

Russell Brand, Lady T, Pisher Bob and Preacher John

Raymond Geuss

Russell Brand's new book *Revolution** is an impressive contribution to political philosophy, a field which during the past thirty years or so has not been overly populated with interesting work. Brand's argument can be summarized in ten steps:

- 1 Our lives are to a large extent given structure by a set of economic practices and institutions which have enough determinacy to be singled out as an object of systematic study. Call these collectively 'C'.
- 2 The operation of C has brought about a state of affairs in which the richest 85 persons (of a world population of over 3 billion) control more economic assets than the poorest 1.5 billion (13).
- 3 The continued normal operation of C will in a very short time render the earth completely uninhabitable for humans (14–17, 86ff., 316).
- 4 Therefore (by 2 and 3) C must be radically changed, i.e. 'revolution' is necessary (e.g. 97); we have no choice (250).
- 5 If 4 is impossible, then excessive drug use is as understandable a way to live one's life as many others (9, 10, 34) – and the same is true of 'apolitical' rioting (88).
- 6 'Drug use' in 5 above includes both the ingestion of chemical substances and such things as consumerism (7–9), celebrity-obsession, sports (39–43, 96–7), or religious beliefs and rituals (45–60).
- 7 Brand has tried most of the drugs and can reliably report that consumerism (29) and celebrity-obsession (51, 113) are not satisfying even in the short term to persons of relatively undemanding and indiscriminate taste, and that, notwithstanding 5 above, ingestion of chemical substances is fraught with its own dangers and has highly unpleasant associated effects (35, 51).
- 8 What are left as possible ways of structuring a meaningful life are revolution, certain forms of collective experience (like that of the ardent sports fan at a football match), and religion.
- 9 The revolutionary abolition of C is not only compatible with but is a necessary precondition of a full revival of the spiritual dimension of human life; this dimension is so important that the need to reconstitute it is a third powerful reason (170–80), in addition to 2 and 3 above, to abolish C. In addition, *some* form of at least incipient spiritual renewal must also be an integral part of the process of revolutionary change (259–60).
- 10 Serious further philosophical discussion, to which Brand's book is a kind of prolegomenon, should *begin* from 8, and go on to discuss the three modes of meaningful life, and their relations to each other, and to other features of our human and natural world.

What might a philosopher say about the argument of *Revolution*, as outlined above? Let me introduce three interlocutors, whom I shall call 'Lady T', 'Pisher¹ Bob' and 'Preacher John'.

* Russell Brand, *Revolution*, Century, London, 2014; page references appear in brackets in the main text.

Lady T

Lady T would, I think, fully admit that 3, if true, is of great importance, but, since she would hate to have to confront the implications of this, she would have to deny that it was true. She might try to do this by denying straightforwardly the seriousness of the degradation of our environment, or she might appeal to the species of hope that is actively cultivated in our society by claiming that further technical and scientific advances will in ways now unimaginable provide a solution to these problems within the framework of C. Or finally she might try to deny that C was in any way causally responsible for them. Having disposed of 3 to her own satisfaction, Lady T would be able to consider 2. Here, she could embrace the empirical finding wholeheartedly, but instead of seeing 2 as in any sense something that ought to give us pause, she would encourage us to 'glory in it'. Think of it this way: I don't 'find' 'value', certainly not 'a valuable life' or 'value in my life', in the way I might discover gold or oil, or even something like a cure for a certain kind of viral infection. Value is not found; it is created. My life is valuable if I can make it valuable, and I do that by, as we say, 'making something' of myself. This, Lady T might argue, is mostly a matter of self-discipline, focus of will, and determination; exercise of will is meritorious. This, of course, in itself will not give one reason to value inequality positively because perhaps we are *all* gifted, disciplined, meritorious agents, collectively engaged in creating ourselves.

So where does the positive valuation of inequality per se, or of economic inequality (to the exclusion of virtually everything else), come from? Why should there be something good, or even especially good, about comparative, or even specifically competitive, achievement? There are two kinds of reason one can give for this emphasis on differential rewards and unequal valuation. The first is that this is part of a morally individualist view. Value must always be that of individuals. One could in principle ask why one should make this assumption, but since everyone in this discussion does make it and a proper discussion would be a very lengthy matter, I will for the sake of discussion pass over this question in silence for the moment. Individuals are the ones who experience value and they must be the final valued objects. 'Value' must be ultimately connected with giving me an enhanced sense of myself *as opposed* to others. Collective achievement must be denigrated, because it dilutes this sense of individual accomplishment. I want merely to point out how genuinely weird this view is if you think about it in a sustained way. The solo playing of a pianist is more valuable than a string quartet; the achievement of an individual sprinter more valuable than that of a football team.

The second kind of reason would be to think that differential 'rewards' were not just good in themselves – they mapped individual merit attained through achievement – but they had good effects for everyone, for 'society'. But who could actually believe that everyone in the USA (or even the world) was better off because the half a dozen heirs to the Walmart fortune owned more than the poorest 30 per cent of the inhabitants of the USA (13–14)? The claim is so palpably false that to preserve any plausibility at all it is necessary to shift ground completely and move from the realm of actual outcomes to that of motivation or what is sometimes called 'incentives'. The argument would be that this concentration of wealth and economic control doesn't actually improve the life of the large majority of the population, but that it is important to defend the possibility of accumulating so much wealth and power because the continued existence of this possibility has overall positive motivational effects on the members of the society of which they are a part.

Where there are 'incentives', however, these derive their specific shape and power from social pressure and are not necessarily the direct results of any inherent, acontextual tendency to admire this particular kind of person, life or form of

achievement. The particular configuration of motives and incentives which is said to be most dominant in our society is, first of all, not nearly as universally shared here as 'common sense' would have us believe, and second, to the extent that it is present, it is produced at least in large part by C itself and hence is part of C. It does not give one any kind of independent standpoint to evaluate C. Note that saying this incentive structure is 'in part' produced by our society need not imply that it is implanted on passive subjects from the outside. Any reasonable social formation will take material which is in some sense pre-existent – highly malleable drives, impulses, fancies (32–3, 54–5) – and form them into something socially specific and concrete.

Although Lady T was not terribly keen on the very idea of 'society', probably not even she could, with any consistency, deny the importance of the question of the possible effect on society of great economic inequality. She would presumably think that *on the whole* the effect is positive. Still, *someone* has to have lost the race, even if only a small group of what François Hollande calls *les sans-dents*.² It is in principle possible, like Friedrich Hayek, to take a radically non-moralizing view about the economy, but this is difficult for a politician really to maintain and there can be little doubt but that Lady T's attitude did take a deeply moralizing turn. Not only *should* people be inspired, rather than being left cold or even revolted by the Walmart example, but it is always up to them to work hard, because social circumstances play no role in endowing them with this ability or allowing them to cultivate it. In other words, this is a matter of their 'individual responsibility' and hard work will always be (more or less) appropriately rewarded, because a society structured around C rewards people (more or less) according to their real worth. So, if you look at the Walmart example and fail to be inspired, you are obtuse or perverse and 'deserve' what you get.

Pisher Bob

Compared with the refreshingly robust and engaged, albeit callous, ignorant and vindictive, approach of Lady T, both Pisher Bob and Preacher John cut very poor figures indeed. They have in common that they would reject most of Brand's argument not as false, but as irrelevant; for them he is addressing completely the wrong question. Political philosophy for Pisher Bob and Preacher John has a clear central focus: distributional justice. 'Justice' is the basic virtue of a society, so that is what a proper philosopher must focus on. Brand, however, has nothing to say about 'justice'. Indeed, *Revolution* does not even contain the term.

Still, it could be claimed by Pisher Bob or Preacher John that he clearly appeals to the concept, because the only way in which 2 could in fact be a relevant contribution to discussion would be if one assumed that it was supposed to have an addendum of the following kind:

2* The operation of C has brought about a state of affairs in which the richest 85 persons (of a world population of over 3 billion) control more economic assets than the poorest billion and a half *and this is unjust*.

Although Brand doesn't say this, he '*must*' (actually) mean it, Pisher Bob or Preacher John might argue, because he is obviously citing this as a reason for distancing oneself from C. But if he did not think it 'unjust', what he says would hang free, utterly unconnected to our structures of argumentation, motivation and the justification for action. Nonetheless, there are good reasons to think that this philosophical use of 'must' is highly suspicious – you *must* use the concept we prefer, or you *must* tell us why not – and that the claim as a whole thus seems implausible. Still, for the moment let us suspend disbelief and follow where Pisher and Preacher John would wish to lead us.

Pisher points out that in a complex society there is a constant recirculation of goods, assets and resources, so that if one ever once attained perfect equality, that



point would be perpetually lost, or at any rate threatened, by various free transactions between the members (voluntary gifts, temporary loans or pooling of resources). Either one would have to ban such transactions altogether on the grounds that they disturbed equality, or one would need to have an all-powerful, but also utterly unwieldy, centralized apparatus of redistribution of resources and assets which would be operating constantly. This would have manifold inconveniences, and, if you thought about it hard, might even be thought to constitute some kind of logical refutation of absolute egalitarianism about resources. Resources, it might be argued, are inherently things to be used, but things that were *continually* being redistributed would never actually be used.

This is a good argument against Brand, however, only if one makes two further assumptions. First, that Brand accepts Pisher's and Preacher John's addendum to his 2 – that the state of the world in which 85 people own more than the poorest half of the world population is unjust – *and*, second, that this state of affairs is 'unjust' *because* it violates absolute equality. There is, however, no reason to make either of these assumptions. Brand might think that equality was neither here nor there, but that having 85 people control all these resources was imprudent, ruinous, dysfunctional, visibly deleterious to the well-being of humans and of the natural environment, contrary to Christ's commandments (66–9), a contribution to human alienation (167–9, 242), an affront to decency, contrary to what most humans would want (154), and so forth. Are none of these in any sense relevant considerations? In short, there may be any number of possible ways in which 2 might be connected with guiding rational action.

Indeed, for that matter, why couldn't Brand just appeal to an 'intuition'? Pisher certainly appeals to an 'intuition' when he says that I can acquire 'ownership rights' over objects, places, even some sentient beings (horses, cows) by satisfying various conditions, and that if I have satisfied those conditions I can use or abuse these objects as I see fit and you can do nothing about it (without violating my rights). These 'rights' are also called 'entitlements'. This is rather complex for an 'intuition', because an 'intuition' was supposed to be a punchy immediate emotional and normative reaction. Pisher's little trick is to insist that all genuinely philosophical questions have

to be couched in terms of 'entitlements'. So, Pisher might continue, to cite 2 does not begin to constitute part of a philosophical discussion until one specifies what kinds of 'entitlements' the 85 people mentioned in 2 have to the assets they control. This ownership distribution is 'just' if, but only if, one can trace their entitlements back through a series of voluntary and legitimate transfers to an initial act of legitimate acquisition. Taking this seriously means that virtually no one now has any legitimate title to anything, because historically the chain of legitimate voluntary transferences is bound to have been broken at some point, and so almost all ownership fails to be just. One might reasonably think, then, that this is a *reductio ad absurdum* of the initial set of assumptions about rights, ownership and entitlements, and thus that this particular set of conceptions is useless for any significant political purpose. Pisher's 'entitlements' are as 'self-contradictory' as his argument showed the concept of 'resources in a society devoted to absolute equality' was. It is Pisher who is asking completely the wrong questions.

Preacher John

Preacher John, too, thinks that 2 is underspecified. His pet view is that in order for 2 to be politically informative and significant, we need to know not about the historically accumulated entitlements the 85 people actually have, but whether, if there had been other economic arrangements in place, the welfare of the worst off would have been enhanced. Furthermore, Preacher John holds, roughly, that in thinking about politics, ignorance is bliss. The right way of thinking about politics, in his view, is to get a really profound insight into the most important issue (in his view 'justice'), which is to imagine a situation in which a large swathe of our knowledge is blotted out as irrelevant. Only if we imagine what we would think under conditions of controlled but extensive ignorance will we get genuinely valuable insight into politics. Preacher John has no account of how we might non-arbitrarily control the appropriate 'ignorance' in question.

Brand represents the opposite trajectory: advocacy of increasing awareness of and sensitivity to oneself and one's environment (40, 254–9). There are dangers associated with this: if you live in a society like ours, it is easy to find one's surroundings objectively intolerable and to try to deal with the pain of this by escape into the world of intoxicating or narcotizing chemical substances, which (as we have seen above in 7) is a self-destructive cul-de-sac. Equally, one might reasonably wonder about the exact meaning of 'revolution' for Brand. Revolutions come in different forms: popular riot, *coup d'état*, saturnalia, abolition of debt (92–8). There is, too, in Marx, that metaphor of revolution as a process in which a 'new society' which is already present and growing within the current state emerges fully. It is like a fruit or embryo surrounded by a membrane, shell or chrysalis. When the time is ripe, the shell pops open to reveal the new form within. This society waiting to emerge is being held back by some obstruction. Revolution, for Brand, then, can be like a removal of obstructions.³ We don't have to construct a whole new society *from nothing*. We already have the infrastructure: state schools, an NHS, functioning harbours, a system of rail tracks; we don't have to create a completely new alternative kind of rail transport. So it is not a huge task to abolish C; all the structures that would be needed for a proper and decent human life without it are *already there in place*. All we need to do is get rid of the shell, the formal set of entitlements and structures which siphon off benefits to the very rich.

However, even if the new social structures are in some sense already there under the membrane, it does not follow that some pushing or cutting might not be required to allow them fully to emerge. On the question of violence, Brand seems to have the greatest admiration for, and feel the greatest affinity to, the views of Gandhi and

certain anarchists, including David Graeber and Chomsky (91, 271, 322). All political movements, Brand holds, must begin as they intend to go on; the process of acting must prefigure the outcome. If the goal really is a society without organized violence, this must be mirrored in a non-violent approach: ‘violence as a means [to a more humane society] is always unsuccessful’ (90).

Yet this is not the end of the story, because Brand also wishes to make three further points. First the issue of violence/non-violence is of subordinate importance compared with the overwhelming necessity (in view of 3) of getting rid of C. Some might think that this is in a certain tension with the Gandhian claims above, but there is nothing inconsistent about holding that non-violence is always better than violence, but that, if C really is ruining the earth as a possible human habitation, the goal of preserving the viability of our planet should reasonably take priority over the avoidance of violence. Second, one must also recognize different kinds of violence. Organized, systemic forms of violence – armies shooting phosphorus shells that have been produced with great care at refugees – should be distinguished from spontaneous, momentary reactions of outrage. Third, as has been repeated continually since Sartre wrote his preface to Fanon’s *Les damnés de la terre* in 1965, the only reasonable way of judging the violence associated with the abolition of C is not absolutely or in isolation, but in the context of – that is, in comparison with – the violence that is needed to maintain C, much of which is indirect and hard to see or intentionally hidden from us, and much of which we have become so used to that we no longer register it. This does not mean that it is a foregone conclusion that every act of violence which *actually* leads to the abolition of C is ‘justified’ – what exactly is ‘justified’ supposed to mean here? – and it certainly does not mean that every act of violence that an agent *claims* will advance the abolition of C is ‘justified’, but it does mean that when discussing violence one can’t, as it were, reckon up with exactitude every rock thrown through the window of a bank, while *failing* to note at all every act of violence or destruction that is a systemic result of the normal operations of the banking system. This does not in itself settle the question of violence, but does set out the terms on which it ought to be discussed.

In contrast to most books about political philosophy, Brand’s actually engages with facts that we can recognize as part of our everyday lives and has a remarkable number of concrete political suggestions, such as dismantling any corporation with a revenue larger than the GNP of the smallest state in the world (81), limiting the lifespans of corporation (225–39), re-localizing food production (86), prohibiting private security arrangements (113–16), cancelling private debt (92–7, 171–3), creating co-ops (240–50), decriminalizing drug-use, and so on. I confess that I hadn’t really registered Brand’s existence until his book came out, but when I read it I was surprised to find it an absolute treasure trove of keen observations. So, let me end with one of these:

We know ... that the dismantling and privatisation of the NHS is not for the benefit of us, the people who use it. It benefits the government that proposed it and the companies that are purchasing it. Nobody voted for it because nobody would be stupid enough to give us the option. (124)

Notes

I am particularly indebted to Dr Lorna Finlayson, who gave me the original idea to write this article.

1. *Pisher*: Annoying young fellow, irritating person (Yiddish).
2. See Valérie Trierweiler, *Merci pour ce moment*, Les Arènes, Paris, 2014.
3. Brand’s interpretation of Ganesh (53) needs, however, to be slightly revised: it is surely just as important to remove external obstacles as it is to remove internal ones. Perhaps he did not mean to deny this.