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# Ritual and Myth in the Russell War Crimes Tribunal on Vietnam

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**Abstract:** This article provides a sociological explanation of the performative core of the Russell Tribunal's power and legitimacy following a certain speech-act theory, in particular, an amalgam of Patrick Baert's positioning theory, Jeffrey C. Alexander's dramaturgical approach, and Ron Eyerman and Alexander's notion of cultural trauma. It will argue that the social success and survival of a human rights organisation on a global scale such as the Russell Tribunal mainly depend on a range of rhetorical and dramaturgical devices through which their creators position themselves and their institution, along with their adversaries, within specific social, political and intellectual contexts. The performative dimension of power clarifies how wars are fought and won not only on the battlefield, but also in the hearts and minds of citizens on both the home front and the enemy side. This and similar sociological factors need to be taken into account when explaining the success and transcendence of human rights organisations beyond the state's power.\*

## 1. Introduction

When we look at the history of war crimes after the Second World War, the Vietnam War, or Second Indochina War, stands out as significant. And, while the war crimes committed by the United States during the Second World War were performed to strong public support and did not interfere with American victory, the situation with the Vietnam War was very different. An understanding of the United States' defeat in the Vietnam War requires consideration of the internal, domestic opposition against the government due to the public awareness and ideological interpretation of the war crimes committed there.

By the end of the 1960s, only a third of the American population continued to defend the United States' foreign policy in Indochina, and almost a third of the Americans were strongly against the war. The situation worsened with the fatal shooting of four students at Kent State University in 1970, known as the Kent State Massacre. In 1973, after the Paris Peace Accords, the American government ordered the final withdrawal of the troops. In 1975, with the Fall of Saigon, the war was officially over.

In this context, I would like to bring up the following questions: "How do some events get coded as traumatic and others, which seem equally painful and dramatic, not? Why do culpable groups often escape being categorised as perpetrators? Why are some horrendously injured parties not seen as victims? Why do some trauma constructions lead to moral restitution and justice, while others narrow solidarity and trigger future violence?" In 2011, Ron Eyerman, Jeffrey C. Alexander and Elizabeth B. Breese sought to answer these uncomfortable questions in *Narrating Trauma: On the Impact of Collective Suffering*.<sup>1</sup> Following the spirit of these inquiries, this article looks at the main sociological mechanisms and factors through which Bertrand Russell contributed to the process of narration and signification wherein the Vietnam War became perceived as one of the most traumatic events of the 20<sup>th</sup> century by a substantial portion of the Western public.

Moving away from the so-called "new sociology of ideas" (Camic & Gross, 2001), I will utilise positioning theory (Baert, 2011a, 2011b, 2012), the dramaturgical approach (Pickering, 1995; Alexander, 2004, 2011) and the notion of cultural trauma (Alexander, 2001, 2004, 2003a, 2003b; Eyerman, 2001, 2011) as the main theoretical frameworks to analyse Russell's endeavours.

Although Russell's criticisms of the American intervention in the Vietnam War came at the end of his life, he was not at all new to the defence of human rights; on the contrary, Russell's sustained

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<sup>1</sup> R. Eyerman, J. C. Alexander and E. B. Breese, *Narrating Trauma: On the Impact of Collective Suffering* (Boulder: Paradigm Publishers, 2013).

engagements secured him a place among the great social activists of the past century. He was a militant pacifist during the First World War and in the nuclear era, he fought for decriminalising homosexuality, he vocally defended women's suffrage and he invested his greatest intellectual energies into transforming public opinion. In 1963, he created the Bertrand Russell Peace Foundation with the impressive objective of enforcing human rights on a global scale. As part of that endeavour, in 1966 he promoted the first Russell Tribunal, the goal of which was to judge and condemn the war crimes committed by the United States and its allies in the Vietnam War.

Although the United States tried to ignore it, the Tribunal was influential in mobilising public opinion, appearing in newspapers around the world. It was also heavily discussed both inside and outside academia. As a consequence, the Tribunal had a very important role in increasing the domestic opposition to the war, and contributing to modifying American's fighting strategies and propaganda policies. As a result of this success, after Russell's death, subsequent Russell Tribunals extended their "jurisdiction" to other parts of the world, from Chile's military coup d'état to the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. What, though, were this organisation's sources of legitimacy and power? In Russell's words: "our tribunal, it must be noted, commands no State power. It rests on no victorious army. It claims no other than a moral authority".<sup>2</sup>

Delving into the performative core of the Tribunal's power and legitimacy, this article will show that this organisation had two different yet interconnected layers, one which I call "practical" or "ritual"—in which it mimicked a real court in the vein of the Nuremberg Trials, though without official support—and another "philosophical" layer—which ideologically justified the actions of the Tribunal through specific rhetorical devices and performative acts.

I will also pay special attention to two interesting sociological feedbacks: the first between Russell's book *War Crimes in Vietnam* and the Tribunal, and the second between the "cultural trauma" generated by the war and Russell's criticisms. Finally, I will show how both the Tribunal's explicit bias—more specifically, its intentional omission of the crimes committed by communists fighters in Vietnam—and the rhetorical and dramaturgical performances used by Russell himself enabled his criticisms and interventions to connect, through important gatekeepers that controlled the media, with a broad stream of Western public opinion within the polarised political and ideological landscape of the Cold War. In turn, the Tribunal's widespread reception further extended an aging Russell's global fame and recognition.

## 2. On "positioning theory" as a new performative approach in the sociology of intellectuals

Positioning theory is a new "performative perspective" which has proven to be particularly fruitful in analysing the social mechanisms and factors surrounding the diffusion and survival of intellectual products (Baert, 2011a, 2011b, 2012). In this article I will mobilise the theory to provide a proper account for the reasons why and the sociocultural conditions under which institutions such as the Russell Tribunal gain popularity and public support, bestowing on themselves great power and legitimacy.

Over his long philosophical career, Russell constantly positioned himself as politically engaged with progressive political stances, which brought him both fame and personal problems, including ending up in jail twice, the last time as an aging man. Patrick Baert's notion of "positioning" aims to solve certain impasses in current ways of writing the new sociology of ideas as outlined by authors such as Charles Camic and Neil Gross (Baert, 2011a, 2011b, 2012). Positioning theory starts by noting that the reception, survival and diffusion of so-called intellectual products is not

<sup>2</sup> B. Russell, *War Crimes in Vietnam* (New York: George Allen & Unwin, 1967), 125.

only a factor of their intrinsic logical virtues or the force of the evidence set forth; rather, the success of an intellectual product also inevitably depends on the range of rhetorical devices that its authors may use to position themselves and their opponents within the intellectual and political field. Thus, positioning theory fits in the general framework of Austin's speech-act theory, whereby language is not only used to assert things, but also to do things. Positionings inside the intellectual sphere belong to these kinds of uses of language.

In the context of the social sciences and humanities, Baert argues that the dissemination and circulation of ideas and intellectual products demand a clear positioning by their authors in which they attribute to their intellectual interventions (such as an article, a book or a conference) and to those of their opponents specific characteristics and features that make sense within a social, political and ideological context. Notably, positionings can also be applied to countries, organisations and religions.

What Baert's positioning theory offers anew is an analysis of the specific mechanisms and factors that play an essential role when it comes to positioning by modern intellectuals. For example, the importance of proper positioning to promote the circulation and spread of ideas sometimes pushes differing groups to show solidarity in the face of their common adversaries, and position their performances and ideas in a very similar field, intentionally downplaying their differences. Another common strategy for effective positioning is the consolidation of necessary networks; the costs and reputational hazards of repositioning would, according to this approach, explain why only authors and scholars who already enjoy a high-standing reputation are willing to take such a risk.

For the purposes of the present article, I also should like to call attention to five specific and important mechanisms for spreading philosophical ideas and intellectual products in general (Baert, 2011a: 626-627). Intellectual products are likely to gain social resonance if: 1) their authors have good and favourable connections amongst critics and journalists; 2) there is a crisis of ideas or values, such that new ideas can propagate and be accepted with greater ease; 3) these intellectual products can be materialised in the context of the mass market, in the publishing industry for instance; 4) their authors use additional communication channels such as television, radio, public lectures and conferences or, nowadays, the Internet; and 5) their ideas and these intellectual products are able to "connect" with the sensibility and experiences of a majority of people.

In short, rather than delving into the psychological motivations behind an author's main views, positioning theory provides a theoretical framework to explore the main sociological factors enabling intellectual products to gain advantages or disadvantages within certain cultural or political areas. However, when possible, this theory can also account for the personal strategies linked to the positionings of their respective authors—for instance, through the study of their correspondence, personal diaries, etc.

This article contends that positioning theory can elucidate the Russell Tribunal's extraordinary popular success in the context of the Vietnam War. At this point, it should be noted that long before his criticism of the American intervention in Vietnam, Russell was already a famous public intellectual. This situation is also explicable from the point of view of positioning theory. To start, a careful observation of his life and work reveals that the spread of Russell's ideas was favoured by the aforementioned five mechanisms: 1) while it is true that he had serious enemies, his association with powerful followers and well-connected propagandists within influential media helped spread his ideas as well; 2) the horrors of two world wars and the fear of a nuclear apocalypse that could bring mankind to the brink of total annihilation had prepared a considerable

portion of Western public opinion to receive Russell's pacifist ideas; 3) Russell published best-sellers that sold millions of copies, including overtly philosophical books like his *A History of Western Philosophy* (1993[1945]); 4) throughout his life, Russell appeared so often in newspapers, television, radio and public conferences that millions of people around the world knew his name without having read anything written by him; and 5) finally, Russell managed to connect with heterogeneous sectors of society, such as pacifists, anti-communists, promoters of sexual liberation, science enthusiasts, critics of religion and so on.

### **3. The confrontation between Russell and the Western press: the case of the *New York Times***

In 1963, the heated dispute that Russell had in the *New York Times* brought to the public eye his strong criticism of the American intervention in the Vietnam War. This event started to sow the seeds of the inception of the Tribunal. According to Russell, the Western press, as it justified the war, also obliquely hinted at the scope of its criminal brutality, such as testimonies of villages full of civilians completely destroyed by napalm bombs and Viet Cong prisoners summarily executed. Russell thought that the main American newspapers were simply publishing isolated pieces of horrifying information, but without interest or capacity in painting a coherent picture of the war (Russell, 1967: 29-30). Russell, then, saw himself as having the responsibility of providing the complete picture of the conflict in order to show its true face to the public, itself a prerequisite to halting the war.

Following this direction, he wrote a letter to the *New York Times* denouncing the horrors of the war and blaming the United States for them. It was published on 8 April 1963, alongside an editorial that accused Russell of being a biased puppet of communist propaganda. From this point on, an interchange of letters full of mutual reproaches took place between Russell and John B. Oakes, editor of the paper's editorial page, which ended in Russell calling the *New York Times'* editorial policy "a conscious fraud". The last letters of this exchange were never published in the paper—until Russell himself published them three years later in his book *War Crimes in Vietnam* (Russell, 1967: 37-41).

### **4. The feedback between the Tribunal and Russell's book *War Crimes in Vietnam***

Following his controversy in the *New York Times*, Russell continued his social activity in denouncing the American intervention in Vietnam, including sending workers of the Bertrand Russell Peace Foundation to Indochina to search for first-hand reports of the war crimes committed there (Russell, 1967: 30). In 1966, he sent his book *War Crimes in Vietnam* to press while he was preparing the International War Crimes Tribunal. The Tribunal sought to answer uncomfortable questions regarding the use by the United States of weapons forbidden by international law, the killing and torturing of civilians, the destruction of schools and hospitals as military targets, and the creation of labour camps and massive deportation of the civilian population (Coates, 1971).

In 1967, the Tribunal's first two sessions took place in Stockholm and Roskilde. It was composed of 25 luminaries. Funding came from a variety of sources, including the North Vietnamese government controlled by Ho Chi Minh, after Russell himself requested the North's support (Griffin, 2002). More than 30 witnesses testified at the Tribunal, among them American military personnel. The social diffusion of these activities rendered futile attempts by the US government to ignore the Tribunal, which soon acquired world fame.

The aim, ideology and methods of the Russell Tribunal are intimately connected with Russell's book *War Crimes in Vietnam* (Russell, 1967). Naturally, this was not a coincidence; Russell published the book as both the empirical and ideological grounding for the Tribunal. Accordingly, from the point of view of the sociology of intellectuals, a highly interesting feedback between the Tribunal and *War Crimes in Vietnam* can be noted: the book provided the Tribunal with its ideological justification and main ideas, and the Tribunal's success made the book more famous and successful.

Russell's awareness of this feedback mechanism is present in the book. There, he wrote:

Along with world famous figures, Nobel prizewinners, novelists, mathematicians, I am forming a War Crimes Tribunal in order to pass judgment, in most solemn terms and with the most respected international figures, upon the crimes being committed by the United States Government against the people of Vietnam. I appeal to you to end your participation in this barbarous and criminal war of conquest.<sup>3</sup>

## 5. The Vietnam War and the concept of “cultural trauma”

Russell's positioning with respect to the Vietnam War would have been futile in the absence of a broader context that recognised this positioning as relevant in an ideological struggle. This context was one of profound ideological division that itself can be explained by the sociological idea of “cultural trauma”. The marked tendency of a world ideologically and politically polarised into two blocs generated an environment in which a significant number of Western societies shared similar “sensibilities” and reacted analogously to Western abuses in Vietnam.

This basic sociological factor linking contemporary generations through the struggle among different ideological movements has been studied by a number of authors (Mannheim, 1952: 286-320; Eyerman, 1994:70-72; Edmunds and Turner, 2002: 71-94). In this regard, particularly relevant is Ron Eyerman's notion of “cultural trauma” (Eyerman, 2001), which he developed for the context of colonialism and slavery in Africa, but which can be applied to other social and political contexts. In social theory, his notion of cultural trauma can be used to describe situations wherein specific events force large swaths of a society to reconsider themselves in a very different light, often negatively. Sociologists have used this concept to analyse how historical phenomena lead to a “trauma process” through which society—or at least a significant part of it—must grapple with the nature of the disruption, along with its causes, effects and general significance (Baert, 2011a: 636). In this sense, it could be said that a large portion of the Westerners who lived through the Vietnam War were, at least to a certain degree, “traumatised”. Western propaganda regarding the evils of communism was unable to stop the growing evidence that capitalist countries, especially the United States, were prepared to commit terrible crimes in order to stop the spread of communism, even when this included torture, rape, mass killings of civilians or supporting right-wing tyrants and dictators. Furthermore, millions of American parents were seeing how the government was sending their sons to distant Vietnam to be killed, mutilated or obliged to participate in the war crimes denounced by Russell and other intellectuals.

Along with Eyerman's conception of cultural trauma, particularly interesting for the purposes of this article is Alexander's later idea of the same notion. Here, I will combine both perspectives of cultural trauma, since they are compatible and relevant to analysing the Vietnam War. For Alexander, in a similar fashion to Eyerman, “cultural trauma occurs when members of a collective feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their group consciousness, marking their memories forever and changing their future identity in fundamental

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<sup>3</sup> Russell, *War Crimes in Vietnam*, 111.

and irrevocable ways”.<sup>4</sup> However, the key idea of Alexander's notion is that it does not really matter if the event was truly devastating; what matters is whether it was perceived as such, even when this ideological perception comes years later through a long cultural process of signification and narration.

Russell's criticisms of the American government played on the cultural trauma generated by the Vietnam War, and, at the same time, his activities through writings, conferences and, above all, the Tribunal, deepened the “social wounds” inflicted by the conflict. In this way, the incidents that took place after the Tribunal and the publication of *War Crimes in Vietnam* contributed to making Russell's reports even more famous, deepening the traumatic perception of the war. Thus, in 1968, media coverage in Vietnam brought to the public eye one of the most horrible and bloody episodes of the war, the My Lai massacre. Mainly in response to this massacre, the Bertrand Russell Peace Foundation organised the Citizens Commissions of Inquiry to continue investigating war crimes in Indochina. The institution's hearings, held in several American cities, would eventually lead to two important national investigations: the National Veterans Inquiry—sponsored by the CCI—and the Winter Soldier Investigation, sponsored by Vietnam Veterans Against the War.

## 6. The accusations against the Tribunal's alleged left-wing bias

To dive deeper into the specific nature of the cultural trauma in which Russell's criticisms of the Vietnam War gained such popularity, I will turn to one of the key elements that ideologically defined the Cold War era: the left/right political distinction. For decades, it defined—often in starkly black-and-white terms—the polarised ideological context through which the Western public perceived the conflicts in Indochina. And even more relevant for my argument is that the Vietnam War deepened this division, further dividing the ideological spectrum between the right, justifying American foreign policy against communism and the left, which became ever more combatant against these policies as war crimes were being publicised.

The Tribunal was composed of well-known left-wing politicians and intellectuals, such as Jean-Paul Sartre, Ken Coates, A. J. Ayer, Julio Cortázar and Ralph Schoenman (Duffett, 1968). In this way, it is undeniable that in the case of the Russell Tribunal, Russell positioned himself alongside left-wing intellectuals opposing right-wing political stances. However, this does not paint Russell as a genuine representative of the left. It is worth recalling that the difficulty in tagging Russell with clear-cut ideological labels was, perhaps proudly, admitted by Russell himself. He stated in his Autobiography: “I have imagined myself in turn a Liberal, a Socialist, or a Pacifist, but I have never been any of these things, in any profound sense. Always the sceptical intellect, when I have most wished it silent, has whispered doubts to me”.<sup>5</sup>

Despite the aforementioned difficulty in assigning Russell's thought to any particular political ideology, the Tribunal was soon accused of having a left-wing bias, and even of explicitly supporting communism. It has already been seen how some years before the Tribunal began work, Russell's criticism of the American intervention in the war was categorised as communist propaganda by important newspapers such as the *New York Times*. This accusation gained further ground once the Tribunal started to work. It should be kept in mind that Russell never hid his pronounced support of communist Vietnam. In Russell's words:

<sup>4</sup> J. Alexander, “Toward a Theory of Cultural Trauma”. In J. Alexander et al. (Eds.), *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity* (California: University of California Press, 2001). 1–30.

<sup>5</sup> B. Russell, *The Autobiography of Bertrand Russell* (New York: George Allen & Unwin, 1998[1967-1969]), 260.



Our Campaign for Solidarity, our War Crimes Tribunal, our films, our books, our meetings and our material help must have one aim: the victory of the Vietnamese over their tormentors. And I express the wish that this victory may herald similar victories of the oppressed everywhere until the day when our own people reclaim their government and transform it into an instrument of good.<sup>6</sup>

For those who denied the existence of war crimes committed by the United States in Vietnam, the Tribunal was straightforward anti-American propaganda (Podhoretz, 2004: 166). But the accusation of bias spanned the entire political spectrum. S. Lynd, a Christian Quaker and a peace and social right activist, stood far from Podhoretz's conservative positions; nevertheless, when asked to join the Tribunal, Lynd refused on the grounds that Russell wanted to focus only on the crimes committed by one side, ignoring those perpetrated by North Vietnam and the communist National Liberation Front. For Lynd, evidently, this was highly biased and unfair (Lynd, 1967).

Russell himself had already stated that, "no equation can be made between the oppression of the aggressor and the resistance of the victim".<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, even some of Russell's affiliates shared this criticism. D. Horowitz, a member of the Bertrand Russell Peace Foundation, recognised that the Russell-Sartre Tribunal did not have the intention of investigating the more-than-likely heinous crimes committed by the communist side during the Vietnam War (Horowitz, 1998: 149).

Other Tribunal affiliates also defended themselves against the accusation of bias. Particularly relevant in this context is J. Gerassi, who served as an investigator for the Tribunal. Gerassi sought to show that the Tribunal was not a mere act of propaganda against the United States, and thereby counter positions such as those of Podhoretz (Gerassi, 1968). Still other affiliates pursued a different strategy to legitimise the Tribunal; western Cold War propaganda, they argued, flooded the public day and night with a one-sided message about the evils of communism and the benevolence and virtues of capitalist societies. As a result, they continued, countering this official view by focusing on the crimes committed by the "good" side was a necessary act of critical thinking. It was perhaps Noam Chomsky who pressed this point furthest. In his "Foreword to Bertrand Russell's War Crimes Tribunal on Vietnam", Chomsky wrote:

Though not reported honestly, the Tribunal was sharply criticized. Many of the criticisms are answered, effectively I believe, in Part 1 of this book. There are two criticisms that retain a certain validity, however. The participants, the 'jurors' and the witnesses, were undoubtedly biased. They made no attempt, in fact, to conceal this bias, this profound hatred of murder and wanton destruction carried out by a brutal foreign invader with unmatched technological resources.<sup>8</sup>

And, more importantly, Russell himself addressed the accusation of serving as pro-Viet Cong propagandist:

I do not maintain that those who have been invited to serve as members of the Tribunal are without opinions about the war. On the contrary, it is precisely because of their passionate conviction that terrible crimes have been occurring that they feel the moral obligation to form themselves into a Tribunal of conscience. [...] I have not confused an open mind with an empty one.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Russell, *War Crimes in Vietnam*, 115.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 130.

<sup>8</sup> N. Chomsky, "Foreword to the War Crimes Tribunal on Vietnam". In *Bertrand Russell War Crimes Tribunal on Vietnam* (<http://www.chomsky.info/articles/1971----.htm>, 1971).

<sup>9</sup> Russell, *War Crimes in Vietnam*, 126.

## 7. Between ritual and myth: the Tribunal's two layers

The popularity achieved by the Tribunal cannot be understood without paying special attention to its rhetorical and dramaturgical nature. In order to understand this nature, I would like to analyse what I will call the “two layers” of the Tribunal: a first layer in which the Tribunal imitated a real court judging war crimes, and a second one that ideologically legitimatised the organisation's actions. The Tribunal positioned itself, both in the imitation of real courts and in the introductory speeches made about them, as a universal institution seeking the consummation of grand philosophical ideals such as justice, world peace, and freedom (Coates, 1971; Duffett, 1968). Russell himself recognised that the Tribunal claimed no other legitimacy than a moral authority: “we do not represent any state power, nor can we compel the policy-makers responsible for crimes against the people of Vietnam to stand accused before us. We lack force majeure. The procedures of a trial are impossible to implement”.<sup>10</sup> As such, the Tribunal could be considered to be a large-scale theatre, where Russell, Sartre and the others were playing the roles of universal judges.

Like the two sides of a coin, this ideological layer is inseparable from the practical or technical layer of the Tribunal. Nevertheless, although both layers only existed in connection with the other, they can be dissociated in sociological analysis, similarly to how many anthropologists, for instance, distinguish between the “ritual” and the “myth” in institutions relating to magic or religion.

The “mythical” layer is key to understand the process of signification and narration through which Russell and his allies heavily contributed to making the Vietnam War one of the most traumatic events of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In turn, this process cannot be properly understood without attending to the specific dramaturgical and rhetorical devices that Russell used. I will limit myself here to listing the main devices deployed and their ideological and symbolic importance.

I will begin by clarifying how Russell opened the second session of the Tribunal in November 1967: “We are not judges. We are witnesses. Our task is to make mankind bear witness to these terrible crimes and to unite humanity on the side of justice in Vietnam”.<sup>11</sup> Russell declared that, although he had been witness to many wars and injustices during his life, the Tribunal had no clear historical precedent (Singh, 1987: 228). In his words:

In my own experience I cannot discover a situation quite comparable. I cannot recall a people so tormented, yet so devoid of the failings of their tormentors. I do not know any other conflict in which the disparity in physical power was so vast. I have no memory of any people so enduring, or of any nation with a spirit of resistance so unquenchable.<sup>12</sup>

Although Russell was a harsh critic of communism and defended, from an early stage in his intellectual career, a future single global government led by the United States to eliminate mankind's main problems (Russell, 2005[1924]; Woodhouse, 1980; Pérez-Jara, 2014), during the Vietnam War it is more than evident that he professed scathing opposition to American foreign policy. In order to counter the American rhetorical and dramaturgical devices used to justify and encourage the war, Russell made use of no less powerful ideological weapons. In this way, once Russell positioned himself as a universal judge above state power, his criticisms of the United States' foreign policy in Vietnam were primed to be covered by powerful rhetorical devices. For

<sup>10</sup> M. Singh, *The Political Philosophy of Bertrand Russell* (Delhi: Mittal Publications, 1987), 228.

<sup>11</sup> Chomsky, “Foreword to the War Crimes Tribunal on Vietnam”.

<sup>12</sup> K. Coates (Ed.), *Prevent the Crime of Silence: Reports from the Sessions of the International War Crimes Tribunal* (London: Allen Lane, 1971), 59.

instance, Russell stated that the Americans had at last succeeded in “shocking the conscience of mankind. In the endeavour to exterminate the inhabitants of South Vietnam in the sacred name of freedom, they have adopted the use of what we are told is 'non-lethal' gas”.<sup>13</sup>

In Russell's positionings, the United States was always presented as some kind of universal evil that corrupts everything it touches; a force for suffering, reaction and a counter-revolution the world over that needed to be defeated, as the Greeks at Salamis vanquished the Persian juggernaut. The struggle in Vietnam was a struggle for human decency and emancipation (Russell, 1967: 112-114). Employing highly Manichaeic rhetoric, Russell asked, with respect to the United States: “Is there anything that can be done to prevent this universal empire of evil? Certainly the first step is to help the people of Vietnam in their efforts to win and preserve their freedom”.<sup>14</sup>

Russell combined his Manichaeism with apocalyptic rhetoric, declaring that if the main political problems of his time were solved, there would be new hope for the world; if, however, they were not, then the drift towards total disaster would be unavoidable (Russell, 1967: 81). In the ideological process of demonising the United States, Russell did not hesitate to make comparisons between it and Hitler's Germany, at the same time that he affirmed that:

The International War Crimes Tribunal must do for the peoples of Vietnam [...] what no tribunal did while Nazi crimes were committed and plotted. [...] Our social institutions, impregnated with racism, must be reconstructed. The Tribunal must begin a new morality in the West, in which cold mechanical slaughter will be automatically condemned. The Tribunal must inspire a new understanding that the heroic are the oppressed and the hateful are the arrogant rulers who would bleed them for generations or bomb them into the Stone Age.<sup>15</sup>

The variety of Russell's rhetorical devices was great. Thus, on other occasions, he used performative devices typical of a military speech, like a captain addressing his troops: “The people of Vietnam are heroic, and their struggle is epic: a stirring and permanent reminder of the incredible spirit of which men are capable when they are dedicated to a noble ideal. Let us salute the people of Vietnam”.<sup>16</sup> Meanwhile, he encouraged the American troops to ask themselves, when they returned from battle, who were those people they were killing, how many women and children died at their hands that day, and what would they feel if these things were happening in the United States to their wives, parents, and children (Russell, 1967: 109).

In order to gain the support of wide-ranging sectors of American public opinion, he also knew how to praise American supporters of the Tribunal, explicitly acknowledging their support: “The Tribunal received from the beginning very considerable public support, not least from very many citizens of the United States”.<sup>17</sup> The use of these rhetorical devices in the polarised ideological spectrum of the Cold War had a far-reaching and undeniable impact and success on Russell's left-wing audiences, whose ideology was flexible enough to be attracted to the magnet of Russell's rhetoric.

## 8. Conclusion

Several decades have passed since the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War. New sociological, historical and philosophical works and approaches have appeared in recent

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<sup>13</sup> Russell, *War Crimes in Vietnam*, 72.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 73.

<sup>15</sup> Coates, *Prevent the Crime of Silence: Reports from the Sessions of the International War Crimes Tribunal*, 311.

<sup>16</sup> Russell, *War Crimes in Vietnam*, 99.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 130.

years that have sought to change traditional opinions about this historical period. What does this article add to the new studies and literature about the Cold War in general, and specifically about Russell's criticisms to the Vietnam War? It analyses the Russell Tribunal, hitherto ignored by the literature despite its historical importance, combining new approaches in the sociology of intellectuals that have proved particularly fruitful in analysing the influence and transcendence of intellectual products from a new perspective. It started by showing the apparent paradox of the Russell Tribunal's power when it not only was not supported by the main capitalist countries of the time, but was against them, due to their criminal intervention in Vietnam.

What were, then, the sources of legitimacy and power of Russell's criticisms? After all, as we have seen, his Tribunal was not a real tribunal, but a large-scale theatre. This article has attempted to answer these questions through the sociological analysis of the specific and main mechanisms and factors that explain, from a performative point of view, the survival, success and power of intellectual interventions. I have argued that these approaches, in the philosophical line of Austin's theory of speech acts, are more suitable to studying the impact and consequences of intellectual interventions than the so-called "new sociology of ideas" (Camic & Gross, 2001).

From this perspective, this article has shown that Russell contributed to the caustic process of narration and signification through which the Vietnam War was perceived as an immense evil of universal proportions by a substantial portion of the Western public. When Russell, for instance, called the United States a "universal evil", or said that in the wake of the Vietnam War the final fate of mankind and human nature was compromised, he and his close collaborators were creating a complex cultural perception that clearly exaggerated the proportions of the Vietnam conflict by means of a process of ideological signification. On this basis, it does not really matter if the event was truly devastating for a society; what really matters is whether the majority of the society, be it even a foreign society, perceived the event as such. Obviously, with this I do not intend to exonerate the war crimes in Indochina by declaring that they did not happen or were not brutal. Rather, I mean to draw attention to the fact that in the 20<sup>th</sup> century similar or even worse crimes did not receive the ideological proportions of the war crimes in Indochina, due to institutions like the Russell Tribunal. The intrinsic impact of political or military crimes is far from the whole story; the fact that numerous war crimes and genocides in the 20<sup>th</sup> century only achieved recognition at a much later stage—and some of them, despite their brutality, remain known only to historians—gives clear indication of the extent to which other sociological, political and ideological factors come into play.

In this line, another crucial idea I have defended is that bias is not only difficult to avoid when analysing a military or political conflict, but that it can also be very helpful for the success and survival of a political positioning, particularly when it comes to ideological struggles concerning more than one state, or an ideologically polarised society. In the case of the Russell Tribunal, Russell and his affiliates aligned themselves with the political left through an explicit bias; this positioning was central, from a sociological point of view, to the promotion and diffusion of the Tribunal's activities.

By virtue of the mechanisms and factors that have been analysed herein, Russell was able to imbue standing power in, and at many times gain widespread fame for, his main political and pacifist ideas in the midst of the "Darwinian ecology" containing the most important ideological movements of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Throughout his life, Russell was forced to navigate between different power groups when positioning his theories and interventions; while in the first Tribunal he aligned himself with the political left and even with Ho Chi Minh, in earlier stages of his career he worked alongside the political right and anti-communists. For instance, he worked closely with

the CIA-funded Congress for Cultural Freedom, a propaganda machine created by the United States in 1950 to combat communism in the ideological arena.

The way a theory is positioned within a particular sociocultural context is key to its social reverberation, although it may at the same time jeopardise its logical coherence. Russell could not escape this conundrum. In the plurality of competing ideologies and philosophies, conflicts are inevitable. It is not just a theoretical struggle, but a real competition among human groups and communities in constant cold, warm or hot wars aiming to control finite privileges and resources. For an intellectual product to flourish in this environment, its promoters need to gauge the complex webs of interests, friends and enemies populating the political and ideological spectrum. In this positioning interplay, the rhetorical and dramaturgical devices used are key to achieving success. Proper positioning within the right context will strongly aid in the diffusion and impact of an intellectual product or intervention, while misguided positioning may condemn it to oblivion, most likely the worst fate an intellectual product can face.

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