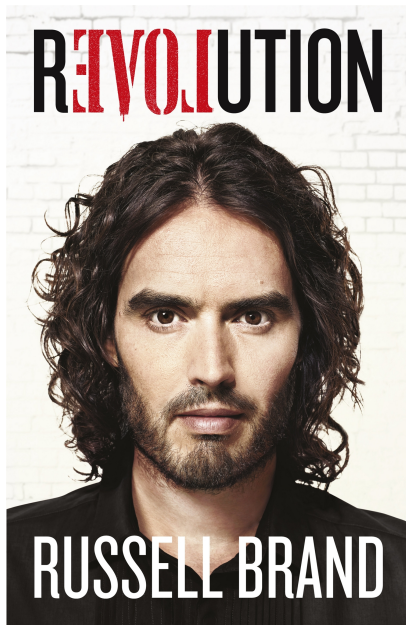


Review: Russell Brand, *Revolution*

Freddie Trevaskis Hoskin



Russell Brand, *Revolution* 2014 Century £20.00

Brand's new book 'Revolution' is an eclectic read. Lying somewhere between political theory, comedy and inane/insane ramblings it certainly sets itself aside from any other book on the subject. This style of writing, however, has its value, Brand jumps between the power of labour, commodity fetishism, the scapegoating of minorities and capitalism's link to climate change without making the ideas seem daunting or overly complex. His ramblings and anecdotes act almost like breathing room between the ideas giving the reader who may be new to such things some time to think about them without scaring them off or patronising them. However his ideas are not without their problems, once you begin to examine Brand's brand of anarcho-syndicalism problems begin to crop up quite rapidly. Other less political ideas in the book which he seems to insist

on linking inexorably to politics are even more blatantly problematic. However let us first look at what Brand is doing quite well in his new endeavour.

The Good

The fact that Brand is a comedian lends itself well to his general project of making ideas accessible to ordinary people. He takes the common sense horrors of capitalism which ought to depress and demotivate and spins them into a lyrical and obvious critique of capitalism which is both convincing and pleasant to read. Near the very beginning of the the book he points out that 'A bus with the eighty-five richest people in the world on it would contain more wealth than the collective assets of half the earth's population'¹ He proceeds to ridicule this state of affairs throughout the book using phrases such as 'Diamond encrusted fun bus' and manages to make fun of the situation without making light of it, which results in a simultaneously jovial and convincing argument for revolution.

It is important to note also that Brand shows some understanding of the importance of the power of labour to the project of revolution. Throughout the book he discusses the importance of workers' co-operatives and the ability of the local community to decide upon their economic output and consumption on a democratic basis. Towards the end of the book he goes as far as to say workers ought to take control of the large corporations which exploit them and their labour. As he puts it 'The system that exploits us cannot function without us, without our labour'²

¹Brand, R. (2014) *Revolution* P.13

²*ibid* P.79

He even decides to implement this on a practical level and has dedicated the profits from the book itself to set up a workers co-op in which recovered addicts can democratically organise their own labour. Along with this he critiques commodity fetishism and tries to point out how we are all constantly indoctrinated into the capitalist system with promises of fulfilment from the things which buy. He points out that ‘ We know, don’t we.. that they cannot, will not, shall not give us relief or sanctuary or love’³.

One of the points which Brand returns to over and over again is capitalism’s inevitable link to climate change. He begins this idea pointing out that apples which are grown in England are often shipped to South Africa in order to be polished or waxed and then shipped back to England for sale. He continually makes reference to the fact that we are now faced with a choice between capitalism and the planet which we call home, and points out that to 99 percent of people the answer is obviously the latter . From his points about localised democracy and capitalism’s links to climate change Brand focuses largely on localised organic co-operative farming as a method of controlling our economy with the benefit of not destroying the environment.

Brand also makes a point of rallying against the scapegoating of minorities and seems to be particularly affected by the election of Ukup in the town he grew up in. He makes the point that racism, homophobia and discrimination in general is a divide and conquer tactic used by elites in order to split the unity of oppressed peoples ‘Every time anti-Islamic fervour is stirred our true exploiters rub their hands knowing their marauding can continue.’⁴

³*ibid* P.169

⁴*ibid* P.227

⁵*ibid* P.305

Finally back on the economic front Brand proposes the interesting idea of ‘Corporacide.’ The idea being that people should democratically decide if a corporation is stepping out of line and if so essentially impose the death penalty upon it, redistributing its wealth and infrastructure either to the workers themselves or to the local community. To illustrate this point he talks about how in their original form corporations were set up to perform a specific task such as building a bridge or repainting a shop and how they then lobbied to exist as permanent profit guzzling entities. To some degree Brand proposes a return to this system to limit the power of companies.

So Brand manages to cover a good bit of important political ground both in terms of economics and social justice issues and always does so in his approachable and comedic style.

The Bad

However once we even begin to apply a Marxist framework to Brand’s general theory problems become evident quite quickly. Most problematic is his ardent pacifism. Brand claims that ‘It doesn’t matter who is doing the violence or to what end. Violence is wrong...armed struggle is wrong’.⁵ Brand thinks this revolution can happen entirely peacefully, he supposes that if we take control of the factories, depose our leaders and try to organise the economy on our own basis that we won’t be met with vicious reactionary force? That the police and the army will just come over to our side if they think our arguments are correct or out of some fraternal feeling? He does say this, I am not creating a straw-man here. Brand states ‘ I

am fortunate in that I have a very positive feeling towards the police and army.⁶ and this is not a once off instance, throughout the book he offers the analysis that the police and army are just normal working class people who need some kind of employment and that they will side with us not the elite. There is of course a grain of truth here in that the police, and the army even more so, are made up of working class people who joined to make ends meet. He does not, however, bring into his account that these people are conditioned by their constant forced confrontation with working class people and by the hierarchical nature of these institutions which are directed from above on behalf of the ruling class. He completely leaves out police brutality on protests and the role of western armies in imperialism; he even brushes over his own frequent arrests portraying them as fraternal and pleasant. This is to say nothing of paid militias and interventionist forces which are too often the death knell of revolutions, imagine how one comprised entirely of pacifists would fare.

Brand's pacifism and his anarcho-syndicalism feed directly into one another. Because he is a pacifist he does not believe in any transitional form of government or state that would have the power of force. He uses the Cuban example to claim that this would always lead to that force being misused against minority groups and a reign of terror would ensue. Again he does not see the resistance that a popular revolution would be met with or understand that a genuine revolution must have the liberation of oppressed groups as an integral part of its mission. So for a Marxist of any ilk it seems that there are going to be some serious problems with Brand's polit-

ical ideology.

The Crazy

So far I have painted Brand as a relatively run of the mill anarcho-syndicalist with an innovative way of explaining his politics to others; this sadly is quite far from the truth. Russell Brand neatly fits the stereotype of reformed celebrity addict who has found God, indeed it is the second rule of the recovery group he attended 'There is but one ultimate authority – a loving God'⁷ Brand is absolutely gung ho about this idea. This in itself would not be a huge problem, it should not be frowned upon to believe in God or spirit or whatever you wish to call it. The problem, however, is that Brand insists throughout the entire book that a relationship with God is absolutely fundamental to revolution. 'Spirituality is not some florid garnish...but part of the double helix DNA of revolution'⁸ This seems to be a direct reference to Marx's claim about religion being the flowers on the chains. It is important to note at this stage that Brand's conception of God is not in any way a western one. It seems to be derived from far more eastern traditions mixed with Alcoholics Anonymous and the strange liberal pyramid scheme which is Transcendental Meditation. So that God becomes the awareness within and the transcendence of self hood rather than some benevolent dictator. Brand seems to latch onto Radhanath Swami's idea that 'All desire is the inappropriate substitute for the desire to be at one with God'⁹ All desire? What of the desire for justice, equality, the desire for a better fairer, ecologically sound world? Ought we to just hope that capitalists and

⁶ *ibid* P.99

⁷ *ibid* P.328

⁸ *ibid* P.259

⁹ *ibid* P.170

tyrants too take heed and give up on their desire for profits? This idea which runs through the book seems almost belittling of people's situations; those people who truly need a revolution are going to desire things because they don't have the things they need to live. On a more basic level Brand proposes that getting beyond the level of self to a communal spiritual reality which seems to be defined on his terms is the only way to achieve that fraternal mindset necessary to revolution. This is problematic in two ways. Firstly the idea that to have a communal society of all creeds we must all adhere to one specific spirituality or any spirituality at all is just blatantly counter-intuitive. Certainly we need to overcome our differences and work together but we need not negate them in order to become a single cosmic entity, this to say the least would be impractical. The other problem here is that Brand leaves the project of revolution to each individual as their personal responsibility to better themselves. He seems to think that a communal revolution is impossible until each individual involved puts themselves through the same spiritual revolution which he has had. Using a prescriptive and individualistic spiritual as the means to achieving a collective revolution seems to go entirely against working together in spite of our differences which of course is a fundamental part of collective revolution. Indeed it is a problem which we have seen before, this prioritising of the spiritual over the material leads Brand to

Nietschean pronouncements such as 'Our current system is the physical manifestation of will'¹⁰ This is, of course, directly opposed to the Marxist concept of our system arising out of material conditions and thus being controlled by material conditions.

Brand's spirituality would of course matter less if he simply practised it himself and did not insist so ardently on it being a fundamental part of his version of communal politics.

Conclusion

So what are we to make of Brand's book overall? I feel it would be wrong to dismiss it outright. Despite its problems it still serves an important function, it presents collectivist and revolutionary ideas in a funny, easy to read and quite convincing manner. It may certainly serve as a good introduction to revolutionary politics particularly to those who are themselves interested in or practising eastern forms of spirituality as this aspect may put off readers who may be more atheistic or traditionally western in their views. It seems to me quite important, thus I have written mainly on it, to keep in mind the political pitfalls of Brand's theory. Not because he is a significant political theorist but because many young people who may follow him and his works will have only this book as their basis for revolutionary politics and we must be able to engage with them on both the positive and negative aspects of his ideas.

¹⁰ *ibid* P.196