

**AN EXAMINATION OF BERTRAND RUSSELL'S GENERALIZED  
STATEMENT: "HITLER IS AN OUTCOME OF ROUSSEAU;  
ROOSEVELT AND CHURCHILL OF LOCKE**

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<https://doi.org/10.37602/IJREHC.2025.6501>

**ABSTRACT**

This paper examines Bertrand Russell, a 19th and 20th century British philosopher's famous saying from his *A History of Western Philosophy*: "Hitler is an outcome of Rousseau; Roosevelt and Churchill of Locke." The paper first examines the meaning of outcome, then describes the quote in the context of the book and Russell's categorization of Enlightenment thinkers into two streams: the romantics and British utilitarians. The paper explores Russell's bias and oversimplification that comes with his categorization of thinkers, which his bias is then reflected in his quote. Drawing on Ralph Waldo Emerson's notion of nonconformity, the paper argues that comparison is interpretive and potentially reductive. It challenges Russell's framing by analyzing the ideological dissonance between Rousseau's populist social contract and Hitler's fascist, racist regime, and by contrasting Locke's liberal ideals with the more socially progressive and economically redistributive policies of Roosevelt and Churchill. Ultimately, it contends that philosophical influence is not deterministic; ideas are provisional and subject to reinterpretation. Thus, labeling political figures as "outcomes" of philosophers neglects the agency, context, and multiplicity of influences that shape historical figures.

**1.0 INTRODUCTION**

Comparison is an act of interpretation, and that makes it a double-edged sword. Ralph Waldo Emerson, who championed individualism and self-reliance, wrote that, "Whoso would be a man, must be a nonconformist" (2). His words, from his 1841 essay, *Self-Reliance*, although relating to self-growth, can be applied to history. In history, in a state of calamity, the temptation to make sense of the present using the past grows. We look for patterns and precedents to restore meaning, clarity, and to fight chaos, sometimes even at the expense of complexity. This is relevant because of Bertrand Russell's 1945 book, *A History of Western Philosophy*, where he wrote, "Hitler is an outcome of Rousseau; Roosevelt and Churchill of Locke" (685). To put his words into context, in 1945, the Second World War had ended, but not without leaving the world entrenched. Russell's statement is an example of turning back to predecessors to gain answers to actions made in times of disorder. His argument is correct, but to a very limited extent. There is no denying that the ideas of Locke and Rousseau are impactful in the real world; they contributed ideas to modern political thought and democracy, and it is tempting to draw clear lines between philosophers in the 17th and 18th centuries and their influences on later politicians, yet such a view is oversimplified. It fails to account for the complexity of ideas and other influences on politicians, such as turmoil, the ideas of other philosophers, and public opinion.

## 2.0 THE MEANING OF “OUTCOME”

For the purposes of this paper, outcome will be seen as “something that follows as a result or consequence” (“Outcome Definition”). This definition indicates that there is a clear relationship, in which one idea leads to another.

However, to say that Hitler is the outcome of Rousseau or that Churchill and Roosevelt are the outcome of Locke is to deny them the room for will, choice, and interpretation.

Moreover, ideas may shape thinking, but do not fully dictate people. Russell has mistaken the accessibility (presence) of ideas for the inevitability (bound to occur) that they will be guaranteed to shape outcomes. With this thinking in mind, in order to truly be an outcome of someone, their ideas must not just exist beside you. You should intentionally adopt their ideas. Ideally, there would be some recognition that links you with your predecessor. Maybe what you are solely known for is similar to what your predecessor is known for. As for Rousseau, he is known for the social contract and for making liberty a universal right (Cranston & Duigan).

Hitler was notably known for racial supremacy and territorial expansion (Bullock et al.), rejecting the idea of universal liberty. Expansion limits self-determination. Setting up a racial hierarchy to discriminate is what Rousseau would’ve wished for German citizens to speak out against, as it is depriving their right to equality. This indicates that the basic philosophies of Rousseau and Hitler move in opposite directions.

Locke was known for labeling life, liberty, and property as natural rights (Rogers).

Roosevelt was known for the New Deal (Friedel), and Churchill was known for being a wartime hero, defending England and democracy against fascism (Nicholas), which are quite different in nature. Being an outcome of someone means that you should be known as something relatively similar to your antecedent.

Chrucky argues that to make Russell’s argument plausible, philosophers must have an impact on public opinion and have an impact on politicians, but politicians and the public often overlook them, so a philosopher’s impact on politics is minimal. Thus, it is difficult to link Hitler (politician) as an “outcome” of Rousseau.

If Russell wanted to make a more accurate argument, he should’ve opted for using the word “inspired” in place of the determinism implied by “outcome.”

## 3.0 BEHIND THE QUOTE

Bertrand Russell saw two branches of philosophers: the romantics and the empiricists. British empiricists were Locke, Bentham, and Mill, who prioritized empirical reasoning, liberal democracy, and gradual reform. They were the epitome of enlightenment thought. These thinkers were the ones Russell deemed practical (Russell, 1945, 564). Russell grouped Rousseau into the continental idealism stream, alongside Nietzsche and Schopenhauer (564). These thinkers prioritized emotion, nationalism, and a romantic vision of will, a breeding ground for fascism. This again shows oversimplification in Russell’s statement—he himself

claimed that “the statement, of course, is too schematic” (642)--because there is a possibility for overlap across these two branches.

Bias in his arguments is also implied as he stated that he was “accused...of writing not a true history but a biased account of the events. But in my mind, a man without bias cannot write interesting history” (“Quote Western Philosophy”). It wasn’t Russell’s intent to write an unbiased view on philosophy. Those biases show clearly when he paints Locke as this perfect, liberal man, while simultaneously viewing the continental stream of thinkers as dangerous. He used a tiger and sheep analogy; while the tiger is beautiful, it is also harmful to the sheep. The romantic perspective focuses too much on the tiger’s beauty and therefore is harmful (Russell, 1945, 19), showing a level of disregard for the romantic stream. He also explicitly critiqued the romantic stream of thinkers, especially Nietzsche. He intended to “completely ridicule” Nietzsche, discrediting his ideas and calling him insecure. One opinion claims that Russell’s attack on Nietzsche was more of an ad hominem attack, going after Nietzsche’s character over his ideas (“Bertrand Russell on Nietzsche”). Thus, we have to keep in mind that his statement regarding Rousseau and Locke includes biases, like the dissatisfaction towards the romantic stream.

#### 4.0 ROUSSEAU & HITLER

Rousseau’s belief was in the corruption of the people and the need to restore them to their mythical natural state. His quote, “man is born free but everywhere else he is in chains” (Rousseau, 1762, 1), is a reaffirmation of his belief that people were corrupt by society, and were not innately degenerate. Using a social contract, a collective agreement determined by all citizens through participatory engagement, not dictated by an entity with arbitrary or unchecked power, citizens could return to an uncorrupted society, showing Rousseau’s populist worldview (Garrard). Fascism, by contrast, deems that the people are weak and impure, and must be saved and “uncorrupted” by a strong, quasi-divine leader. Fascism does not trust the people, while Rousseau’s populist belief in a general will depends on their capacity for trust. In that way, a fascist leader is the replacement of the general will.

Another large proponent of Hitler’s reign was racism. This idea is much more closely related to Herbert Spencer’s Social Darwinist theory; the survival-of-the-fittest, when applied to humans, was used to justify ethnic cleansing and eugenics (“Social Darwinism”). Jews, in Hitler’s eyes, were parasites (“Propaganda: Jews are Lice”) who needed to be eradicated. Hitler’s ideology is also closely tied with Kant’s racial hierarchy; only white European males had innate talents that allowed them to function better than non-whites (Rasmauer). Hitler, similarly, developed an Aryan race to categorize white, blonde, blue-eyed Europeans who were safe from his ethnic cleansing (“Aryans”). This shows a much clearer correlation between Hitler, Kant, and Spencer, rather than Rousseau.

In terms of democracy, Hitler interacted with democratic ideals in a way that leveraged him. He used free speech and assembly to his advantage; he discussed his propaganda in rallies (Ryback). When someone uses democracy to reap personal benefits like power, it represents a betrayal of democracy; it shows that the government is interested in taking rights away from people, without exchanging their right to security and newfound freedoms, which is what the social contract discusses as a tradeoff.

You may argue that because Rousseau was considered a romantic, he is connected with German fascism. Nazism was rooted in attempting to return Germany to an idealized past where the German Volk was powerful. Attempting to return to an idealized epoch of Germany's rule is similar to romantic thinking, especially the concepts of nationalism and idealism. However, the correlation between Rousseau's romanticism and German fascism is an example of the correlation, not causation fallacy: when two things happen, but there is no way to prove that one actually caused the other ("Correlation v Causation"). An example of this is saying that sales for chocolate bars increased, and so did car accidents, so eating chocolate bars causes car accidents. With Russell's wording, it is making it sound like Rousseau led to Hitler. Just because Hitler displayed romanticism through his "Make Germany Great Again" efforts, it doesn't mean Rousseau caused fascism. There was so much in between Rousseau and Hitler, namely Nietzsche, Herbert, Kant, and Mussolini, that also could've influenced Hitler.

### **5.0 LOCKE, ROOSEVELT, & CHURCHILL**

Locke is acclaimed as the father of liberal democracy—a system that places an emphasis on universal liberties (Liberal Democracy). However, Locke has always been mythologized as a perfect upholder of liberal democracy (Stanton).

Liberal democrats call for universal suffrage. Roosevelt did this by publicly announcing his support for women's suffrage in 1912 ("FDR: Suffrage"). In his 1941 Four Freedoms speech, he claimed that "Freedom means the supremacy of human rights everywhere," which extends to Britain and to women ("Four Freedoms to Congress"). Churchill in 1904 voted in favor of a female suffrage bill (Langworth). Locke's idea of suffrage was not universal, unlike Roosevelt or Churchill. However, it is important to identify that in the Lockean era, universal suffrage indicated giving MALES of all social classes the right to vote.

Furthermore, inequality is present in Locke's statement that people have a god-given right to life, liberty, and property. With private property, though, the distribution of wealth would be unequal due to the invisible hand. FDR implemented his New Deal welfare programs to combat the effects of the Great Depression, incorporating a social approach to democracy. He acknowledged that a completely capitalist approach (e.g, private property that Locke believed in) would not be enough to ensure equality or security. His programs created jobs, infrastructure, mimicking Napoleon III's Paris reforms (Euler) over Locke's.

The first two natural laws, life and liberty, were also very contradictory because he argued for slavery, even if it was limited to war captives (Locke, 1690, 114). This deprives captives of the right to life and liberty, which are natural rights according to Locke.

This shows that Locke does not fully uphold this standard of being a liberal democrat. Sabine argues that true liberalism emerged in the 18th century with Bentham, Mill, and Smith (Stanton). To argue that Locke is the father of liberalism is a stretch. Thus, it is not conclusive to call Roosevelt an outcome of Locke.

Expanding on Churchill, he had his time jumping between conservative and liberal parties. He supported "liberal democratic reforms" but also sought out free trade, so it is too uniform to call him a full liberal democrat. Yet, in 1909, he supported the "People's Budget," which taxed the rich more heavily ("People's Rights"), showing his view on economic redistribution. This

is much more similar to Marxist redistribution of wealth to the working class, rather than Locke's minimal government intervention philosophy. Since Churchill had both "Marxist" ideas and Lockean/Smith: free market worldviews, his thinking can't be reduced to only Locke.

## 6.0 BELIEFS

Whatever Rousseau or Locke believed in doesn't mean they are responsible for how others interpret and USE their beliefs, because beliefs are provisional. Hitler is not an outcome of Rousseau, so Rousseau can't be blamed for genocide. Since Churchill and Roosevelt are not fully outcomes of Locke, Locke can't be credited for everything Churchill and Roosevelt did in the name of liberalism.

## 7.0 CONCLUSION

Russell's argument, while ostensibly true, is still limited due to how oversimplified it is. The fact that it was quite biased, and didn't account for world events and other famous thinkers makes his argument "less correct." Just as Emerson describes how the world may compel a self to fit in, Russell's argument risks reshaping philosophers into what fits his line of thought.

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