

When will the anger spill over?

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Paul Mason has written an insightful piece for Channel 4 and the New Statesman in which he does two things. First he more than justifies his moving on from Newsnight. Secondly, he reviews the furore over Russell Brand's interview with Paxman last week. [The analysis makes this whole article well worth reading.](#)

In the article he makes clear there is an inter-generational divide, pivoting around the age of 40 or so. As he says:

In Jeremy's [older] world, all legitimacy comes from the parliamentary process and the monarchy. In Russell's, things are different. In Russell's world, people are so fed up with capitalism that there is a high likelihood of revolution. When he made this point, Jeremy's eyebrow went crazy.

I'm very clearly partly in Jeremy's world by this definition: my faith in democracy is not without limit, but considerable despite its manifest failings. And then there is Russell's world:

Russell stands up in front of thousands of young people who've paid a serious dollop of their wages to hear him make them laugh. Though he looks like a survivor from Altamont, his audience does not. They are young, professional people: nurses, bank clerks, call-centre operatives. And what Russell has picked up is that they hate, if not the concept of capitalism, then what it's doing to them. They hate the corruption manifest in politics and the media; the rampant criminality of a global elite whose wealth nestles beyond taxation and accountability; the gross and growing inequality; and what it's doing to their own lives.

Russell's audience get pay cheques, but their real spending power is falling. They don't just need help to buy, they need help to pay the mortgage; help to get out of relationships that are collapsing under economic stress; help to pay the legal loan shark and meet the minimum credit-card payment. Above all, they need help to understand what kind of good life capitalism is going to offer their generation. Because since Lehman Brothers that has not been obvious.

That puts me firmly in Russell's world too except I had that doubt long before Lehman came along to prove how misplaced faith in capitalism of this sort was.

In fairness, Russell Brand does not claim he is saying something original. [As he writes in the Guardian this morning:](#)

The people who liked the interview said it was because I'd articulated what they were thinking. I recognise this. God knows I'd love to think the attention was about me but I said nothing new or original, it was the expression of the knowledge that democracy is irrelevant that resonated. As long as the priorities of those in government remain the interests of big business, rather than the people they were elected to serve, the impact of voting is negligible and it is our responsibility to be more active if we want real change.

With this I have, I realise, a real agreement. Despite invitations to consider doing so I will not put myself up for public office. Those on the back benches tell me that I have more impact where I am. A junior ministerial post in agriculture does not appeal. As Brand says, that won't create real change.

And Brand and those under 40 are right to say that the current system is corrupt and is [intended to deliver to big corporations: it is, and does](#). What is surprising is that it has taken so long for anger about this to surface. As Paul Mason says:

To people of my generation, the absence of outright anger, rage and aggression sometimes makes it seem as if young people don't care about any of this. But anger and rage are behaviourally impossible in our society: raise your voice, and the official responses range from "being asked to leave" to tasering. All the repression of the various protests — Sol, Syntagma, Taksim, Occupy — has done is to force the anger and rejection inwards. The revolution that's under way is more about mental and cultural rejection of the story on offer: to leave college with a heap of debt, to work as a near-slave in your early twenties in the name of a "work placement" or "internship".

I think that's right. As Mason also says, the revolution, if it happens, will not be socialist. As conventionally understood that's also a materialist ideology of power and that is not what is needed now. Rather the change will be one of the narrative, of what life is literally all about.

Capitalism has no answer to that question. All it can offer is abuse of many for the few. That is, and will remain, unacceptable because there is within it no hope - the demand for which is what always drives political change in the end. Younger people want to know, as Mason puts it:

where will the jobs come from if automation takes over our lives? Where will high wages come from if workers' bargaining power is repeatedly stamped down by the process of globalisation? How will this generation be secure in old age, if the pension system is

shattered and we face half a century of boom-bust?

Capitalism cannot offer any of those things: all we can say for sure is that it will deliver greater insecurity.

Labour has been wedded to the same basic economic theory as the right for so long it still has no alternative narrative.

And that is what is being demanded. The tax gap story, the story of tax justice and the story that tackling corporate abuse that I have been involved in telling are an alternative narrative. I am proud to have been part of that telling, even if I will be candid and say I did not know that was what I was doing when I started. Those narratives have worked: they became the theme of Occupy in the end.

But I will also say they are not enough. They highlight that government is partly powerless, but at least partly by choice: they choose not to collect tax that would make a difference to so many lives. But more than that is needed.

We need a narrative that focusses the anger Brand has highlighted. [He's right when he says:](#)

It's easy to attack me, I'm a right twerp, I'm a junkie and a cheeky monkey, I accept it, but that doesn't detract from the incontrovertible fact that we are living in a time of huge economic disparity and confronting ecological disaster. This disparity has always been, in cultures since expired, a warning sign of end of days.

I still don't fancy the idea of 'end days'. Dark ages follow and they are uncomfortable. That is why a compelling narrative is needed now. That is one reason why [I am not keen on the old capitalist narrative trying to populate comments on this blog](#). And in the Green New Deal group we have tried to imagine that narrative - but I do not pretend we have found it yet.

Nor has Brand but he shares the understanding that it is hope that matters. He concludes his Guardian article saying:

I believe in change. I don't mind getting my hands dirty because my hands are dirty already. I don't mind giving my life to this because I'm only alive because of the compassion and love of others. Men and women strong enough to defy this system and live according to higher laws. This is a journey we can all go on together, all of us. We can include everyone and fear no one. A system that serves the planet and the people. I'd vote for that.

So would I.