been the Millenarians, the Seventh Day Adventists, The Latter Day Saints, the Christadelphians, there have been a host of these people who represent that after some catastrophic revolution you are going to have a millenium.

That, I say, is not a scientific view of human society. And I think what has happened in Russia is extraordinarily conclusive against that view. They had in Russia the revolution which they demanded.

They had the revolution which was to introduce complete communism with all its benefits.

Mind you, I am not arguing against communism. I am arguing against the belief that it is going to come about in this catastrophic fashion.

Well, they had their revolution. And after they had had it, and after they had tried for four years to carry out the policy for which they had made it, they had to go back to the New Economic Policy involving only those parts of socialism which even the most moderate socialists accept.

And, in the meantime, they had had a Government quite extraordinarily like the old Government of the Czar, far more like than it was said to be by most of its Western admirers—a Government centralized in Moscow, depending upon secret police who were the very same men who had been the secret police under the Czar, depending upon secret arrests, imprisonments and even executions without trial, continually concerned to suppress insurrections and to prevent assassinations, a Government opposed by the great bulk of the population. That was the situation that you had in the early days of the revolution. It is not the situation now. It is not the situation now

because they have adopted the New Economic Policy. And having adopted the New Economic Policy, they are getting away from that transitional form, and they are beginning to get towards something which may be really a step towards communist government.

Mr. Scott Nearing suggested that one of the great things about the Russian revolution was the attempt to introduce justice and equality as between man and man. Now that is a very great ideal, and it is one we have got to strive towards. It is not one which was realized in the early days of the Soviet revolution or one which ever can be realized by methods of violence and by methods of force.

You had there a Government with tremendous powers, greater powers than any Government has ever had before in the world's history. And you had the bulk of the population subject to that Government, having to content themselves with what that Government would allow it. You had no justice. You had to a certain extent a degree of economic justice, only a degree of it, because the men in the Government undoubtedly did live better than the men who were not in the Government. But you did have a degree of economic justice.

You did not have any degree whatever of political justice. Certain men held political power and certain others did not. And it rested with the men who held the political power whether they should take to themselves a larger share of the economic goods than other people or whether they should not. That is to say, the form of Government which was provided contained no safeguard whatsoever against economic exploitation, except the personal integrity of the politicians who ran it.

Well, we know something about the personal integrity of politicians. (Laughter.) And, although I do not like to say it, I believe that politicians are politicians in one longitude as in another. That is, to my mind, one of the great difficulties about this method of transition by revolution.

Then there is another point. You had in Russia an inefficient monarchy and an inefficient aristocracy. You have in this country no monarchy and a highly efficient aristocracy. (Laughter.) You have an aristocracy of men who have risen mainly by their own abilities, men who have achieved enormous power, executive men, men who are accustomed to controlling great affairs, who are liable to lose their position if they are foolish—an aristoc-

racy totally unlike the feudal aristocracy of Russia.

And I say to you, if you attempt as the Russian Bolsheviks did, if you attempt while you are a minority of the country to pit yourselves against your aristocracy, you will find it a very different task. You will find, unless you can win the majority of your country, that that aristocracy in your country will beat you. It is not a thing that can be done—to beat an efficient aristocracy when you are a minority against it. You must first win the people.

In Russia that was not necessary. In Russia the people are apathetic. The Bolsheviks have discovered a great thing, a thing of immense importance, and that is how to take the next step in the countries of Asia, among which I include Russia.

In those countries you have an intelligentsia, you have a collection of educated people accustomed to the ideas of the West, and determining out of national vanity that they will not admit that anything applicable in the West is not applicable in the East. They commit, to my mind, the converse error to that of which I am accusing Mr. Nearing. They think, if this system is good for the West, it must be good for the East.

That is not so. You have in the East



enormous uneducated democracies, an enormous bulk of the population not knowing how to read or write, totally ignorant of political events, hardly knowing even that they belong to a country. Those men are not capable of exercising democracy. And if you are going to take the next step from autocracy or from any ancient evil in a country of that sort, you cannot take it by the line of democracy such as we have in the West.

The Soviet leaders have discovered another line—that is, the Government of a certain political party, the Government of a certain group of intellectuals. And I am inclined to think, as a transition stage, that is the very best that you can have. I do not believe that there is a better way of making the transition from the old autocracy to the new democracy. As a transition in an uneducated country I think the Bolsheviks have chosen probably the better way.

As a method in a country like yours or mine, where people are accustomed to participation in politics, where they are accustomed to think about public events, it is a totally impossible method. It would not be the communists who would secure the Government of this country or of mine if

there were a scramble and an appeal to force. You know what happened in Italy. It was not the communists in Italy. The methods adopted were the same as those of the Bolsheviks. The people who emerged were the Fascisti. If you tried the methods tried in Russia you would find equally that it would be the Fascisti who would emerge. I mean by them the people to whom I alluded a moment ago as your aristocracy. Those would be the people who would secure the power, and you would not get a step towards that ultimate goal that we all desire.

Where you have your population able to read and write and participate in politics, you must adopt a different line from that which has been adopted in Russia. You cannot do it in the same way. The Russian system is one inherited, if I may say so, from the Byzantine, the whole tradition of the Greek civilization, the whole tradition of the Eastern Roman Empire.

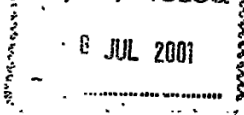
You had in the Eastern Roman Empire an emperor who was omnipotent, and who had under him the patriarch of Constantinople, who led the religious life of the community. In the West you did not have that, because in the West the empire fell and the Pope became independent of the State. You had in the West the conflict

of the State and the Church, leading ultimately to a certain degree of freedom. In the East you did not have that. The Church was subordinate to the State, and you got despotism.

You have the same thing under the Bolsheviks. The Bolshevik regime represents the State, and the Third International represents the Church. And the Third International is subject to the regime of the Bolshevik Government. You have a Byzantine tradition of centralization and despotism, a tradition from which people with our Western tradition are separated by a great gulf.

Wherever you have that Western tradition of the separation of Church and State, you cannot run a theocracy such as the present Government of Russia. The whole Government of Russia at the present time is an outcome of Eastern tradition. It belongs historically with the orthodox church.

I know that Mr. Nearing will be shocked with me for bringing in considerations that are not economic. But I am perfectly persuaded that the Marxian dogma that economic things are at the bottom of everything is exaggerated. They are at the bottom of much, but not of everything. And when you try to simplify to that



ordinary extent, you are not being scientific. You are no more scientific than would be a man who said, "All the movements of bodies are due to the force of gravitation, and to no other whatever." Many of them are due to that. Others are due to other forces.

So it is with society. And the claim that that view of life is scientific is not compatible with a knowledge of scientific method. Take one sole point about it. It is fixed for ever in the sacred word of Marx. It cannot be changed. It has all the marks of an ancient orthodoxy. Many things have been discovered since the sixties. Many things have come to be known since Marx wrote. Those things have to be decreed as unimportant, because they are not in the sacred text. That is not an attitude which can be called scientific. It is an attitude which you find in Russia. It is an attitude belonging naturally to what I should call the theological outlook. And I say the domination of the Bolsheviks in Russia is a theological stage in development and anything but a scientific stage.

It is not all the same thing to say, here is a doctrine which is scientific, and actually to be scientific. The man who is scientific is tentative. He is cautious. The man

who tells you, "Here is something which is absolutely and eternally true because I can prove it by science," contradicts himself because science does not believe in the possibility of obtaining eternal and unalterable truth.

And that is why I do not think that the real progress of the world is achieved by the revolutionary methods. I think the real progress of the world is a more patient thing, a more gradual thing and a less spectacular thing. And I think a good deal of the desire to imitate Russia, which exists among our Western radicals, is due to the delight in what is spectacular, due to the desire to think that results can be achieved quickly from one day to the next.

They cannot. Results in Russia are only now beginning to be built up as the revolutionary ardour ebbed. During the revolutionary ardour you had a necessary phase. You did not have the actual construction of those organs of economic life which are necessary if you are going to carry out socialism. The things attempted to be built did not succeed, partly because of war, partly because of discontent, partly because of disaffection. But all those evils were the products of revolution, and revolution brings them inevitably with it.

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And if we have these terrible cataclysms in the West which Mr. Nearing spoke of (and which I am not prepared to say we shall not have), if those cataclysms come to us, they will not issue in the establishment of communism, they will not issue in the establishment of socialism or of capitalism or of anything else at all. They will issue in the return to barbarism. They will issue in the destruction of our industrial system.

Communism, capitalism, are both of them forms of industrialism, and both presuppose a certain kind of civilization. Both alike are incompatible with the state of destruction and starvation and barbarism which you will have if these great cataclysms come upon us in the West. So far from having communism, you will have a state where we shall have to return probably to hunting animals with bows and arrows, where a few of us will lead a precarious existence upon the wild fruits of the earth. That is the sort of thing that you may expect if we go on with wars.

Russia has been able to some extent to build up again. Why? Because other nations survived, because when the worst was over, other nations have been able to supply Russia with her needs. But if the leading nations all at the same time are

engaged in a cataclysm of that sort, there will be no one to help them out. There will be starvation. A vast percentage of the population will die. The rest will grow savage through the difficulty of keeping alive. And the whole thing that we have built up will simply go.

That is the danger that you have to face. You have to face the thought that it is very easy to destroy what we have, and it is very hard to make sure that that will be succeeded by what we want. And that is why I do not think that this form of Government which has been adopted in Russia is a necessary stage for us here in the West. We have to make our transition by other methods in other ways, more gradual ways, less spectacular ways. Our days for the spectacular, our days for the dramatic, to my mind, are past. We have gone through that stage, and the time has come for solid work and slow work and a gradual building up bit by bit. That is my belief about what it is necessary for us to do if we are to realize the hopes which Mr. Nearing and I equally share. (Applause.)

The Chairman: There will now be a ten minute recess to enable us to think for ourselves.