

THE SUICIDE CLUB

Ivor Montagu

THERE are many more ways than one of committing suicide. One is to go on developing nuclear weapons and hoping that nothing will come of it. Another is to let others do this without doing anything to stop the process. The honour of Bertrand Russell's old age is that he is largely devoting it to saving humanity from committing suicide in either of these ways. But another is to misdirect those who wish to save humanity, so that their energies are wasted on the empty air. This, alas, is likely to be a consequence of Bertrand Russell's 'Common Sense'.*

I do not wish to smother Bertrand Russell with suffocating and humiliating tolerance, after the fashion of the British and American establishments, who load him with honours and royalties, and humour him with simulated respect, all the time whispering behind their hands 'The old man's dippy. See his grey hairs'. Nor do I wish to polemize with him, though this would be easy; he spends some space in this book endeavouring to prove that he is not an agent or dupe of Moscow, explanation that really should be unnecessary to anyone but McCarthy's ghost, and trying to explain away the fact that in the days when only America had atomic weapons, he was in favour of threatening to drop one on Moscow, whereas now he would like all warfare abolished. This is a perfectly logical change of mind, but he seeks to prove consistency, explaining his former attitude as having been the best way—in the circumstances of those days—to avoid world destruction by nuclear arms. I simply do not believe this account of his motive. I do not believe he would have given the same advice to Stalin had U.S.S.R. not U.S.A. then possessed monopoly of the bomb. Again, the practical details of some of his proposals are fatuous—he seems to fancy that de Gaulle, Macmillan and Adenauer could agree that one of them (which one?) could suffice to represent West Europe on a conciliation committee beside two Americans. But all this is trivial, and irrelevant.

What I wish to do is to acclaim the basic, broad fundament of his viewpoint with vigour and without reserve. The world is in the debt of this aged, and, in the past, often mistaken, philosopher who is devoting his last breathing years to trying to keep us all

**Common Sense and Nuclear Warfare*, by Bertrand Russell. (Allen & Unwin. 7s. 6d. cloth, 3s. 6d. paper.)

alive. The trouble is that prejudice restrains him from going the right way to achieve his object. Those who heed his warning—and stop there—will find themselves sidetracked, their efforts nugatory or frustrated, their hopes dispelled.

What is Russell's 'Common Sense'? Broadly: that nuclear warfare would be a disaster, the magnitude of which is insufficiently realised and all must understand; that its possibility requires a new attitude on the part of governments, in which they approach it as an ill of humanity to be avoided in co-operation, as they would combine to avoid some pestilence, rather than as a means of combat to be preserved for national ends either of conquest or to avoid being conquered; that those who, knowing the capacity of nuclear warfare for destruction, wish to retain it (including all its assumed capacity for exterminating the human race) and threaten its unleashing rather than tolerate social changes which all human experience teaches us would not themselves be unchanging are monsters, fanatics, to be chained and discredited, rather than statesmen (or soldiers, or divines) meriting admiration; that conciliation and *détente* to be practical of attainment should be gradual and at each stage confer no military or strategic advantage on either side; that such conciliation should proceed forthwith. With this thesis I have not a word of quarrel. It is the most important matter in the world. I cheer it. I shout 'Hurrah!'. I declare Bertrand Russell on the side of the angels.

Unfortunately he refuses to stay on that side, and adopts a perpetual pose of scuttling back to a non-existent middle. Sometimes he comes very near to appearing to seek this middle from motives of expediency in propaganda. In some places he seeks to balance condemnation of some egregious action, posture or declaration by an American politico—so clear that it is impossible to ignore its folly or infamy—by 'supposing' (that is the word he constantly uses in such cases) without a shred of hard factual evidence, a similar folly or wickedness on the Soviet side. Sometimes, in his desire to believe in equal error, his wrong-headed anxiety to grasp after something that, by appearing equal, can still allow him to go on balancing on his uncomfortable razor-edge, he invents or distorts to his purpose. Type and kernel of this is his distortion of a phrase in the Khrushchov letter from his famous triangular correspondence in the *New Statesman* that included Dulles. Khrushchov wrote: 'I think that if imperialism unleashes a new world war, it will perish in it. The peoples will not want to put up with a system which cannot exist without wars, without the annihilation

of millions of people, to enrich a handful of monopolists'. He blindly thinks that this means Khrushchov believes in the possibility of military victory by nuclear warfare. From this to suggesting that Communists would like to achieve such a victory is only one more step. He appears totally blind to the fact that Khrushchov is not speaking of military victory at all, that Communists do not in the least regard military victory as an essential or even desirable method of securing the replacement of imperialism by communism, whose triumph they regard as certain and would look on as certain, if more distant, even if U.S.S.R. and the Peoples' Republic of China were wiped from the map; since they believe that it springs from the inevitable shaping of human relations deriving from human nature itself in its environment: and that what Khrushchov is speaking of is the patent fact that whatever system unleashes world nuclear war, and however many hundreds of millions be the number of casualties, the system responsible will be unpopular with the survivors. A proposition with which, surely, few will disagree.

The trouble is, however, not the mental contortions Russell goes through in his endeavour to justify the 'a-plague-on-both-your-houses' attitude. The trouble is that thereby he condemns himself and those who follow his example to sterility.

The trouble about assuming a neutral position between A and B, and trying thereafter to be constructive (as Russell, to his infinite credit, tries) is that if your effort is to suggest an intermediate position, X, the moment you have advocated this you can, in essence, no longer be neutral. If A accepts the compromise and comes to X, and B will not, you the mediator must thereafter support A or, if—in the interest of conciliation—you cannot bring yourself to do so, you inevitably become a supporter of B. You either have to conceal from the public the fact that A has in fact come to X, or you have to justify B in not coming there; in either case you objectively divert public opinion from pressing the real culprit responsible for non-agreement at point X, the one you yourself designated earlier as fair.

It is exactly this process that Russell follows throughout. Re-examine his main thesis, as I have extracted it (and in a way I am sure he would not dissent from): exactly this is also, and has been throughout, the attitude of the Soviet government, exactly his procedures (in their essentials) of stage by stage advance conferring no advantage and conciliatory discussion of every question, is its own. The make-up of the Russell conciliation committee (2 Americans, 1

West European, 2 Soviet, 1 Chinese, 2 neutrals) is even *more* favourable to U.S.S.R. than that which U.S.S.R. has demanded (and the NATO powers refuse)—*i.e.*, equal numbers, on one side of NATO-orientated powers, on the other of Soviet sympathetic states plus neutrals counted together. Yet nowhere is there the slightest recognition of this, and that hence it is to the NATO group and not the Soviet group that the blame attaches for no agreement such as he desires having been reached or even attempted. To argue as he has done, that both sides are equally to blame, is shutting both eyelids before putting the telescope to the bridge of one's nose. Why does Russell, so clear-sighted on the fundament of the problem, behave in this way. Real blindness? Misjudgment of expediency? I do not know, but he is thereby encouraging the anti-political tendencies of his followers, discouraging them from the duty of analysis and judgment, diverting them from applying pressure where it must be applied to achieve results—in a word, for the peace movement it is a counsel of castration.

HAVELOCK ELLIS CENTENARY

Havelock Ellis, whose birth centenary is being celebrated on February 2, wrote for Labour Monthly on War and the Fighting Instinct, a quarter of a century ago. He intimated that he did it partly in homage to the memory of his friend Eleanor, the youngest daughter of Karl Marx.

LABOUR MONTHLY

TWENTY-FIVE YEARS AGO

A CHANNEL OF PUBLICITY

The Revolutionary Movement—with the Soviet Union as its vanguard showing the only way forward of limitless economic, scientific and cultural advance—more than ever before needs all the channels of publicity, all the advance posts, which it has set up in what is still the enemies' country, at once to counter the panic-stricken fury and break up and expose this motley mob of the last despairing crew of the decaying régime of capitalism, and at the same time to take part in the organisation of the working class for their overthrow.

The *Labour Monthly* is one of these channels of publicity which, in spite of critical days in the past has held on and has been one of the vital instruments for the development of the revolutionary movement in Britain. For over twelve years it has been able to play its role in promoting the understanding of revolutionary Marxism in the working class movement.

From a statement by the Editorial Board, February, 1934.

A MEMOIR OF G. D. H. COLE

(September 25, 1889 - January 14, 1959).

R. Page Arnot

G. D. H. COLE, outstanding scholar, trade union historian, economist and publicist, very early gained a high reputation in the British labour movement, a reputation which he retained to the end. As a leader of University Socialists he was unlike so many generations of university socialists before the first world war in that he early plunged into activity in connection with strikes and other forms of trade union action. An exceptionally brilliant academic career brought him a prize Fellowship at Magdalen College, Oxford, from 1912 to 1919, years which he employed chiefly in work in the labour movement. In the last forty years of his life he filled a succession of high academic posts in Oxford including the Chichele Professorship of Social and Political Theory from 1944 onwards. But it was in 1911 at the time of the Syndicalist agitation led by Tom Mann and the great strikes successively of the transport workers, railwaymen and miners that Cole's lucid and forceful articles gave a lead to the younger generation of trade unionists in an agitation against the dominance over the labour movement of Ramsay MacDonald, Philip Snowden, J. H. Thomas and also Sidney Webb and the older trade union leaders surviving from the Liberal period. It was also the time of the stormy agitation and strike activities in Ireland, led by Jim Larkin and James Connolly, while within the labour movement the *New Age*, edited by A. R. Orage, was developing its propaganda of guild socialism. In its columns and still more in the columns of the *Daily Herald*, established in the spring of 1912, as the first Labour daily with a left-wing outlook in contradistinction to the very reformist, and as it turned out, shortlived *Daily Citizen*, fostered by Ramsay MacDonald, Keir Hardie, John Hodge and the more right-wing leaders of the trade unions, Cole's writings seemed to mark a new development. His book, *World of Labour*, published in 1913, was highly esteemed amongst the younger generation of trade unionists who found in it theoretical justification for the 'direct action' frowned upon by the older socialists and trade unionists.

Inside the Fabian Society Cole carried on a propaganda for a change in policy that would have transformed its function into that of a mainly research body within the united socialist party