

Russell Brand, Taking No Chances: The Empire Strikes Back With the BBC

A Revolution Led by Russell Brand?

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Global Research, October 31, 2013

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“Russell Brand, who are you to edit a political magazine?” asks BBC (British Broadcasting Corp.) interviewer Jeremy Paxman with all the arrogant irrelevance required of an establishment shill at the beginning of [an eleven-minute](#) interview on the BBC’s October 23 edition of Newsnight. Posted on the BBC Newsnight channel on Youtube, the interview had almost 6 million views in its first three days

Disappointingly, Brand does not immediately respond to the insult with something like, “Well who are *you* to decide who does or doesn’t get to edit anything in a country that more or less claims to have a free press?”

This segment of Newsnight isn’t exactly for serious news. It’s also a promotional appearance by Brand, whose primary work is as a comedian and actor, currently on a world tour of his stand-up show, Messiah Complex. It opened in June, but doesn’t get even a mention in the interview. Brand is on the program now because one of Britain’s more successful political magazines, New Statesman, has just published its October 24 issue for which Brand served as guest editor, organizing the content around the present need for global revolution. He explained his appearance in New Statesman in a [4,500-word editorial](#) that began:

“When I was asked to edit an issue of the New Statesman I said yes because it was a beautiful woman asking me. I chose the subject of revolution because the New Statesman is a political magazine and imagining the overthrow of the current political system is the only way I can be enthused about politics.”

So when the over-dressed, neatly bearded Paxman challenges the under-dressed, shaggy Brand about his “credentials,” Paxman is both quietly bullying, and is committing a basic logical fallacy: basing his argument on authority, rather than facts. Instead of pointing this out, Brand answers with a variation on the opening paragraph of his editorial, with an added joke about being “a person of crazy hair, quite a good sense of humor, don’t know much about politics – I’m ideal!”

“But is it true you don’t even vote?” Paxman immediately asks next, already knowing the answer. Brand confirms this, he’s never voted. Then, not even thirty seconds into the interview, Paxman seems to go gently for the jugular: “Well, how do you have any authority to talk about politics then?”

Can we then assume that, if you don't vote, you don't really exist?

Brand takes the bait without missing a beat. He doesn't challenge the presumptuous premise of the question – that you have to participate in a system in order to earn the right to criticize that system (a standard by which there was no authority for the Cold War). But Brand takes the question at face value and offers a perfectly coherent, brief answer about deriving his authority from looking for alternatives “that might be of service to humanity – alternate means, alternate political systems.”

Still on the attack, the BBC interviewer presses the comic for a blueprint of his alternate systems, but this time Brand ridicules the ridiculous question. He points out some of the worst abuses by the current system, noting that the world would be improved merely by stopping these abuses (such as destroying the planet, creating massive economic disparity, or ignoring the needs of the people) – “the burden of proof is on the people with the power.”

Paxman pounces on the mention of power and tries to argue that people “get power by being voted in.... in a democracy, that's how it works.” This is just another paraphrase of the traditional establishment defense, that you have to be part of the system if you want to change the system. It's so patently false, it's hard to imagine Paxman actually believes it. But it's an argument he's tacitly expected to make as part of his job.

But Paxman has a reputation for being good at his job. Business Insider calls him “Britain's toughest journalist,” adding that he's “a journalist known for his incredibly combative style of interviewing (he once asked a [government minister the same question 12 times in succession](#)).”

So Paxman presses on with the same rutted irrelevance, in an ad hominem form: “If you can't be asked to vote, why should we be asked to listen to your political point of view.” When Brand bats that away with more sharp criticism of the system, Paxman tries a guilt inflection, asking Brand, “Well why don't you change it then?”

Challenging the powerless to change things is what the powerful do

When Paxman learns that Brand has never voted, he tries to make the issue completely personal, saying to Brand: “so you struck an attitude, what, before the age of eighteen.” This is tantamount to calling Brand's politics nothing more than an adolescent pose, rhetoric without substance. Just over two minutes into the exchange, Paxman seems to be on top when Brand says:

“Well, I'd really been a drug addict at that point, because I come from the kind of social conditions that are exacerbated by an indifferent system that really just administrates for large corporations and ignores the population that –”

Paxman interrupts with a desperate ploy: “You're blaming the political class for the fact that you had a drug problem?” But Brand keeps on with an articulate critique of the present moment that reduces Paxman to accusing Brand of not believing in democracy and wanting a revolution. Something is happening here, and he doesn't seem to know what it is.

Now, in response to Brand's articulate litany, Paxman goes in a completely different direction: “All of those things may be true –” They are true!” says Brand. “I wouldn't argue with you about many of them,” Paxman responds, at which point the interview appears to

be edited and what follows is some nonsense about Paxman's beard.

Paxman shifts back to the inquiry mode, asking Brand for details again about what he means by revolution and what are the specifics of the new system he wants, but his tone now is less confrontational. Even so, when Brand says voting makes no difference, Paxman responds, "It does make a difference," without offering any evidence that it does. And he's already agreed with Brand that in many important ways, voting hasn't made a difference.

After six minutes, Paxman seems more hesitant, the exchange becomes more of a conversation. Having conceded most of the problems facing the world, Paxman tries yet another tack in defense of the powerful: "It's possible that human beings are just overwhelmed by the scale of the problem."

That seems desperate and improbable, since he's defending people who, rather than appearing overwhelmed, are actively making the problems worse. When Brand lucidly says as much, Paxson, without looking Brand in the eye, says, "You don't really believe that." But he's quiet almost to the point of inarticulateness at this point and offers no rebuttal. Brand by now is energized and needs no questions to continue his hyperactive analysis than ends with, "why pretend, why be complicit in this ridiculous illusion?"

Lacking a relevant response, he tries irrelevance, and then silence

Paxman, defender of the status quo, answers only: "Because by the time somebody comes along that you might think it worth voting for, it may be too late." In other words, Paxman is suggesting, your analysis of the crisis is essentially correct, but the only way to fix it is to work within the system. At this point, after almost nine minutes, Paxman even looks as hopeless as he sounds, and Brand spins on.

After another minute of saying nothing, Paxman asks quietly, "Do you see any hope?"

"Yes, totally, there's going to be revolution, it's totally going to happen," Brand snaps back. And then he gets personal with Paxman in a startling way. Brand says:

"I remember seeing you on that program where you look at your ancestors and you saw that your grandmother had to brass herself or else get f**ked over by the aristocrats that ran her gaff and you cried - because you knew that it was unfair, and unjust. And that, what was that, a century ago?"

"That's happening to people now. I've just come from a woman who's being treated like that, I've just been talking to a woman, today, who's being treated like that. So if we can engage that feeling, instead of some lachrymose sentimentality trotted out on TV for people to pore over, emotional porn - if we can engage that feeling and change things, why wouldn't we? Why is that naive? Why is that not my right because I'm an 'actor'? I've taken the right. I don't need the right from you. I don't need the right from anybody. I'm taking it."

The segment ends and Paxman hasn't said another word.

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