

Revolution: The witch-hunting of Russell Brand continues

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There are few public figures in Britain who have been subjected to such a torrent of abusive comment by media pundits as Russell Brand.

Camilla Long, in Rupert Murdoch's *Sunday Times*, was one of a list of right-wing and pseudo-liberal commentators who utilised the launch of Brand's new book, *Revolution* [London: Century, 2014], to denounce the comedian and actor for raising the fact that there is no one worth voting for in a political set-up dominated by big business and for urging that there should be a "revolution" to change the world.

Long ridicules Brand for his "mincing tintinnabulations [!], his squawking convulsions, his constant garbling of words," for being "the herpes of geopolitical debate" and "mediocre, hypocritical, dancing, prancing and arrogant."

The basis of her outrage is made clear when she complains of Brand's "reductive child's 'them' and 'us' narrative". By this, she means the numerous occasions where he has railed against grotesque levels of social inequality and corruption to make his case for a revolution that cannot be accomplished through existing political mechanisms.

This is Brand's crime of crimes in the eyes of every one of his accusers. A few celebrities have been roped in to hopefully counter Brand's charismatic appeal. Richard Bacon, advertising his own programme about wealth inequality, insists that Brand telling people not to vote is "very unhelpful". His own criticism of "wealth disparity" is "not a left-wing student tirade... We're not sitting around saying let's put a great big tax on wealthy people, We're not communists. It's not something crazy."

Heydon Prowse, star of the satirical TV show "The Revolution will be televised," makes clear in the *Guardian* that he does not, in fact, want a revolution to take place. Vote for the Green Party is his message: "Don't abandon democracy, hijack it."

John Lydon (Rotten) is solicited by the same newspaper to employ his shop-soiled credentials as a former Sex Pistol to describe Brand's call for revolution as "The most idiotic thing I've ever heard."

In every case these layers simply provide window dressing for the editorial message of the big business media.

Significantly the collected ranks of *Guardian* journalists are the only ones more incensed than the right wing over Brand. Polly Toynbee professes her agreement with Rotten on the fact that "Brand's 'revolution' is vain and destructive, peddling unreal, hip alternatives": Suzanne Moore decries the "winklepicked Jesus

Clown who preaches revolution"; Hadley Freeman urges, "Britain, don't put your faith in Russell Brand's revolution."

Anyone with a shred of political integrity or class consciousness understands that Brand must be defended against such loathsome, conformist bile, articulated by the smug, self-satisfied upper middle-class media servants of the ruling elite. Individually, they hate Brand because he has dared to challenge the status quo from which they benefit. And all references to Brand's wealth to demonstrate his supposed "hypocrisy"--coming from this quarter--are simply jealousy, combined with a real sense of shock and outrage that someone can so readily bite the hand that feeds them.

But there is a broader social and political impulse to the formation of such a chorus. Brand is attacked because his message, however confused, is closer to political reality and to the sentiments of broad layers of the young people who are his main audience, than the thousands of column inches produced by the innumerable media hacks assembled against him. It is not Brand who is the main target.

Of all the charges levelled against Brand, the one that stands out as most false is that of being a hypocrite. Nothing he has said or done in the recent period appears to be anything other than genuinely motivated. He is someone who came from a working class background, sought escape in drugs, then through fame and fortune; got it in spades and then, by his own admission, found it all somewhat hollow and unsatisfying. Perhaps because of his origins and his position as an outsider, even though at times having been reduced to being the modern-day equivalent of a court jester, his reaction has been to look again at the fate of those he left behind in his personal journey of social advancement.

"The Trews", his Internet comment show, often focuses on highlighting social inequality, political corruption, corporate greed and opposing anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim sentiment. He has made a point of using his celebrity status to, in his own words, "magnify" the message of, among others, opponents of Israel's assault on Gaza, the victims of social cleansing in London and striking firefighters.

For these reasons, the discussions that have taken place in Britain's editorial offices are not hard to imagine. "Brand is an idiot, but his statements are being applauded": "Millions watched his *Newsnight* interviews. The most viewed episode of his 'The Trews'—on Israel and Palestine—was watched so far by three million people;" "He must be made to be a laughing stock,

silenced, traduced.”

Unfortunately, Brand is not in a position to match his sympathy for the working class and oppressed layers with anything approaching a perspective through which to oppose the corporate elite and the economic system he now finds to be repugnant.

His *Revolution*, because it seeks earnestly to explain what he means by the term, is in many ways far weaker and more problematic than his generally engaging encounters with the reptile-like figures that people *Fox News* in the US or with Evan Davis and his egotistical right-wing forerunner, Jeremy Paxman, on Britain's *Newsnight*. The focus of *Revolution* is far less upon the type of critical commentary of contemporary capitalism that has endeared him to many, especially the young, than it is on his railing against “materialism” and insistence on the need to get in touch with God and the divine through an embrace of religious teaching in any of its myriad forms.

Religion is counterposed to the supposedly blinkered view of science that is based upon our “five imperfect senses” and cannot ever know the infinite complexity of the “spiritual” world.

At various points, and more recently on “The Trews”, Brand explicitly rejects Marxism and revolutionary socialism in favour of a necessary peaceful “revolution” that begins with altering the individual psyche by attuning oneself to the divine in us all. To cite some of the more egregious comments he has made, he writes, “My mate Adam Curtis, the documentary filmmaker who I’ve gone on about a bit because of his amazing films and clever, sweet personality, told me this, ‘The problem with Marxism is that it placed economics at the heart of socialism’... What it means is, I reckon, that every subsequent political ideology, especially successful ones, like capitalism, have similarly placed economics at the centre of their philosophy. The economy is just a metaphorical device it’s not real, that’s why it’s got the word ‘con’ in the middle” (p. 242).

Later he asserts, after praising the Spanish Revolution after a reading of George Orwell's *Homage to Catalonia*, “A lot of other political struggles and social uprisings labelled ‘revolutions’ are in my mind unworthy of the term, in that they are simply a hegemonic exchange. Whether it’s the Russian Revolution, that led to Stalinism, or the American Revolution, that led to corporate oligarchy.”

Or, as he said, on a recent edition of “The Trews,” dedicated to a defence of religion and yet another of his sporadic attacks on evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins, “I don’t think we can do it with old leftist ideas or old revolutionary notions because I don’t think they work anymore.”

If one were to approach such statements solely from Brand's personal history, it is clear that his embrace of spiritualism is bound up with its role in freeing him from his own private hell as an addict. Even the conclusion of his book is an attempt to advance the 12 Traditions of Alcoholics Anonymous, especially its focus on altruism, as the basis for a reorganisation of society. But Brand's views are not simply his own. They have been shaped by others.

Searching for an alternative to the present social order, he has plunged, entirely uncritically, into the fetid swamp of petty bourgeois radicalism—including a veritable who's who of the

purveyors of religious flummery. Just as centrally, Brand has sought political enlightenment from every Green, anarchist, libertarian and neo-Keynesian pundit imaginable—all of whom offer up social and economic nostrums that are not levelled against capitalism, but at the supposed evils of a system that does not take “sustainability” and “localised production” as its premise.

Brand has been clutched to the collective bosom of what is in fact a privileged upper middle class layer—not so very far removed from the social group he now seeks to break from. And it is they who are responsible for his political miseducation. He condemns the American Revolution as essentially a waste of time because this is de rigueur among these layers. He pronounces on Marxism and on the Russian Revolution without once having been introduced by anyone to the writings of Marx, Lenin or, most importantly, those of Leon Trotsky.

At one time, this would have been almost inconceivable. No one but an out-and-out political reactionary would have felt it possible to dismiss such world-historic events with a verbal flourish. But today's not-so-leftist circles, wedded as they are to a capitalist system that ensures that they are comfortably well off, are more than ready to rail against the supposed futility of the October Revolution without feeling compelled to engage with the titanic figure of Trotsky and his struggle against Stalinism. This leaves them free to focus on the lifestyle issues that really concern them and to advocate measures that involve only a transfer of some of the wealth of the top 1 percent into their own bank accounts. This is the reason why Brand is more familiar with Fidel Castro and Che Guevara as his models of failed “leftist ideals” and “revolutionary notions” than he is with Lenin or Trotsky.

If we were to offer Brand himself any advice, it would be this: Given that you take pride in questioning everything, then question the alternatives that are being set before you. Before accepting those who so casually dismiss socialism, carry out some independent study, including such works as Trotsky's *My Life*, *The History of the Russian Revolution* and *The Revolution Betrayed*, beginning—I would strongly suggest—with a careful study of David North's *The Russian Revolution and the Unfinished Twentieth Century*.

Anyone seeking a way forward today must address the fundamental question posed in that politically unfinished century, “Was there an alternative to Stalinism?” An answer can only be provided by a familiarity with the historic struggle to defend socialist internationalism waged by Trotsky.

Whether Brand chooses to do so, or continues along the intellectual dead end path he is presently traveling, is a matter of conjecture. What is certain is that many of those who have embraced him for his critical stand will not be satisfied with the confused economic nostrums and religiosity presented in his *Revolution*—and will seek a more substantial answer to the crisis facing humanity.



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