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Review: Revolution by Russell Brand

Anarcho

January 9, 2016

One of the more bizarre developments of the last year has been Russell Brand or, more correctly, the response that he has provoked across the political spectrum. Watching commentator after commentator froth at the mouth and seeing Cameron proclaim in the middle of an election campaign that a comedian was a “joke” was, to say the least, strange. It reached a (to use a word Brand would surely approve of) climax when it was proclaimed by the right that Ed Miliband was “getting into bed” with Brand – by having an interview with him. Seriously? Did Cameron get into bed with Paxman then?

What is going on here? The over-the-top demonisation suggests one thing – that Brand has touched a nerve. Why? Perhaps we need to revise some history. Brand’s book *Revolution* starts as you would expect with his Paxman interview and his unashamed admission that he had never voted, that he felt none of the parties represented his views, that the system was corrupt and needed to be changed by the people from below. This provoked a response

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which was interesting, not least that some expected that Brand should discuss his alternative in some detail.

To say the least, this was somewhat unfair. Why should anyone – not least a comedian – be expected to provide a detailed blueprint to replace a system which is obviously not working (at least for the many)? Not least because if you are arguing that a key issue with the current system is that people are disempowered and have no say then it hardly makes sense to announce a ready made social system which said people are expected to simply implement! We can also be sure that if he had produced one then he would have been denounced as an authoritarian elitist seeking to impose his preferences on the masses.

This is what produced *Revolution*, as Brand himself states at its start, which leaves the task of reviewing it. Now this is where it gets tricky. I could review it as a contribution to political theory with my best anarchist activist hat on. That would be incredibly po-faced and, fundamentally, missing the point. So I will review it for what it is, a work of autobiography that aims to get various ideas – most of which are libertarian in essence – across to those who know Brand via his stand-up and forays into TV and films (i.e., me) or read *Booky-Wooky* and its sequel (i.e., not me).

This is important for the book is fundamentally an autobiography – *Booky-Wook 3: This Time It's Politics* – and so “Brand, Russell” is the longest entry in the index. This should come as no surprise to those who have seen him in stand-up – he does an amusing line of self-centred but somewhat self-deprecating humour which is reflected in this book. While many people label him as narcissistic, I don't see this as being an issue. Being partial to a bit of Egoism (communist-egoism, naturally), I'm not going to berate someone for being focused on themselves – after all, what is revolution and socialism about unless it is about creating a world *you* are happy in and wish to live in? The self-sacrificing dour-faced moralism of much of the left has never been that appealing – as can be seen from its steady decline.

The first thing to stress is that Brand has found God (spiritualism may be a better word). This makes some of the book hard going, for me at least. Then there are the enthusiastic assertions about the power of transcendental meditation, which again I found unconvincing. Much of the book describes his new found spiritualism and his belief in the interconnectedness of all life. This is reflected in the title, with *Revolution*'s *evol* reversed into love in a nice shade of red. I think most anarchists will not be too interested in this aspect of the book but, then, we are not the audience it is aimed at.

So what of his analysis and alternative? I think it is fair to say that most people will not be expecting Russell Brand to produce a work of deep political thought. He does not disappoint in that respect – it is not so much “Chomsky with nob gags” as “summarising Chomsky with a few nob gags thrown in”. Given this, it comes as no surprise that the book varies widely in tone and subject, covering aspects of autobiography to illustrate his own political awaking and ideas while summarising other people's work – notably, anarchists like Noam Chomsky and David Graeber. His commentary on Orwell's account of anarchist Barcelona is amusing and to the point as are his comments that the Ten Commandants don't mention homosexuality. His throwaway comment on 9/11 conspiracy theories distract from his serious points – like workers' control, decentralisation, federalism, etc. These are basic anarchist ideas and they are reaching a bigger audience, which can only be good.

The book's basic message is that if he can change then we can change both ourselves and the world. This is a refreshing message and it is good that he is using his fame to push ideas we take for granted out of the libertarian movement into wider society. He is stressing the need for direct action as well community activism, and that is a good thing. He is urging the replacement of capitalism with co-operatives, the end of wage-labour by associated labour, creating a decentralised system which empowers people to manage their own lives, communities, workplaces and, ultimately, world.

So the book reflects a journey (sorry, this feels like a cliché but it will have to do), one which is obviously not finished yet. Is *Revolution* confused? Yes. Are Brand's politics completely correct and coherent? No: but potentially they are – and they are more correct than many on the left. Overall his message is quite reformist and hardly utopian – if we ignore the spiritualism aspects and his claims for it – replacing corporations with co-operatives, decentralising power, etc. So why the backlash? Partly because he is exposing the “Elephant in the Room” with his comments on not voting. You do not say things like that in polite society. He touched a nerve and as he cannot be refuted he must be demonised.

From an anarchist point of view, he has raised the notion that not voting is not apathy but can be conscious political act which shows disdain for a corrupt system as well as saying that this is not the only system possible. So if he gets even a few of his readers interested in the people he summarises – Chomsky, Graeber, Orwell – or gets them reading about anarchist ideas or active in direct action community and workplace groups then all for the best. And I'm sure he would be the first to agree.

As I mentioned Brand's interview with Ed Miliband, it would be remiss to mention developments after the book's publication. He famously backed the Greens in Brighton and urged a Labour vote in England and Wales to keep the Tories out (from the context, the implication was to vote SNP in Scotland). Much was made of this, with some proclaiming Brand a hypocrite. Personally, I was not surprised for he actually did not proclaim a principled opposition to voting but rather that the current parties did not deserve his vote. This implied that if a party came around which he considered as decent then he would vote. This can easily result in advocating tactical voting, something which – as the LibDems discovered to their cost – is widespread.

While some anarchists do make not voting into a point of principle, this just fetishises something which is a tactic. Anarchists are against voting because you cannot achieve socialism by those

dislikes or failure on his part to have reached the correct conclusions as quickly as we would like. Some seem to forget that no one is born an anarchist and none become one overnight.

Finally, the more serious (i.e., po-faced) Marxists dismissed his book while the opportunists (like the SWP) were uncritical about it (probably because they want donations from and/or publicity via him at some later stage). He deserves neither (saying that, in the unlikely situation Brand actually reads this, *Black Flag* could do with a cheque for £1,000 to eliminate our historic debt to our printers). Brand is raising important issues and is clearly learning as he does so. We can expect missteps and mixed messages. This is to be encouraged and so while the average anarchist will not gain much from *Revolution* it may get an audience which we do not usually reach interested in social change. If it does, then Brand should be congratulated.

Revolution
Russell Brand
Century
London
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means. In this, we have won the argument. No self-proclaimed Marxist, bar the Socialist Party of Great Britain of course, agrees with Marx that the working class can liberate itself by means of “political action”. Rather, it is a case of using elections for propaganda reasons or for getting Labour into power so people can see their limitations. Either way, it is used simply to build the party rather than for the reasons Marx supported it for.

So the anarchist critique, that political action produces reformism, has been proven correct to such a degree that even Marxists usually echo it.

This is not to deny that decent, principled people can get elected and stay that way. People like Mhairi Black, Caroline Lucas and Tony Benn are, however, the exception. That they are so rare is shown by the very fact people remember their names. You can count them in one-hand. Nor is it to deny that some parties are worse than others – the Tories in power always make Labour more appealing – and that tactical voting can work in the sense of getting the lesser evil in office.

However, we must always remember that it is still an evil – so it does not matter if you vote or not, the government gets in and we need to organise in our workplaces and communities to tame it until such time as we can smash it. This would have been true even if Ed Miliband got the keys of Number ten and it is still true for those of us who have Nicola Sturgeon’s anti-Austerity rhetoric not being matched with her government’s actions.

Brand suggested that a Labour government would be more likely to be swayed by political protest from below and that was the main reason why he urged people to vote. Yet he seems to have forgotten that it was a Labour government which ignored the mass march against war in 2003. Indeed, Blair’s rejection of this mass protest was a major factor in current cynicism about politics and, of course, it emboldened subsequent governments to “make hard decisions” and ignore public opinion and protest. Needless to say, Brand should have challenged Miliband more on that.

Miliband also argued that we need protest and “politics” (i.e., voting) to change things and placed the focus on politics (unsurprisingly). Yet the example of the equal pay act he pointed to shows that this is not the case. It took direct action to get that law passed and inequality still remains – worse, the strike that forced the matter into the public consciousness would be deemed illegal today and would never have happened. Is Labour proposing to change that? No, at best they were – unlike the Tories – not going to make it even harder to strike. Similarly, Miliband, as usual with Labour politicians and their apologists, pointed to the NHS and other feats of the distant past while failing to mention that Labour as much as the Tories undermined those achievements. Yes, Labour nationalised many industries back in 1945 but they did not put them under workers’ control and Labour under Miliband could not even suggest letting the privatised train franchises expire!

Why does this happen? At one point in his book Brand rightly notes that those who fund a political party will get what they paid for in terms of friendly decisions and legislation. This is obviously the case with Brand’s example – companies and corporations – but he does not mention that Labour is funded by the trade unions and – regardless of the *Daily Mail*’s hysterics – it is clear that the “union bosses” (i.e., union officials who, unlike actual bosses, are democratically elected) do not get to pick the tune or the dance. This points to an obvious issue with Brand’s position – if, as he suggests, a party did appeal to him and the general public and it were voted into office why expect it to reflect its supporters interests any more than Labour does?

The reason why this happens is because the state is not an instrument of popular power. It has evolved to secure minority rule, to exclude the many. Its centralised and hierarchical structure is there for a reason – to disempower the many so that the few can enjoy their wealth and the power that comes with it. Governments are in office, not in power, as they are subject to the pressures of business and the permanent state bureaucracy. This can only be

countered by pressure from below which means building an anti-parliamentarian movement based on direct action.

So Brand has identified and exposed a truism which most commentators and politicians do not want to admit: the system is corrupt, people have little influence, parties do not represent people but those who fund them (unless it is Labour and their trade union “masters”, of course!). However, he still has some illusions that the system could be reformed into a real democracy if we elect the right people although he does recognise the need for pressure from below to keep them in check. The next step will be to recognise that while pressure from below is needed for reforms and to tame the state, the state itself – like capitalism – cannot be reformed away and that a consistent anti-parliamentary socialism from below is needed.

Will Brand make that step? Hard to tell but one thing is true, he won’t be encouraged to take it if he is attacked simply for his past and that he has not reached the position we would like him to.

In short, for anarchists Brand’s book will not be that enlightening. While some chuckles will be produced, he is not saying anything we don’t already know while wrapping it around a core of mysticism and religion. For non-anarchists, his book does raise the idea of ending capitalism with co-operatives, direct action, decentralisation, building the new world today and the need and possibility of real change. That a relatively well-known figure is raising these ideas means more people will become aware of them and that can only be a good thing.

Of course, this may all be a passing phase. Little Steven of the E Street Band got political and produced a series of increasingly radical albums in between 1984 and 1989 (“Voice of America”, “Freedom – No Compromise” and “Revolution”) before stopping and doing some acting along with continuing to back Bruce Springsteen. Still, his songs are still there and may inspire others to find out more. Will the same happen to Brand? Who knows but it would be crazy to force him to abandon a promising path due to personal