Re-thinking Revolution: A Systems Approach to Sustaining Democracy

James Tonson

Abstract

In late 2013 an interview with Russell Brand went viral. He gained widespread attention for asserting that we should stop voting at elections as it legitimises a failing political system. Our system of democracy is not perfect, but at what point can calls for revolution be justified? This paper briefly examines our democratic system and Brand’s call for revolution in light of two systems theories. The first is ‘Panarchy’, a model of ecological system adaptation with growing application to social systems. The second is Donella Meadows’ ‘Leverage Points’. Through these lenses, I explore the purpose, history and evolution of our political system, leading us to an appreciation of the mindsets within which it has arisen. I argue that this appreciation reveals the value and inherent achievement of the democratic system we’ve constructed thus far, and that the revolutions required to sustain and develop it are principally conceptual rather than political.

Introduction

In a late 2013 interview with the BBC’s Jeremy Paxman (Russell Brand talks about his revolution 2013) and in an article for the New Statesman magazine (Brand 2013a), Russell Brand attracted significant public attention with the proposition that ‘people should refrain from voting’. He argued that current political structures are fundamentally flawed as they have enabled both widespread human induced ecological destruction and the entrenchment of economic inequality. He described widespread apathy about politics as a “rational reaction to a system… that is apathetic” to issues of economic justice and environmental sustainability (Brand 2013a). He suggested that voting is not only ineffective but serves to legitimise this failing system. Instead he advocated for a “total revolution of consciousness and our entire social, political and economic system” noting that this “is the only way I can be enthused about politics” (Brand 2013a).

A number of critics dismissed Brand as a naïve and attention seeking celebrity (Brand 2013b). Whether or not that is true, Brand raised significant and relevant issues about whether our democratic system is adequate for sustaining our society and the broader ecological systems. His critique flummoxed the accomplished Jeremy Paxman, captured public imagination and warrants a serious response.

Our democratic system should not be taken for granted.

Declining voter turnouts around the world (and the increasing number of informal votes cast in compulsory voting systems such as Australia) have been the concern of political theorists and commentators for some time (Pintor et al. 2002). Various electoral reforms have been proposed and adopted to address this but they have not yet arrested this trend. Our democratic system is a key enabler for a range of other economic and cultural systems which have been elsewhere described as “fundamentally anti-life”, making dissent a “pre-requisite for survival” (Sardar 1999, p. 2). But, in a world awash with dissent, at what point can
outright revolution be justified on the basis that “resilience is maintained by disturbance”? (Pritchard & Sanderson 2002, p. 165)

For the purpose of this examination, let us accept Brand’s premise that we are failing to adequately address the key social and ecological challenges of our time, and focus on his assertions that this is due to the failure of our political system and that this failure is so complete as to warrant a revolution. In exploring these contentions I will draw on two systems theories to explore the operations of our political system, its contexts and the ways we might intervene. Constant consideration of these issues is important for the maintenance of democracy, regardless of whether we agree with Brand’s assertions about specific failures or the causes of them.

**Panarchy**

Ecological systems theorists including Gunderson and Holling (2002) have developed a model of ecological and social systems known as *Panarchy*. This describes four phases of system adaptation:

- Exploitation: system growth and development using available resources to increase the system’s potential and connectedness;
- Conservation: increasing rigidity as resources and/or adaptability deplete; potential stagnates as connectedness peaks;
- Release: system collapse as rigid connections become unsustainable; leading to
- Reorganisation: old and new elements gradually rearrange to exploit a new configuration of elements and resources (Gunderson & Holling 2002, pp. 32-52).

In political systems, revolution can be described as the release from conservation through to reorganisation. This takes place when socio-political connectedness has become so strong as to become rigid, reducing the system’s potential for development and its resilience, leading to collapse. Revolution breaks down existing political structures, paving the way for the reorganisation of structures that can then be exploited for further development. Of course, more micro-level cycles of adaptation take place within the life of political systems too, which Gunderson and Holling, with Peterson, argue is healthier (2002, p. 95).

**Meadows’ leverage points**

Environmental scientist and systems theorist, Donella Meadows (1999, p. 5), describes a series of leverage points for intervening in systems which she has listed “in increasing order of effectiveness”, namely:

12. Constants, parameters, numbers (such as subsidies, taxes, standards);
11. The sizes of buffers and other stabilizing stocks, relative to their flows;
10. The structure of material stocks and flows (such as transport networks, population age structures);
9. The lengths of delays, relative to the rate of system change;
8. The strength of negative feedback loops, relative to the impacts they are trying to correct against;
7. The gain around driving positive feedback loops;
6. The structure of information flows (who does and does not have access to information);
5. The rules of the system (such as incentives, punishments, constraints);
4. The power to add, change, evolve or self-organise system structure;
3. The goals of the system;
2. The mindset or paradigm out of which the system — its goals, structure, rules, delays, parameters — arises;
1. The power to transcend paradigms.

As well as being points of intervention, these also provide ways in which to analyse the health and broader contexts of a system. For example, looking at point six we can observe that information about complex social, ecological and political problems is abundant, diverse and hotly disputed. Our political system arguably lacks sources of information with broad legitimacy, as the legitimacy of scientific and political institutions that provide information has been undermined (for example, the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change). Therefore, we might decide to intervene in our political system with an educational program about the processes that generate scientific knowledge, or political processes (such as Royal Commissions) that generate publicly legitimated information. This kind of intervention also addresses points two and one in Meadows’ list (more on them later).

In the analysis that follows, I intend to focus on the last five of Meadows’ points, as this is where Brand’s proposals may be located, and where Meadows has suggested that we can be most effective. Brand’s proposals address point five - his call for political and economic revolution, point three - his call for a system more oriented towards sustainability and equality, and point two - his call for a revolution of consciousness that would enable the other changes. However, a deeper analysis of (at least) the last five points sheds more light on whether our political system is responsible for our failure to adequately address issues of social equality and ecological sustainability, bringing into question Brand’s revolutionary approach.

The purpose of our political system

Let us begin by examining the purpose of our political system (thereby informing the goals we might set at point three). This is of course contested and has evolved over time. At its most basic level, the purpose of a political system is to make decisions and resolve conflicts to enable social and economic cooperation. But cooperation for what? If we stretch our gaze back prior to the origins of democracy, to the beginnings of human political organisation, we can appreciate that an early objective was to provide a sense of order, protection from enemies, stability and ideally peace. This was (and remains) closely connected with the ability to provide for our basic economic needs (food and shelter). As these needs were met by feudal and tyrannical systems, we developed ambitions for systems that could also provide more freedom and a more equal distribution of economic wealth (Rosanvallon 2008, pp. 292-4; Keane 2009, pp. 461-2). Our experiments with democracy (and capitalism) have been broadly successful in this regard, though there remain tensions between whether our priority should be for freedom or equality (Little 2012, p. 5). The purpose of ensuring ‘sustainability’ has emerged only in recent decades, although it is arguably just a new expression of the need for (sustained) order in response to the ecological disorders caused by the unrestrained (free) pursuit of material wealth.
In parallel with these growing expectations, the span of institutionalised cooperation has grown larger: from tribal systems, city states, principalities, nation states and now the ever growing global political institutions and agreements (Keane 2009). These increasing scales of human activity, supported by continually increasing population and knowledge, and more powerful technology, have created larger and larger problems and conflicts, yet without denting the growth in our expectations of our political systems.

**Changes in political systems**

One of the political adaptations that has evolved to cope with growing aspirations has been the expansion of the political franchise: from despots and monarchs to land owners, ethnically alike men, women, other ethnic groups and now even codified rights for children. In many cases, additions to the franchise were hard won by uprisings of the excluded (Keane 2009, pp. 540-8, 721-7). In political terms, we could even view climate change and instability as an uprising by the natural world in search of political representation. It is certainly mirrored by the growth of human ‘environment’ groups, green parties, processes such as the ‘council of all beings’ and, in some places, legal recognition of the rights of natural ecosystems (Vidal 2011).

Returning to Meadows’ list, we can see that not only have the goals (point three) and the rules (point five) of the system developed and changed over time, but that the power to change the rules (point four) is in part held by those outside the franchise. Brand’s contribution itself illustrates that one can publicly call for a complete re-building of the system and gain significant public attention without fear of persecution. In terms of Panarchy, ongoing changes indicate that the system continues to grow in both potential and connectedness and does not yet appear to be reaching such a rigid form as to require collapse and release for reorganisation.

**The role of perceptions and mindsets**

The changes in expectations of our political systems are also an example of changes in mindset (point two in Meadow’s list) and how changes at this level drive changes in other parts of the system. This can be described as nested social systems interacting at different speeds: “slowly developed myths (structures of signification) [shape] faster rules and norms (structures of legitimation) [which in turn shape] still faster processes to allocate resources (structures of domination)” (Westley, cited in Gunderson, Holling & Peterson 2002, p. 72). Brand himself acknowledges this need to address not just domination and legitimation but signification, with his call for a revolution of consciousness towards a culture of inclusiveness (Brand 2013a).

However, Brand’s writing also reveals some limiting current mindsets regarding our political system. In particular, some dualisms are present in Brand’s descriptions which, while typical of ‘Western’ thought are neither very helpful nor accurate (Fisher 2006, pp. 4-13). Firstly, Brand implies a contrast between elites who run the political system for their own benefit and an underclass that feels largely powerless and unserved by the system. While there are significant differentials of wealth and power, the reality is a more complex spectrum in which the diversity of interests and groups (including among ‘elites’) ensures that no one group holds power for too long. Thus to some extent, everybody has a sense of their aspirations being thwarted by those of others (Little 2012, pp. 8-9).
Secondly, Brand’s perspective of being a ‘system outsider’ reveals a view of the political system as being distinct and separate from the people it serves. Does this mean that Brand and others had come to expect the system to serve them without their participation?

*It can seem easier to take psychological comfort in seeing ourselves as outsiders and thus avoid the responsibility of realising that the failure of the system is really a failure of those of whom it consists.*

What is our political system and its institutions comprised of if not us? As alluded to above, history is full of examples where people not recognised by formal political institutions have been able to change the rules. This was not achieved by voting. Democracy itself is nested within a culture that shapes moral values, expectations and the formal democratic institutions that in turn help to preserve this culture. Political historian Rosanvallon (2008, p. 8) describes this as ‘counter-democracy’, “a democracy of indirect powers disseminated throughout society” not opposed to the formal institutions but to complement them by overcoming the limitations of relying on the episodic nature of voting. “In a sense it is democratic life unmediated” (Rosanvallon 2008, p. 25).

**Pursuing system change**

Brand’s call to action is a part of this informal democratic process and perhaps his revolutionary rhetoric is ‘just’ a means of seeking reform. However, he and others may find a greater sense of empowerment from openly framing their actions as part of democracy’s ongoing contest about itself. In this way he would help not just to shift our mindsets but to intervene at Meadows’ most effective lever by enhancing people’s ability to transcend their own mindsets and paradigms.

*This requires helping people to see the democratic process at work (not as ‘not working’) and the way our own mindsets shape how we perceive the democratic process.*

Rosanvallon (2008, p. 310) goes so far as to say that democratic politics “cannot substantively exist without effort to make the organising mechanisms of social life visible” and that the goal of politics is “to reveal society to itself, to give meaning and form to a world in which individuals find it increasingly difficult to orient themselves” and “to see themselves as members of a collective” (Rosanvallon 2008, p. 308).

So is our political system failing us, or are we failing it? In a sense, a revolution is required. But the structural re-organisation needed is principally conceptual rather than political, beginning by transcending the notion that ‘the system’ is somehow distinct from ‘us’. In terms of Panarchy, our political system continues to demonstrate dynamism and potential without yet reaching a level of rigidity that might require – or, as Gunderson and Holling might say, enable – a revolutionary release. One might even argue that once the system does develop such rigidity, revolution will take place regardless. The rigidity that risks collapse exists within our conceptual simplifications of ‘us’ and ‘them’, equating ‘democracy’ with ‘voting’, and viewing ‘failure’ and ‘success’ through the narrow lens of short time frames.
The failure to appreciate the long (and continual) evolution of our democratic system and the social and cultural norms and attitudes that underpin it creates an unjustified attraction to revolution. Any new system of comparable value and effectiveness would surely take a similar time to develop. In the meantime we can do much to improve the system by adjusting our mindsets and, more importantly, developing our collective capacity to transcend paradigms. In this way revolutions in thought and reform of political systems become symbiotic parts of the same process.

References


Meadows, D 1999, Leverage points: Places to intervene in a system, The Sustainability Institute, Hartland.


Russell Brand talks about his revolution [television program], Newsnight, BBC2, 23 October 2013.
