

# **The Socialist Party of Great Britain**

**New Enquirers Information Pack**

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## **To New Readers**

We believe that you share our concern for the well-being of people in our society, and perhaps, for the welfare of Earth itself and all its dependants. We write as members of a long-established independent democratic movement which seeks by persuasion and world-wide peaceful political organisation to transform our present society into one fit for humankind.

The problems of our world cannot be solved within the existing structures of production and government. Our world is divided into national areas dominated by class minorities in each country, which, either by private or corporate ownership or by state bureaucratic parties monopolize the means of production.

These ruling classes and their political representatives, by reason of a combination of historical circumstances, governmental, military and ideological control or influence, are able to keep the majority of the world's population in subjection. In the decisive areas of the world this domination takes the form of people being denied access to the means of living except on the basis of working for a wage or salary. In the major countries of the world, the people who, in the widest sense, produce what we need to live, are wage-slaves.

### **Dominated by Capitalism**

Our access to food, clothing, shelter and other needs is rationed by money. Even professional persons and those running small businesses are dominated by the system under which we live: capitalism. It is a world-system based upon the class monopoly of the means of production where things are produced and services rendered as commodities for sale at a profit. Labour-power also is a commodity; its price is what we receive as a wage or salary.

Each enterprise or grouping of capitalism, in competition with others in the market, must strive to increase the profit surplus which it

makes after the investment of capital. If it fails to achieve sufficient profit to re-invest in new machinery and techniques it will lose out to more powerful groupings or nations.

Russia, China, Yugoslavia, Cuba and all other mis-called "socialist" regimes in Eastern Europe and elsewhere are part of this competitive process over markets, trade-routes, raw materials, strategic points and exploitable populations. These regimes are more accurately described as being "state-capitalist": today, under internal and external pressures, some seek more efficient means of exploiting their wage-slaves. The Socialist Party right from the Bolshevik seizure of power in Russia in 1917 has been aware that what transpired was not the establishment of, nor a development of a socialistic society. We have always made clear our opposition to Leninism, Trotskyism, Stalinism and all similar undemocratic vanguard movements.

### **Appalling Destruction**

The class interests, values and drive for profit of the world-system have been the underlying reasons for the unprecedented destruction of life and resources throughout this century. This appalling process, made worse by new forms of pollution, including the spread of artificial radio-activity and the cutting-down of the rain forests, to say nothing of the possible effects of secret weapons, the existence of which it is reasonable to assume. This uncontrolled madness will continue unless we take the necessary democratic action to transform our way of life throughout the planet.

We believe that socialism can only be brought about by an overwhelming majority of the population, a majority which understands why capitalism must be replaced by socialism. If we are to bring into being production solely for use, where needs are self-determined, we must have a clear idea of how such a society could be established, organised and sustained. We must also ensure that the

values and methods of the World Socialist Movement are fully consistent with its aims.

Socialism is a new world society where the means of production are commonly owned and where governments and systems of exchange, whether barter or money, have been replaced by democratic administration at local, regional and world levels: a society where there could be decentralized co-ordination of production with free access according to need. Information about how socialism could be organised is available in our pamphlet *Socialism As A Practical Alternative*.

### **Organise for a Better Life**

Why have previous attempts to build a better world failed? In our view the terrible events of the twentieth century are in part a consequence of the fact that most of those who sought to ameliorate the lot of the majority had no clear alternative distinct from some form of the system of nations, of wage labour and capital, of money, prices, profits, of buying and selling. They had no clear understanding of the dynamics of capitalism. They had illusions about the politics of gradualism or insurrection or about revolutionary vanguards and state-capitalism. They clung to their illusions in the face of the facts of Labour administrations of capitalism or of the brutal dictatorships in the "East" over the workers. As a result of their unsound theories these "practical" men and women diverted the enthusiasm, unselfish devotion and energies of millions into political blind alleys. The advances that have been made are largely those made by workers themselves in producing in greater quantities and in organising to obtain more of the products. However, while capitalism is allowed to exist gains made are not necessarily permanent.

When confronted by the programme of socialism, "left-wing"

reformists (apart from seldom being in favour of it) always pose the question: "What do we do in the meantime?" — never waking up to the fact that the appalling present is the "meantime" which their political activities, in opposition to the vigorous pursuit of socialism helped to bring into being. In any event, the attitude of genuine socialists is not one of passivity, awaiting a socialist millennium, it is one of active informed organisation for a better way of life.

### **Building a Strong Socialist Movement**

The more reformists abandon their illusions and inadequate activities, seek to understand the nature of genuine socialism and play their part in building a strong World Socialist Movement, the more effective we can be against capitalism now, prior to an early transformation of society. Such a movement, with the clear objective of taking the means of production out of the hands of a minority and making them the common property of society, would become much more influential than the present parties of the "Left".

Today many aware of past political errors, propose different approaches to the problems of humankind. They put forward schemes which though rightly concerned with holistic, ecologically benign, locally democratic, "human scale" production are still seen as being within the framework of money, wages, prices and profit. These proposals are attractive to a new political generation, which, failing to identify correctly the process responsible for our major problems, are likely to become a new wave of reformists.

The above comments, of course, are large generalisations, needing further elucidation and discussion. We hope that we have been able to interest you in our ideas and look forward to hearing from you or seeing you at one of our meetings.

*(Socialist Standard, August 1989)*

## **Socialism Means One World**

Just as capitalism is a world system of society, so too must socialism be. There never has been, and never can be, socialism in just one country because its material basis is the world-wide and interdependent means of production that capitalism has built up. The bulk of the wealth produced in the world today is produced by the co-operative labour of the millions employed to operate these means of production. What is needed now, to establish socialism, is a conscious political decision on the part of these millions across the world to run society in their own interests.

This will be done by taking the means of production throughout the world into *common ownership*, with their *democratic control* by the whole community, and with *production solely for use*.

Common ownership will be a social relationship of equality between all people with regard to the use of the means of production. No longer will there be classes, governments and their state machinery, or national frontiers.

Democratic control will involve the whole community in making decisions about the use of the means of production. Instead of government over people there would be various levels of democratic administration, from the local up to regional and world levels, with responsibility being delegated if necessary to groups and individuals.

Production for use will bring production into direct line with human needs. Without money, wages, buying and selling there will be a world of free access. Everyone will be able to contribute to society by working voluntarily, according to ability. Everyone will be able to take freely from whatever is readily available, according to self-defined needs.

## **Global Problems**

The motivation for this new world comes from the common class

interest of those who produce but do not possess. An important part of this motivation comes from the global problems thrown up by capitalism. Ecological problems make a nonsense of the efforts of governments. War and the continuing threat of nuclear war affect us all. The problem of uneven development means that many producers in the underdeveloped countries suffer starvation, disease and absolute poverty. All of these problems of capitalism can only be solved within the framework of a socialist world. Ecological problems require the sort of long-term planning and development of which competitive, international capitalism is incapable. Converting the armaments industry (capitalism's biggest industry) from producing weapons of destruction to producing useful things to satisfy human needs will take time. Ending world hunger and poverty, above all, makes the world-wide co-operation of socialism an urgent necessity.

But this does not rule out local democracy. In fact a democratic system of decision-making would require that the basic unit of social organisation would be the local community. However, the nature of some of the problems we face and the many goods and services presently produced, such as raw materials, energy sources, agricultural products, world transport and communications, need production and distribution to be organised at a world level. Corresponding to this, of course, there would be a need for a democratic world administration, controlled by delegates from the regional and local levels of organisation throughout the world.

### **Development of Ideas**

The world socialist movement, of which the Socialist Party is a constituent part, expresses the common class interest of the producers. Because political power in capitalism is organised on a territorial basis each socialist party has the task of seeking democratically to gain political power in the country where it operates. If it is suggested that socialist ideas might develop unevenly



across the world, and that socialists of only a part of the world were in a position to get political control, then the decision about the action to be taken would be one for the whole of the socialist movement in the light of all the circumstances at the time. It would certainly be a folly, however, to base a programme of political action on the assumption that socialist ideas will develop unevenly and that we must therefore be prepared to establish "socialism" in one country or even a group of countries like the European Community.

For a start, it is an unreasonable assumption that socialist ideas will develop unevenly. Given the world-wide nature of capitalism and its social relationships, the vast majority of people live under basically similar conditions, and because of the world-wide system of communications and media, there is no reason for socialist ideas to be restricted to one part of the world. Any attempt to establish "socialism" in one country would be bound to fail owing to the pressures exerted by the world market on that country's means of production. Recent experience in Russia, China and elsewhere shows conclusively that even capitalist states cannot detach themselves from the requirements of an integrated system of production operated through the world market.

Faced with this explanation of how the world could be organised, many would reject it in favour of something more "realistic", including some who call themselves socialist. They seek to solve social problems within the framework of government policies, the state machine, national frontiers, money, wages, buying and selling. But if our analysis of capitalism as a world system is correct—and we've yet to be shown how it's wrong—the state politics are irrelevant as a way of solving social problems. Viewed globally, state politics only make sense when seen as a means for capturing political power in order to introduce a world of free access.

*(Socialist Standard, August 1989)*

## **One Green World**

All over the world the present economic system plunders and wastes the Earth's non-renewable mineral and energy sources. All over the world it pollutes the sea, the air, the soil, forests, rivers and lakes. All over the world it upsets natural balances and defies the laws of ecology. Clearly this destruction and waste cannot continue indefinitely, but it need not; it should not and must not.

It is quite possible to meet the basic material needs of every man, woman and child on this planet without destroying the natural systems on which we depend and of which we are a part. The productive methods that would have to be adopted to achieve this are well enough known:

The practice of types of farming that preserve and enhance the natural fertility of the soil;

The systematic recycling of materials (such as metals and glass) obtained from non-renewable mineral sources;

The prudent use of non-renewable energy sources (such as coal, oil and gas) while developing alternative sources based on natural processes that continually renew themselves (such as solar energy, wind power and hydroelectricity);

The employment of industrial processes which avoid the release of poisonous chemicals or radioactivity into the biosphere;

The manufacture of solid goods made to last, not to be thrown away after use or deliberately to break down after a calculated period of time.

### **The Obstacle: the Profit System**

So what stands in the way? Why isn't this done? The simple answer is that, under the present economic system, production is not geared to meeting human needs but rather to the accumulation of monetary wealth out of profits. As a result, not only are basic needs far from

satisfied but much of what is produced is pure waste from this point of view—for example all the resources involved in commerce and finance, the mere buying and selling of things and those poured into armaments.

The whole system of production, from the methods employed to the choice of what to produce, is distorted by the imperative drive to pursue economic growth for its own sake and to give priority to seeking profits to fuel this growth without consideration for the longer term factors that ecology teaches are vitally important. The result is an economic system governed by blind economic laws which oblige decision-makers, however selected and whatever their personal views or sentiments, to plunder, pollute and waste.

This growth-oriented and profit-motivated capitalist system exists all over the world, in the West in the form of an economy dominated by large private enterprises and multinational corporations and in Russia, China and other such countries in the form of a state capitalism.

If needs are to be met while at the same time respecting the laws of nature, then this system must go.

### **What is the Alternative?**

If we are to meet our needs in an ecologically acceptable way we must first be able to control production—or, put another way, able to consciously regulate our interaction with the rest of nature—and the only basis on which this can be done is the common ownership of the means of production.

By common ownership we don't mean state property. We mean simply that the Earth and its natural and industrial resources should no longer belong to anyone—not to individuals, not to corporations, not to the state. No person or group should have exclusive controlling rights over their use; instead how they are used and under

what conditions should be decided democratically by the community as a whole. Under these conditions the whole concept of legal property rights, whether private or state, over the means of production disappears and is replaced by democratically decided rules and procedures governing their use.

This is why a fully democratic decision-making structure must be an essential feature of the system that is to replace private and state capitalism. The centralised, coercive political state must be dismantled and replaced by a decision-making structure in which everyone is free to participate on an equal basis.

It is possible to envisage, for instance, the local community being the basic unit of this structure. In this case people would elect a local council to co-ordinate and administer those local affairs that could not be dealt with by a general meeting of the whole community. This council would in its turn send delegates to a regional council for matters concerning a wider area and so on up to a world council responsible for matters that could best be dealt with on a world scale (such as the supply of certain key minerals and fuels, the protection of the biosphere, the mining and farming of the oceans, and space research).

### **A Needs-Oriented System**

Given the replacement of the coercive political state by such a democratic decision-making structure, the network of productive units could then be geared to meeting needs. We deliberately use the word "geared" here because what we envisage is not the organisation of the production and distribution of goods by some central planning authority but the setting up of a mechanism, a system of links between productive units, which would enable the productive network to respond in a flexible way to the demands for goods and services communicated to it.

If the existing situation, where needs are not met in such basic fields as food and housing, is to be avoided then people must be guaranteed access to the goods and services to satisfy their needs. We think the best way to do this is not for some central authority to distribute purchasing power to people but to let people choose for themselves what their real needs are and then to take, in accordance with this choice, what they need from the common store of goods. In other words, a system of free access to goods and services in which money would be unnecessary and so would cease to be used.

Signals to the network of productive units as to what to produce would thus come from what people actually chose to take from the common stores under conditions of free access. This would essentially be a question of stock control which we can envisage being done, in the first instance, at local community level. In this case needs would be communicated by local communities to the productive network as demands for given amounts of specified goods and materials. This would then be communicated throughout the system from supplier to supplier and if necessary to other regions or to the world level, again as demands for given amounts of specified goods and materials.

Such a system of production to directly supply needs would be essentially self-regulating as the productive system would be responding to real needs in much the same way as the market system is supposed to respond to monetary demand. It is the alternative both to the mechanisms of the market and to central state planning.

Naturally, if people are guaranteed the satisfaction of their needs in this way then work will also be radically transformed. From being a drudgery performed to obtain a money income, work can become meaningful. What will be produced will be useful things that people really need. The whole employee/employer relationship will come to an end. Instead there will be free and equal women and men working

together to produce what they need.

In these changed circumstances work can become a voluntary service organised on a democratic basis. People will be able to choose the work they do, in a sector of production they feel suits them.

Productive units can be run by a democratic council elected by all those working in them.

In the needs-oriented society we are describing here the concept of "profits" would be meaningless while the imperative to "growth" would disappear. Instead, after an initial increase in production needed to provide the whole world's population with an infrastructure of basic services (such as farms, housing, transport and water supplies) production can be expected to platform off at a level sufficient to provide for current needs and repairing and maintaining the existing stock of means of production.

What is envisaged here is a society able to sustain a stable relationship with nature in which the needs of its members would be in balance with the capacity of nature to renew itself after supplying them.

### **We Call It Socialism**

So, to sum up, the alternative to the present capitalist system of profit-seeking and monetary accumulation involves:

The absence of any property rights, private or state, over natural and industrial resources needed for production;

The existence of a non-coercive democratic decision-making structure;

The guaranteed access for all to what they need to satisfy their needs;

The orientation of production towards the direct satisfaction of real needs in a flexible and self-regulating way without the intervention of money and buying and selling;

The organisation of work as a voluntary service under the democratic control of those working in the various productive units.

We call this system "socialism", but it is the content, not the name, that is important. In any event, it obviously has nothing in common with the existing state capitalist regimes (as in Russia and China) or proposals for state control (as by the Labour left) which are often erroneously called "socialist".

### **Getting from Here to There**

The means by which the new society can be achieved are determined by its nature as a society involving voluntary co-operation and democratic participation. It cannot be imposed from above by some self-appointed liberators nor by some well-meaning state bureaucracy but can only come into existence as a result of being the expressed wish of a majority—an overwhelming majority—of the population. In other words, the new society can only be established by democratic political action and the movement to establish it can only employ democratic forms of struggle.

Because the present system is, as a system must be, an inter-related whole and not a chance collection of good and bad elements, it cannot be abolished piecemeal. It can only be abolished in its entirety or not at all. This fact determines the choice as to what we must do: work towards a complete break with the present system as opposed to trying to gradually transform it.

Gradual reform cannot lead to a democratic, ecological society because capitalism is an economic system governed by blind, uncontrollable, economic laws which always triumph in the end over political intervention, however well-meaning or determined this might be. Any attempt on the part of a government to impose other priorities than profit-making risks either provoking an economic crisis or the government ending up administering the system in the

only way it can be—as a profit-oriented system in which profit-making has to be given priority over meeting needs or respecting the balance of nature. This is not to say that measures to palliate the bad effects of the present economic system on nature should not be taken but these should be seen for what they are: mere palliatives and not steps towards an ecological society.

The only effective strategy for achieving a free democratic society in harmony with nature is to build up a movement which has the achievement of such a society as its sole aim.

*(Socialist Standard, August 1987)*



## Socialism and Democracy

What is democracy? Why should it be considered a good thing? Why should an individual accept a democratically-arrived-at decision with which they disagree? These are the questions Keith Graham sets out to answer in the first, more philosophical, part of his book (*The Battle of Democracy*, Wheatsheaf Books, £8.95)

The simplest definition of democracy is that it is decision-making by the whole people ("rule by the people", as the Greek words from which it is formed mean) involving procedures such as free and open debate, free access to information, one person one vote, and the accountability of public officials and elected representatives. Graham argues that such a decision-making system can be regarded as desirable because one key aspect of the nature of human beings is their ability to reflect and weigh up options before deciding what to do. In other words, a system in which the people as a whole freely decide what to do is the only decision-making system worthy of humans as self-determining ("free") agents.

The idea of democracy is also bound up with that of equality, if only in the sense that it is a decision-making procedure in which every human deemed capable of making a reasoned decision has a vote of equal weight. Pursuing this further, Graham shows that ensuring each person an equal as possible say in the decision-making process requires a high degree of social equality and not mere equal political rights. This introduces the idea that it is not only political democracy that is desirable for humans as self-determining agents but a democratic society. As Graham makes clear in the second, more political, part of his book where he discusses the views of Marx, Lenin and others on democracy, this democratic society would have to be "a world where private ownership of the means of production, buying and selling, the wages system have all been abolished, in favour of the communal ownership of the earth's resources". In other

words, the philosophical justification for democracy is also, even more so in fact, a philosophical justification for socialism—though, of course, as Graham is quick to point out, Marx himself did not justify establishing socialism on such "an appeal to abstract, timeless principles to do with the nature of human beings".

Graham's discussion of the views of Marx and Lenin on democracy—in which he convincingly makes the point that "the terrible fate which befell Marx was that he was Leninised—corresponds exactly to our own position on this subject: Marx stood for the establishment of a democratic, classless society as a democratic act on the part of the wage and salary working class as a whole. In contrast, Lenin saw the agent of social revolution as a minority "vanguard" of professional revolutionaries who, on winning power, would establish their own undemocratic, even if supposedly temporary, rule over the rest of society. Graham's discussion of the differing views of Marx and Lenin also allows him to clarify the reform versus revolution dilemma, often seen as a choice between gradual, constitutional change and violent insurrection. He can also set out, for the first time in a book of this sort, the case for a revolutionary but essentially peaceful use of existing political institutions as the means of establishing socialism.

“Marx's presuppositions enable a distinctive challenge to be made to the two alternative positions on the question of constitutionalism as we have been considering them. In one way, the most important political development for Marx takes place prior to any revolution and outside parliamentary institutions, namely in the growth of working class consciousness. This is distinct from Kautsky's parliamentary constitutionalism, where the entry of a party into parliament, which may form alliances with non-revolutionary groups and the like, is seen as the chief means to revolution . . . On the other hand, Marx's position is distinct from Lenin's. The state is not

to be smashed but taken control of, so that it cannot be used against a revolutionary working class: and some of the institutions of a parliamentary system, notably universal suffrage, will be something to foster for a majoritarian like Marx, though not for a vanguardist like Lenin. In the light of Marx's presuppositions, there do seem to be oversimplifications in the terms used to express the original dilemma of the route to the new society. There need be no straightforward, exclusive and exhaustive choice between constitutionalism and violent seizure of power. Certain elements within existing institutions may be valued, and action taken in conformity with them, while others may not. Connectedly, the aspiration to a peaceful transition need not be identified with an attempt to effect it by piecemeal means, an identification which both Kautsky and Lenin are prone to make. It is consistent with Marx's presuppositions to recognise parliament as an institution geared to the needs of capitalism, and therefore inappropriate as the vehicle for a fundamental transformation, but yet to regard its connected electoral practices as coinciding, to some extent, with the principles governing that transformation, and to that extent adding the possibility of a peaceful transition. This is not tantamount to the view parodied by Lenin as the expectation that the ruling class will meekly submit to the working class, as minority to majority. It does, however, limit violence to the role of counter-violence in the event of resistance when a clear majority for revolutionary change is apparent, rather than seeing the use of violence as itself a primary means of change, even in the absence of majority support."

Leninists sometimes try to argue that this is only a question of tactics, that they too share the ultimate goal of a truly democratic society (socialism) but that because a majority of workers can never be expected to acquire a socialist understanding within capitalism ("the ruling ideas of an epoch are those of the ruling class", as Marx

put it), a minority must act on their behalf. Graham answers this by pointing out that, in the case of socialism as the democratic society, there is a very real sense in which the end determines the means to achieve it.

“What is the nature of the transformation which, according to Marx, it is the role of the proletariat to bring about? In place of the compulsion to work which is characteristic of their position in capitalism, there will be a free association of people. In place of the exploitation of one section by another there will be common ownership of the means of production. In place of the political domination of a bureaucratic elite there will be widespread participation and revocable delegation. Leaving aside all question of the realism of Marx’s proposals, these are the arrangements which he regards as meeting the real interests of the proletariat. But these are arrangements which in their very description are incapable of attainment without the voluntary co-operation of the proletariat itself. Whereas you can make people do what they do not wish to do, you cannot make them adopt a set of social relations which require their voluntary co-operation if they do not voluntarily co-operate” (Graham’s emphasis).

In other words, democratic organisation and methods are not just one among many possible means to establish a democratic society; they are the only such means. Leninist minority action can only lead, as historical experience has confirmed, to some form of minority rule—in fact to a more undemocratic society than the sort of capitalism we know in countries like Britain.

*The Battle of Democracy* is a very useful book about the nature of democracy written by a socialist. It is hoped that it will spark off a wide-ranging discussion about the desirability and feasibility of “a world-wide society of common ownership” and of the means of bringing it into being.

(*Socialist Standard*, November 1986)

## State Capitalism

Alfred P. Sloane, who once ran General Motors, is reported to have said: "It is the business of the automobile industry to make money not cars"—and what he was saying applies generally to production in the modern world. It takes place first and foremost with a view to making monetary profit and only incidentally with a view to producing goods or services. There's no difficulty in seeing this in what's called the "private sector". It's clear that an employer will only carry on a business as long as it is making a profit or there's a prospect of profit. If profit stops being made, the business will either try to cut costs (usually by reducing its workforce) or, if this is impossible, will close down.

We can see this process together with its human toll in insecurity and unemployment going on all the time. And we can see it not just in the private sector but in state-owned industry too, as in the closure in recent years of so many British coal mines. Yet it's still widely thought that in state owned industry profit is not paramount and that in countries such as Russia, where virtually the whole of the production process is state controlled, "planning" and not the profit motive prevails. In the West, because many of the state-owned industries have been concerned with providing essential goods and services (such as energy and transport) it's been widely believed that they somehow belong to us all, that their purpose is to serve the community and they do not have to run at a profit.

This belief was particularly widespread in Britain in the years immediately following the second world war when the Labour government introduced large-scale nationalisation measures. The old lady who went down to the pithead with her coal bucket to collect some of what she thought was her coal had just this kind of optimism. She had been told that now the mines were nationalised they belonged to the people. In fact she was greeted with delirious

laughter and told to go and buy her coal from the coal merchant as before. Many other people have been similarly disillusioned when confronted with the failure of nationalisation to bring about the shared prosperity of a new social order. And so unpopular has it now become that the present-day Conservative Party is able to gain electoral advantage by bringing in sweeping privatisation measures.

It's often said that this failure of state-run industry to give people a better life shows that socialism has been tried and failed. This is true only if you regard socialism as synonymous with state ownership (and by extension capitalism with private ownership). But another way of looking at it is that state ownership is simply an alternative to private ownership of capital and of running a capitalist economy. No matter who handles capital—the state or private investors—the majority of people, all those who have to work for a living, continue to have only the limited access to the wealth of society which their wage or salary gives them.

### **State industries**

This is an approach adopted in a new book by Adam Buick and John Crump called *State Capitalism: the Wages System Under New Management* (Macmillan, 1986, 157pp.). Buick and Crump argue that state-run production is just as much concerned with profit as private enterprise and present convincing evidence that, when it comes to making profit, nationalised industries in Britain and other Western countries have on the whole been extraordinarily successful. They do not deny that state-run industries such as coal and transport necessary for the overall profitability of production have sometimes been run at a loss with the aid of government subsidies. But this has been the exception rather than the rule and in general nationalised industries, which have a statutory legal obligation to try to run at a profit, have not been allowed to continue to run at a loss. The cut-backs in the coal and iron and steel industries over the last 20 years

by both Labour and Tory governments are evidence of this and on the whole anyway, despite popular myth, subsidies have not been needed for nationalised industries. They have generally produced not only enough profit to accumulate new capital but also enough to provide a property income for the private individuals who originally owned the nationalised industries. For the old private owners nationalisation meant a change in the form of ownership from private shares to interest-bearing government bonds, while some chose to receive payment in cash from the state to the full value of what was being purchased from them.

What this shows is that nationalisation does not dispossess private capitalists but simply changes their property titles. And what Buick and Crump go on to illustrate with many practical examples is that historically state intervention in industry (or "state purchase" as it used to be called) has taken place not for ideological reasons but to protect the interests of the private-owning class as a whole so that individual or groups of capitalists could not, by their monopoly of an essential good or service, hold the rest of the capitalist class to ransom.

The depth and sophistication of the authors' analysis makes their conclusions irresistible—nationalisation is essentially a buying and selling transaction involving haggling over a purchase price and represents no more than an institutional arrangement, a change of formal ownership which leaves intact the basic social relation of wage labour to capital. It is of no concern therefore to the majority of us in society, who receive in return for selling our energies to a state or private employer a wage or salary of smaller value than what we have produced. And like private capitalists or the managers of a private enterprise, the professional managers appointed by the state to run the nationalised industries are, as the authors put it. "the mere agents of market forces, interpreting, more or less successfully, the dictates



of the market and exploiting, more or less successfully, the labour power purchased".

But what about countries like Russia and China where there is blanket state ownership and no distinct privately-owning capitalist class? Here Buick and Crump show that the party bosses and bureaucrats who govern Russia also effectively own the wealth of that country, by virtue of their control over production and the productive machinery. The privileges they draw from ownership are expressed in the massively higher living standards they enjoy compared with the majority of Russians. Like the private capitalists in the West they derive their wealth from the surplus value produced by the wage and salary earners. But instead of, as in the West, receiving this wealth directly in the form of profit due to them legally as a return on investment, they receive it in the form of enormously bloated "salaries", bonuses and payments in kind of various types—holiday villas, travel abroad, access to special shops and so on.

### **Socialist analysis**

Not that Buick and Crump claim to have discovered anything new in this. In the detailed and wide-ranging account they give of the idea and history of state capitalism, they point out that since the 1920s the *Socialist Standard* has argued that Russia has a capitalist class and that the system there is not socialism or communism but a form of capitalism—state capitalism. They point out too that in recent years other observers and political currents have been driven to a similar view, usually without even knowing about the pioneering work of the Socialist Party. Unlike the Socialist Party, however, most of them have argued that if Russia is now a class society in which the party leaders and bureaucrats have become a new ruling class on the basis of the wages system, it was not always so. The Russian revolution of 1917, the arguments run, was a socialist revolution which overthrew capitalism for a while until it was restored at a later date by Stalin,

Khrushchev or whoever. But, as Buick and Crump remark, “wherever the date of capitalism's ‘restoration’ in Russia is fixed, all the elements which are cited as evidence of capitalism's existence subsequent to that date were also in existence previously.”

The point here is that the difference between capitalism and socialism is seen as a difference between the politics of those controlling the state and not as a different form of social organisation. And what the authors show, in their chapter entitled "The Revolutionary Road to State Capitalism", is that a different form of social organisation on a socialist basis of production for use, voluntary cooperation and the abolition of the wages system never existed at any time in Russia. The Russian revolution from the very beginning was aimed not at abolishing capitalism and making the means of living into the common property of the whole community but at a takeover of the state by a minority group whose purpose was to centralise capital in the state with a view to speeding up industrial development—and all this behind a smokescreen of socialist declarations.

How has this centralisation of capital in the hands of the state worked out in practice? The answer to this question is the area in which Buick and Crump are at their most original. What they do is to analyse in detail the mechanics of production in Russia and other such countries (but in particular Russia) to show precisely how and why production, even under almost total state control, takes place—and indeed must take place—with a view to making profit and not to satisfying people's needs. Not to concentrate on profit, they point out, would be to ignore the pressure arising from the international rivalry of competing capitals, the pressure to compete both militarily and commercially, and therefore to accumulate capital. And the penalty for such ignorance would be economic and political collapse. So Russian "planning" is not aimed at satisfying the needs of consumers but at extracting surplus value from Russian workers as

effectively as possible—making them produce greater value by their labour than they receive in wages or salaries, just like workers in the West. Not that, under the profit imperative, "planning" and its production targets are a particularly precise, reliable or long-term instrument for economic organisation. They must of necessity be short-term, piecemeal and subject to constant revision—as indeed they have always been in Russia—as the nature and amount of the goods that can be sold on the market at a profit constantly changes.

### **Russian capitalism**

Shades here of Western "market forces". And indeed perhaps the most penetrating insight of this book is that an effective market and the forces of competition that go with it do exist in Russia:

“The ‘plan’ does not abolish exchange relationships between enterprises but merely attempts to quantify the exchanges in advance.”

In other words the state has to devise mechanisms of a market kind and "the pressures which act on the state and its economic planners in the state capitalist countries are identical to the pressures which act on their private capitalist counterparts via the market". And these pressures, the need to make financial calculations in order to realise profit and accumulate capital indicate, over and above any differences of detail, the essential similarity of the economic systems of East and West. Nor does "planning" remove the element of competition from Russian production. Competition remains an essential and ever-present feature. There is competition between enterprises producing different goods where financially accountable enterprise managers are anxious to achieve their targets ahead of other enterprises. There is competition between enterprises which produce the same goods, with planning specifications, which are necessarily vague and approximate to allow individual managers latitude to adapt to rises

and falls in spare capacity and consumer demand, have brought about a situation where a number of different enterprises may be producing, say, refrigerators at the same time in competition with one another. There is, above all, because of the pressure on managers to reach production targets, competition among enterprises for the skilled labour power available:

“Such is the intensity of competition for scarce grades of labour power that even the Russian authorities admit that almost one-third of labour recruitment by-passes official channels, while many Western scholars believe that, with certain exceptions, ‘the immense majority of workers and employees is recruited at the factory or office gates’”.

All this knocks sideways the arguments of those who say that what exists in Russia is not state capitalism but some form of socialism, or at least a fundamentally different economic system than in the West. The view of Trotsky, Trotskyist theoreticians like Ernest Mandel and Trotsky's followers in many of today's left-wing organisations, that Russia does not operate on capitalist principles but is a "deformed" or "degenerate" workers' state where production takes place at least partly for the benefit of workers is shown to be based on excessive attention to legal forms and official ideological pronouncements rather than on how the economy functions in practice. Likewise, those who, identifying socialism with full-scale nationalisation, refuse to see Russia as capitalist because it has no privately-owning class are shown wrong through overestimating the importance and effectiveness of "planning" and seriously underestimating the role of prices, profit and money. Often of course such Western observers have an ideological point to prove but in this they are no different from the official ideologists of the Russian state who must also insist on qualitative differences of organisation and lifestyle between "socialist" Russia and the "capitalist" West.

But if Russia's state propaganda calls the society there socialist, what it claims to be moving towards as the ultimate realisation is "communism". And what it is widely thought to mean by this is a classless, stateless society based on the principle "from each according to ability, to each according to need". But in their final chapter, "The Alternative to Capitalism", Buick and Crump examine closely the wording of official Russian pronouncements on future society and find that what is actually being advocated is not a classless society of free access at all but a society of "free distribution", one in which a minority will still rule and a majority will still work for the rulers receiving in return for their work payment in kind of the things the rulers consider they need. Such a society would still be a form of wages system and in any case not a society based on the self-determined satisfaction of needs.

### **Alternative society**

The alternative the authors offer to replace all the different forms of wages system examined in the book is just that society of free access which Russian state ideology denies. It is a society without money and wages and without buying and selling. It cannot, they insist, be brought in gradually by some kind of transition process but only as a rupture, a clean break with the present system—if for no other reason than the total difference in the form that wealth takes in the two societies. In the one (socialism or production for use) it appears in its natural form for the purpose of satisfying human needs; in the other (capitalism or production for profit) it appears in the form of exchange value for the purpose of being sold on the market at a profit. And the two are mutually exclusive. In socialism, as the writers put it:

“Goods would simply become useful things produced for human beings to take and use . . . people would obtain the food, clothes and other articles they needed for their personal consumption by going

into a distribution centre and taking what they needed without having to hand over either money or consumption vouchers.”

And they go on to suggest how it could be organised in practical terms. Such arrangements are possible today, they conclude, because our resources, technology, skills and knowledge are sufficient to allow us to produce a massive abundance of all the goods and services we need in order to live comfortably on a worldwide scale. But if this is to be achieved then we must organise ourselves democratically on the basis of voluntary cooperative work instead of forced wage labour and through production for use instead of profit—and all this in a society without states and frontiers, without rulers and ruled, without leaders and led.

Some might find these recommendations require too great a leap of the imagination, but they should not be deterred from reading this excellent book. It is a landmark in the study of modern society to which no short account can do justice—and it is thoroughly readable. It will find its way on to the bookshelf of socialists but it will also be read by, and change the thinking of, many non-socialists.

*(Socialist Standard, April 1987)*

## **Uncommon Tragedy**

In 1968 the journal *Science* published an article by an American biologist, Garrett Hardin, entitled "The Tragedy of the Commons". Its central argument, that common property leads to ecological ruin, has since become "part of the conventional wisdom in environmental studies, resource science and policy, economics, ecology and political science" (*Human Ecology*, No 1,1990).

Hardin did not exactly break new ground. Others had already elaborated a theory of the commons along similar lines. Nevertheless the publication of his article struck a chord at a time of growing environmental concern. It echoed the prevailing ethos of ecological pessimism articulated by the emerging environmental lobby and, more particularly, by the authoritarian anti-humanism of its neo-Malthusian wing.

Hardin set out to demonstrate the implications that different systems of property rights had for the sustainable use of natural resources. As the title of his article suggests, his main concern was with a system in which these resources were held in common (in the sense of not being monopolised by anyone).

### **Unrealistic model**

He gave the example of a rangeland on which a population of herdsmen were able to graze their cattle without restriction. While the benefits of adding a head of cattle to his herd would accrue to the individual herdsman alone, the environmental costs of this decision would be shared by all the herdsmen. Thus, from the individual's viewpoint, these costs would be largely "externalised". That would encourage him as a rational economic actor to increase his herd still further—and thereby become richer—since the benefits would outweigh the private costs this entailed.

The problem, according to Hardin, was that every other herdsman

would be inclined to do the same and thus, ultimately, the combined effect of their actions would be to increase the number of cattle on the commons beyond its carrying capacity. In short, common ownership of the rangeland will lead to tragedy. That the private ownership of the cattle might be equally implicated in his scenario was a point that appears to have escaped Hardin's notice.

Some economists have tended to see the solution to this problem as something to be imposed from outside or above: leave the existing system of property rights intact but introduce measures such as cattle taxes or quotas to force herdsmen to reduce their stocking rates. An alternative approach, favoured by Hardin, is to enclose, or privatise, the commons. Private ownership, goes the argument, would compel the individual herdsman to bear the full costs of any decision to increase his herd and thus persuade him to maintain a stocking rate compatible with the sustainable use of grazing land. It would also provide the necessary incentive to upgrade pasture because the benefits of doing so would be similarly "internalised".

Both these approaches concur on one fundamental point: there is no possibility of an internal solution to the "tragedy of the commons". After all, if there was, there would be no reason to expect a tragedy. Yet it is precisely on this point that the theory is coming under fire.

Wherever a commons has existed it has been associated with a complex pattern of institutional rules governing a distinct community of users; unregulated open access regimes are more typical of sparsely populated frontier zones. As John Reader puts it: "access to the commons was restricted by entitlement; use was regulated to ensure that no individual could pursue his own interest to the detriment of others. Far from bringing ruin to all, the true commons functioned to keep its exploitation within sustainable limits." (*New Scientist*. 8 September 1988).



There are numerous examples that bear this out, from the traditional Japanese village to Pacific island communities. Some have emerged only recently, such as the case of a number of Turkish coastal fisheries, but many contemporary examples have been in existence for hundreds of years. Indeed, it is the very persistence of the commons as an institution which testifies, in the view of some, to its inherent stability.

Carlisle Ford Runge has presented a cogent critique of Hardin's theory (*American Journal of Agricultural Economics*, November 1981), in which he argues that it is not the existence of a commons that is the problem but uncertainty in the context of interdependent decision-making. Hardin assumes that the decisions reached by his herdsmen are made in isolation from one another. A more appropriate model, Runge suggests, permits communication between the parties concerned. In this way a compromise could be struck between them which results in a better outcome than would otherwise be possible.

Within actually existing pastoral societies such mutual assurance is secured through the institutionalisation of rules that allow herders to adapt their behaviour in the light of the expected behaviour of others. Once established, herders have a vested interest in maintaining such rules through the exercise of moral sanctions because of the high opportunity costs involved in finding an alternative. Group size may be an important consideration insofar as it affects the transmission of information within, and the cohesiveness of, the group.

Significantly, Hardin felt compelled to qualify his theory in his response to Reader's article when he explained that the title of his article should have been "The tragedy of the unmanaged commons" (*New Scientist*, 22 October 1988). But since the commons as a rule are not unmanaged, this made the whole relevance of his theory

questionable.

## **Land enclosures**

When we look at the historical development of private property it is abundantly clear that what characterises this process above all is its coercive nature. The gradual demise of the commons in Britain from the 15th century onwards was not the result of their decline into ecological ruin. It was the deliberate result of the state's policy of land enclosure to meet the agricultural capitalists' demand for more land.

This same process of land enclosure is still going on in many parts of the Third World today. In the colonial era, conservationist arguments were often used to justify the appropriation of other people's land. Communal tenure was dismissed as "primitive" and "unscientific", and conducive to poor economic performance as well as environmental deterioration. By and large, these same attitudes continue to inform the policies of many post-colonial regimes. As Vink and Kassier point out, there are "numerous examples of livestock development projects in sub-Saharan Africa which have, implicitly or explicitly, been based on the tragedy of the commons hypothesis" (*South African Journal of Economics*, No 2, 1987). Such projects have sought to substitute private for communal tenure but have been "characterised by a pervading sense of failure".

There is scant evidence to show that environmental management of rangelands has improved as a result of introducing private ownership. On the contrary, the undermining of communal institutions in the Sahel and Southern Africa has led to increased overgrazing. Land enclosures in drought-prone semi-arid areas preclude the application of traditional risk-avoidance grazing strategies involving the movement of cattle to less vulnerable areas. Moreover, the commercialisation of agriculture accompanying the spread of private

tenure tends to make the private rancher vulnerable to the vagaries of the market. So, while, in theory, private tenure may induce them to maintain sustainable stocking rates by internalising their environmental costs, economic pressures often force them to disregard these costs to ensure short-term viability.

The social consequences of land enclosures have almost invariably proved calamitous. While some may benefit—usually government officials and multinational corporations—the high transaction and enforcement costs (such as stock-proof fencing) preclude most from participation in such schemes. This results in large-scale land eviction, increased inequality and rising discontent.

The small yeoman farmers evicted by the Enclosure Acts in Britain had little option but to migrate to the towns where some prospect of employment awaited them. In much of the Third World today, however, urban employment opportunities are few and far between and are declining still further under the current fad for "structural adjustment". Many of those displaced by land enclosures tend to end up in the more ecologically marginal areas which are subsequently degraded under this strain.

### **Property and pollution**

Despite his advocacy of private property, Hardin had to recognise its limitations where it concerned other kinds of natural resources to which—unlike his example of a rangeland—it was difficult, if not impossible, to prevent open access. As he put it. "the air and the waters surrounding us cannot be so readily fenced".

But he saw the tragedy of the commons reappearing here in another form, as pollution, when a "rational man finds that his share of the costs of the wastes he discharges into the commons is less than the cost of purifying his wastes before releasing them". Even where privatisation on a limited scale could be introduced the basic

problem would remain:

“The owner of a factory on the bank of a stream—whose property extends to the middle of the stream—often has difficulty seeing why it is not his natural right to muddy the waters flowing past his door.”

For Hardin, the solution to this problem necessarily entailed some infringement of the rights of property owners. In this regard, he saw a role for the state. However, the difficulty with this approach is that, though the state may have more room for manoeuvre, it is subject to the same competitive pressures that face industry on which it depends for its tax revenue. Ironically, state enterprises are often among the worst transgressors when it comes to pollution.

Hardin's theory of the commons is basically an attempt to vindicate the principle of private property in respect of the Earth's resources. As such it can be shown to be both empirically suspect and theoretically unsound. In the counter-arguments it has provoked, we can glimpse the potential of a sustainable alternative to the imposed monopoly on what should be our common heritage.

*(Socialist Standard, February 1992)*

## **Russel Brand Attacks Capitalism**

... and its ideological guard dogs come running

When Russell Brand was invited to guest edit the New Statesman at the end of October, he took the opportunity to write a long feature article on a subject which he deemed important enough to devote his whole piece to. He did not choose to write about his work as a comedian or actor, or his current worldwide live tour which had already almost sold out. He did not write about his sexual reputation as a ladies' man, or about which toothpaste he uses. He wrote with passion about how the world is organised and how all main stream politics serves the same global economic elite. He made a great number of insightful, thought-provoking observations.

A few days later he further elaborated on several of these points when interviewed by Jeremy Paxman on BBC TV's Newsnight. He certainly succeeded in stimulating debate, and since then there has been a frequently heated exchange of views, both with and about Brand himself, but also further afield, with the You Tube video of that interview having had millions of hits even by early November.

### **What Did Brand Actually Write?**

There was a lot of distorting of the things that Brand actually wrote and said, so let's start by setting out clearly and accurately what he actually expressed. The feature article, 'We no longer have the luxury of tradition. But before we change the world, we need to change the way we think' (New Statesman, 25-31 October), started out with one statement which was later seized on in particular by many of his opponents as a terrible sacrilege:

'I have never voted. Like most people I am utterly disenchanted by politics. Like most people I regard politicians as frauds and liars and the current political system as nothing more than a bureaucratic means for furthering the augmentation and advantages of economic

elites.’

He says those who ‘fought in two world wars’ to protect the right to vote ‘were conned’, adding that ‘total revolution of consciousness and our entire social, political and economic system is what interests me, but that’s not on the ballot.’ But rather than the focus on voting, his main and far more important theme was the fundamental inability of our present social system to meet the needs of the majority of people.

His written piece claimed, first, that the majority of (‘non-rich’) people have become disaffected from the whole political process and lost all interest in politics, as the main parties and politicians are virtually indistinguishable from one another. They are all dishonest and self-serving and all stand to represent and run a system in which human needs always take second place to the further accumulation of financial surpluses by a tiny minority who already have huge wealth and power. The apathy of the oppressed majority is an understandable reflection of the apathy of the social order about meeting our needs. But for society’s problems to be solved, this apathy must first be challenged and replaced with a passion for real change. All these points were argued in detail and eloquently by Brand in his article.

### **The Goal: A Co-operative Society**

He rightly takes the Left to task for being so po-faced and urges a spirit of fun and excitement in the movement for social change. He thoughtfully bemoans the way in which defenders of capitalism have taken the ideological advantage by tying their cause to the selfish instinct for individual survival. But, as he explains very clearly, we have now reached a stage in human history where our success and survival as individuals is more connected than ever before to ensuring our survival as a whole community or species:

‘Fear and desire are the twin engines of human survival, but with

most of our basic needs met these instincts are being engaged to imprison us in an obsolete fragment of our consciousness.’

At this point Brand departs momentarily from this rational extrapolation of the social, political and economic roots of human suffering, to argue that the solution is ‘part spiritual and part political’. He defines spiritual as ‘the acknowledgement that our connection to one another and the planet must be prioritised’. He then states very clearly his goal, paraphrasing Buckminster Fuller: ‘to make the world work for 100 per cent of humanity...through spontaneous co-operation without ecological offence or the disadvantage of anyone’.

Brand does not mention it, but in fact there is one precondition for this rational and democratic use of the world’s resources to serve the needs of all. The ‘one percent’ who monopolise all the natural resources and productive machinery of society have to be legitimately dispossessed, so that the world and all that is in it can become at last the common heritage of all. Without doing that, we do not even have access to the resources we seek to co-operatively manage. And for this we do indeed have to organise political and democratic action, including voting, which will be a lot more exciting and far-reaching than the mere choice between Tweedledum and Tweedledee just twice each decade.

### **The Contradictions of Capitalism**

Those of us who complain about there being a small class of billionaires and multi-millionaires for whom, directly or indirectly, the rest of us work as waged or salaried servants of capital, do not do so out of some hate-filled jealousy. Like Brand, we recognise that this is a global system which has outlived its usefulness. That the problem is systemic and not merely a question of attitude or of clearing away just the worst excesses of greed. In the words of William Morris,

‘there are rich and there are poor, and the rich are rich because they rob the poor’. Yes we do begrudge the fact that shareholders (or bureaucrats, in the misnamed ‘socialist’ countries which run state capitalism) own and control the productive resources of the world, because that is what stops the other 99 percent of us from accessing those resources and turning them over to production for need rather than profit. There is a profusion of research reports from the World Health Organisation and others, showing that without the artificial limits placed on production by the billionaires’ need to be sure of a market before production is permitted, then the actual global resources would be sufficient to feed, clothe and house several times the current world population.

Meanwhile, in the social system which currently exists throughout the planet, in Brand’s words,

‘The price of privilege is poverty. David Cameron said in his conference speech that profit is “not a dirty word”. Profit is the most profane word we have. In its pursuit we have forgotten that while individual interests are being met, we as a whole are being annihilated. The reality, when not fragmented through the corrupting lens of elitism, is we are all on one planet.’

### **A ‘Total Social Shift’**

Brand condemns the ways in which scapegoats are constructed and people turned against each other, so that ‘the wrath is directed to the symptom, not the problem’. He describes revolution as not violent rioting or misdirected fury, but a dignified and complete withdrawal of consent, a mass refusal to accept the current social relationships of production and ownership, which are inherently exploitative. Whilst not denying that human behaviour has elements of greed or insecurity as well as co-operation and common interest, he asks why should we continue to base our entire social fabric on the worst traits



rather than the best aspirations of humanity?

'My optimism comes entirely from the knowledge that this total social shift is actually the shared responsibility of six billion individuals who ultimately have the same interests. Self-preservation and the survival of the planet. This is a better idea than the sustenance of an elite.'

He writes that he does not have a precise or perfect blueprint for the future, but seeks nevertheless to emphasise that 'the only systems we can afford to employ are those that rationally serve the planet first, then all humanity'. By this measure, clearly, capitalism in all its forms must be ended. 'We cannot afford...old-fashioned notions like nation, capitalism and consumerism simply because it's convenient for the tiny, greedy, myopic sliver of the population that those outmoded ideas serve.'

At this point his prescription for change does become slightly vague and somewhat romantic, advocating that we meditate, love indiscriminately, reserve our condemnation exclusively for those with power, and revolt spontaneously in whatever way we want; though he is careful to specify 'without harming anyone'. He calls for a revival of the old values of the working class movement typified by the Tolpuddle martyrs, so that today's young people might realise that there is 'a culture, a strong, broad, union, that they can belong to, that is potent, virile and alive'. He makes a final call for a 'revolution of consciousness' and makes the optimistic observation that we are far from impotent, as proved by the huge twin efforts of propaganda and repression which have to be used to contain dissent around the world, the 'institutions that have to be fastidiously kept in place to maintain this duplicitous order'.

### **The Paxman interview**

A few days later, he was interviewed on Newsnight, and Paxman lost

no time in trying to ridicule and belittle all of this radicalism. He set the tone for other critics to follow, by arguing quite illogically that, because Brand declines to choose between the virtually indistinguishable brands of capitalism which we are offered to vote for once every five years, that therefore he has no 'right' to voice any opinion about how human society should be organised in the world. Brand dealt with this admirably, arguing right from the start that we can at least state what human society should not do: 'Shouldn't destroy the planet. Shouldn't create massive economic disparity. Shouldn't ignore the needs of the people.'

He explained that he does not set himself up as a political or technological expert, and that he defers to others who are more equipped than he is to fill in the gaps as to how we can best use our planetary resources to feed, clothe and house our several billion members of this human community. What he needed to point out, however, is that the current global system of minority ownership and control of resources cannot ever do that. But he did make the excellent point to Paxman that it is those who do defend the present social order who must be called on to answer for it. 'The burden of proof is on the people with power.' The system we have is indeed indefensible. The debate then is not whether to have a complete change of social system, but how best to quickly enact this urgent and obvious need, before capitalism causes even more carnage both socially and climatically.

When pressurised by Paxman to come up with a specific plan of how the alternative would work, Brand suggests:

'A socialist egalitarian system based on the massive redistribution of wealth, [with] heavy taxation of corporations...I think the very concept of profit should be hugely reduced...I say profit is a filthy word, because wherever there is a profit there is also a deficit.'

He goes on to say that there would have to be a democratic central administration rather than a government. When pressed further, he urges Paxman not to ask him to 'sit here and devise a global utopian system...I am calling for change'. And he was absolutely right to say this. No great social change has ever come from constructing an ideal 'doll's house' society, with a rule-book full of minutiae, and imposing it on the future. We need urgently and democratically to replace minority ownership with common ownership, and production for profit with production for needs.

This will not involve the 'redistribution of wealth', however, as that implies there would still be owners and non-owners. The only alternative to capitalism is to have common ownership of all productive resources, across the world community. All of those billionaire shareholders, plus the stony-faced bureaucrats of the state-capitalist regimes, have to be legitimately dispossessed by a conscious, determined, educated, peaceful majority. Then and only then can we start to produce for need, not profit. And this also has nothing to do with 'heavy taxation', as taxation is a levy on profits and therefore is a mechanism only relevant to capitalism itself.

Brand then explains what it would take for him to want to vote, telling Paxman that people are bored with politics because what's on offer is not a radical enough change, hence the frequent eruption of rioting and civil unrest. But 'when there is a genuine alternative...then, vote for that...but until then, why be complicit in this ridiculous illusion?'. He praises the Occupy movement for at least introducing into the popular lexicon the idea of the one percent versus the ninety-nine per cent, and making large numbers of people aware of vast economic corporate exploitation. He also turns the argument around on to Paxman, pointing out that he of all people must see through the charade of politics, since he has spent thirty years in interviews berating politicians of all parties for their lies and

their failed promises.

### **How was all this received?**

The responses to Brand's comments were replete with distortion, misrepresentation and personal attack, showing just how much venom is often trained against the merest whisper of dissent from the assumptions of the present world order. In the Guardian's weekly politics podcast on 31 October, associate editor Michael White unleashed a torrent of venomous, spluttering, reactionary bile against Brand, without even having read or heard what he had said:

'I listen to him and I think, what a turd he is. I have made it the two principles of my working life not to read the Sun or watch Newsnight, they're both up themselves too far, so I didn't see this interview, but I know what he's like...'

White went on to accuse Brand of 'proto-fascism' and of wanting to have a revolution 'in which probably he can do a lot of screwing around, because that seems to be one of his more important priorities. Pass the sick bag'. White has revealed more about himself than anything else in this misinformed and vindictive response. Reporter Shiv Malik on the same podcast, again with breathtaking disregard for the most fundamental journalistic principle of reporting what people say rather than what you would like them to have said, asserted that '[in his article] Brand dropped in 'non-violent'; but really I think he meant 'violent', and just go out and riot'!

Other reactions also came thick and fast. Simon Kellner acknowledged in the Independent on 24 October that 'Russell Brand is far from trivial. On Newsnight, he made Paxman look ridiculous. This was the old guard against the new, and the new came out on top.' Paxman himself had the decency and intellectual honesty a few days later to concede that Brand had been right about 'the whole green-bench pantomime in Westminster'. Writing in the Radio

Times he agreed that people are disgusted by the 'tawdry pretences' of politics, and even admitted that he had himself not voted in a recent election, as the choice of candidates was 'so unappetizing'. Nick Clegg responded to this on LBC Radio, setting himself up as a sitting duck by whining illogically that Paxman was 'sneering about politics' despite making a good living from Westminster, and that he treated all politicians as 'rogues and charlatans'. With Clegg's party holding the dubious honour of being amongst the biggest liars in recent political history (student fee rises ring a bell, Nick?), one has to ask, what else should Paxman treat them as.

Fellow comedian Robert Webb patronizingly took Brand to task via an 'open letter' in the following issue of the New Statesman, in which he sings the praises of the last Labour Party government (how short is his memory?) compared with the current Coalition, and bemoans Brand's call for social revolution, since 'We tried that again and again, and we know that it ends in death camps, gulags, repression and murder...please read some fucking Orwell.' Brand in turn responded to this in a long interview with the Huffington Post: 'Just for the record, in case anyone else from Peep Show is worried, I'm definitely against death camps...definitely no killing. I'm against that; I'm a vegetarian, I think we're all equal. I'm not saying smash people's stuff up, and definitely no killing.'

Most of the criticisms blatantly ignored all of Brand's points about present day society and what is wrong with it, and focussed purely on the supposed 'crime' of refusing to vote in elections. But in this respect, he is hardly alone. In recent UK elections, well over a third of voters could not find the motivation to go and choose between the options on offer. And what of the sham elections conducted by dictatorial regimes elsewhere, do these critics condemn those brave enough to abstain? The voting process is important, and socialists have long had a policy of writing 'world socialism' across their ballot

paper in the absence of any genuine socialist candidate. Again, this is something which Brand has also mentioned. In a follow-up piece for the Guardian (5 November) he mentions his friend's 15-year-old son who, he says, prefers the idea of spoiling ballots rather than not voting, 'to show we care', and Brand adds, 'maybe he's right, I don't know'.

In the same piece he also writes movingly of an encounter whilst on tour with his show, at Watford, with some soldiers and some Muslim women. It led to thoughts about the insanity and legalised murder of warfare and the hugely important recognition that: 'The reality is we have more in common with the people we're bombing than the people we're bombing them for.'

He does go on to propose that the billions being used to bail out banks, or the unpaid tax of tycoons like Sir Philip Green, should be used to 'create one million jobs at fifty grand a year'. However, this would not be a lasting solution since it would leave intact the same root cause which has led to all of this in the first place: the existence of capitalism. We must go further and end the institution of working for wages or salaries itself as it is this, the wages/profits system, which is causing all of the social contradictions from which we suffer.

Let us all take up Russell Brand's proposition. The need to get rid of capitalism is urgent. We do need to think outside of the constraints of the profit system. The solution is very clear. Common ownership of all productive resources. Democratic control of society. Production for need, not profit. This needs to happen now, and the only remaining missing ingredient is a conscious and well-informed majority determined to take democratic action to make it happen.

Brand acknowledges movements like Occupy for putting on the public agenda the idea of the power of the one per cent which prevents the freedom of the ninety-nine per cent. We owe Russell

Brand some thanks now for helping to put the idea of revolution back into public discussion too, at a time when a complete change of social system is more urgent than ever.

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