

The Misfortune of Being Out of Date

Bertrand Russell

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The last years of the second millennium, like the last years of the first, were filled with prophecies of the end of the world, but with somewhat more reason than at the earlier date. The Cold War had been steadily getting hotter, and was felt to be rapidly approaching explosion point. Attempts had been made by both sides to make use of various heavenly bodies as bombsites. Astronomy, both in the East and in the West, had been made a department of the Air Ministries, and all recent astronomical knowledge was 'classified'. Each side continued to hope that the other knew less than it did, but so far this hope had proved vain. Each side had hopefully sent an expedition to the Moon and, after a few days of jubilation, had discovered that the other side had also landed there in full force. The two parties had instantly engaged in nuclear warfare and had wiped each other out. But what they had not foreseen was that the Moon was made of more explosive materials than the Earth. The brief H-bomb war started a chain reaction on the Moon. The Moon began to crumble and, within a month, was reduced to a cloud of tiny particles. A few poets regretted the loss, but they were considered subversive. The British Poet Laureate wrote a verse obituary of the Moon, pointing out that she had been the source of lunacy, and we were well rid of her. An eminent Soviet scientist published a very learned memoir pointing out the advantages of having done with tides.

Since the Moon had proved unsatisfactory, the next war effort on both sides was directed to reaching Mars and Venus. Both were reached simultaneously

by both sides; but, again, the space-travellers considered it their duty to ideology to exterminate each other. But, alas, Mars and Venus, like the Moon, disintegrated under the influence of the powerful nuclear solvents that the voyagers from Earth had brought with them. Nothing daunted, the apostles of the rival faiths proceeded to Jupiter and Saturn. But even these enormous planets disappeared as the Moon and Venus and Mars had done.

The Solar System, so the zealous Governments on either side decided, is too small for our cosmic warfare. We cannot hope to win a decisive superiority over our dastardly foes, unless we can find a means of enlisting the stars.

Meanwhile, astronomy pursued researches which, both in the East and in the West, were shrouded in the utmost secrecy. Radar had proved that the distances of the nearer stars had been quite wrongly estimated, and this wrong estimate was explained as due to the bending of light-rays by the gravitational effect of dark matter in the interstellar spaces. Each side decided that the nearest habitable spot, outside the Solar System, was the Dark Companion of Sirius, which, in view of the new data, was estimated to be at a distance of fifty light-years from the Sun. Each side hoped that it alone possessed this knowledge. True, there was one astronomer in the West, and one in the East, who was suspected of treacherously revealing secret information, but it was hoped that the leak had been stopped in time. Both in the West and in the East, it was found possible to launch a projectile with a velocity not far short of that of light, and it was calculated that this projectile should reach the Dark Companion of Sirius eighty years after its launching. The expense was so great that food in both East and West had to be rationed to the bare minimum demanded by health, and all new capital investment had to be forbidden unless it contributed to the Grand Design. Since it could not be expected that the passengers originally embarked in the projectile would survive their eighty years' journey, it was necessary to make provision for new passengers to be born en route, although this entailed a much larger projectile than would otherwise have been necessary. All this was successfully accomplished, and, with a cargo of adequately indoctrinated boys and girls, each projectile was sent on its journey on the last day of the second millennium. On Earth each side came to know that the other side also had launched a projectile towards Sirius, but, as this was only discovered after the launching, the passengers did not know it and believed that they had stolen a march on their enemies.

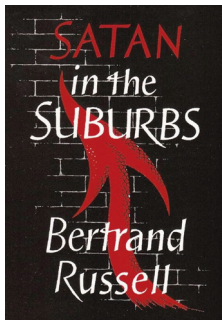
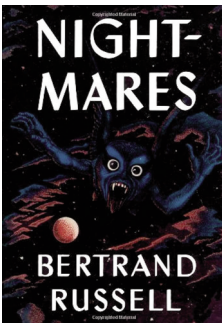
Year after year each projectile sailed on its way through the darkness of interminable night. The boys and girls, instructed by wise elders and removed from all subversive influences, were cheered throughout the

dreary years of their imprisonment by the hope of the ideological benefit which would ultimately accrue to those whom they had left behind on Earth. The boys and girls grew to manhood and womanhood, and children were born to them. Indoctrinated by their parents, the children equally felt themselves dedicated to the sacred task. They, in turn, had children and it was this second generation, now in the prime of life, which found itself at last on the firm ground of the Dark Companion. They proceeded at once to set up radar and send triumphant messages to Earth – triumphant, because neither knew that the other party also had landed. ‘Communism vanquished,’ said one message: ‘Wall Street overwhelmed,’ said the other. Fifty years after these messages were despatched, they duly reached the Earth.

But during the hundred and thirty years that had elapsed since the projectiles had been despatched, affairs on Earth had taken a new turn. Capitalism and Communism had, alike, disappeared into the archives of history. The division of mankind into separate nations had ceased. In an uncommitted nation a great Prophet had arisen who had taught that enough to eat could bring even more pleasure than simultaneous death to our enemies and ourselves. But he had not confined himself to this hedonistic argument. He had revived an older and almost forgotten ideology which taught that people should love one another, and even that they should love their enemies. Oddly enough, this idealistic doctrine did as much to convert public opinion as did the appeal to self-interest. In Eastern and Western lands alike, mobs assembled, shouting: ‘Let us all live in peace. We will not hate. We will not believe that we are hated.’ At first the mobs were small and were easily dispersed by the police, but gradually the words of the Prophet found more and more of an echo, until only Governments were left preaching the old doctrines. At last even they surrendered to the immense wave of liberation and goodwill that swept over the world. Mankind had established a single Government, and had forgotten the old divisions that had kept the human race in bondage to strife. The new generations knew little of the Cold War period, since all knowledge of it had been kept secret while the danger of war remained, and very few in the new world of joy cared to plunge back into the gloomy abyss in which their grandparents had thought themselves compelled to live.

The messages from the Dark Companion were almost unintelligible except to historical students. They had the same musty, old-world flavour as we should feel if we got messages from Wessex and Mercia denouncing each other’s abominable wickedness. When the messages from the Dark

Companion reached the Earth, the World Government considered them and at last sent a brief reply. The reply said: ‘Come home together and forget all this nonsense.’ The reply reached the Dark Companion a hundred years after the immigrants sent their triumphant messages. Warned by the fate of the Moon and the Planets, the two parties on the Dark Companion had established an uneasy truce which was kept in being by the Great Deterrent. But neither side had abandoned hope of ultimate triumph, or had ceased to regard the other as the progeny of Satan. Each side, throughout the century since their landing, had been inspired by a great faith, the faith that they themselves were good and the others were bad. The dreadful message from Earth showed that the ideologies in which they had lived were outmoded. When it appeared that the Government not specially representing either East or West had sent identical messages to both groups, the faith of each side collapsed, and each side felt that it had nothing left to live for. In sorrow, both groups met in no man’s land, and both decided that life had nothing more to offer to either. In a joint harangue, the leaders of the two sides proclaimed their common loss of faith. Sadly and solemnly, in the sight of the two assembled groups of immigrants, they set a light to two very small nuclear weapons, and after a solemn moment of waiting all were reduced to dust.



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