

Exiting The Vampire Castle

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Contents

Inside the Vampires' Castle	6
Neo-anarchy in the UK	8
What is to be done?	9

This summer, I seriously considered withdrawing from any involvement in politics. Exhausted through overwork, incapable of productive activity, I found myself drifting through social networks, feeling my depression and exhaustion increasing.

‘Left-wing’ Twitter can often be a miserable, dispiriting zone. Earlier this year, there were some high-profile twitterstorms, in which particular left-identifying figures were ‘called out’ and condemned. What these figures had said was sometimes objectionable; but nevertheless, the way in which they were personally vilified and hounded left a horrible residue: the stench of bad conscience and witch-hunting moralism. The reason I didn’t speak out on any of these incidents, I’m ashamed to say, was fear. The bullies were in another part of the playground. I didn’t want to attract their attention to me.

The open savagery of these exchanges was accompanied by something more pervasive, and for that reason perhaps more debilitating: an atmosphere of snarky resentment. The most frequent object of this resentment is Owen Jones, and the attacks on Jones – the person most responsible for raising class consciousness in the UK in the last few years – were one of the reasons I was so dejected. If this is what happens to a left-winger who is actually succeeding in taking the struggle to the centre ground of British life, why would anyone want to follow him into the mainstream? Is the only way to avoid this drip-feed of abuse to remain in a position of impotent marginality?

One of the things that broke me out of this depressive stupor was going to the People’s Assembly in Ipswich, near where I live. The People’s Assembly had been greeted with the usual sneers and snarks. This was, we were told, a useless stunt, in which media leftists, including Jones, were aggrandising themselves in yet another display of top-down celebrity culture. What actually happened at the Assembly in Ipswich was very different to this caricature. The first half of the evening – culminating in a rousing speech by Owen Jones – was certainly led by the top-table speakers. But the second half of the meeting saw working class activists from all over Suffolk talking to each other, supporting one another, sharing experiences and strategies. Far from being another example of hierarchical leftism, the People’s Assembly was an example of how the vertical can be combined with the horizontal: media power and charisma could draw people who hadn’t previously been to a political meeting into the room, where they could talk and strategise with seasoned activists. The atmosphere was anti-racist and anti-sexist, but refreshingly free of the paralysing feeling of guilt and suspicion which hangs over left-wing twitter like an acrid, stifling fog.

Then there was Russell Brand. I’ve long been an admirer of Brand – one of the few big-name comedians on the current scene to come from a working class background. Over the last few years, there has been a gradual but remorseless embourgeoisement of television comedy, with preposterous ultra-posh nincompoop Michael McIntyre and a dreary drizzle of bland graduate chancers dominating the stage.

The day before Brand’s now famous interview with Jeremy Paxman was broadcast on *Newsnight*, I had seen Brand’s stand-up show the Messiah Complex in Ipswich. The show was defiantly pro-immigrant, pro-communist, anti-homophobic, saturated with working class intelligence and not afraid to show it, and queer in the way that popular

culture used to be (i.e. nothing to do with the sour-faced identitarian piety foisted upon us by moralisers on the post-structuralist ‘left’). Malcolm X, Che, politics as a psychedelic dismantling of existing reality: this was communism as something cool, sexy and proletarian, instead of a finger-wagging sermon.

The next night, it was clear that Brand’s appearance had produced a moment of splitting. For some of us, Brand’s forensic take-down of Paxman was intensely moving, miraculous; I couldn’t remember the last time a person from a working class background had been given the space to so consummately destroy a class ‘superior’ using intelligence and reason. This wasn’t Johnny Rotten swearing at Bill Grundy – an act of antagonism which confirmed rather than challenged class stereotypes. Brand had *outwitted* Paxman – and the use of humour was what separated Brand from the dourness of so much ‘leftism’. Brand makes people feel good about themselves; whereas the moralising left specialises in making people feel bad, and is not happy until their heads are bent in guilt and self-loathing.

The moralising left quickly ensured that the story was not about Brand’s extraordinary breach of the bland conventions of mainstream media ‘debate’, nor about his claim that revolution was *going to happen*. (This last claim could only be heard by the cloth-eared petit-bourgeois narcissistic ‘left’ as Brand saying that he wanted to *lead* the revolution – something that they responded to with typical resentment: ‘I don’t need a jumped-up *celebrity* to lead *me*’.) For the moralisers, the dominant story was to be about Brand’s personal conduct – specifically his sexism. In the febrile McCarthyite atmosphere fermented by the moralising left, remarks that could be construed as sexist mean that Brand *is* a sexist, which also meant that he *is* a misogynist. Cut and dried, finished, condemned.

It is right that Brand, like any of us, should answer for his behaviour and the language that he uses. But such questioning should take place in an atmosphere of comradeship and solidarity, and probably not in public in the first instance – although when Brand was questioned about sexism by Mehdi Hasan, he displayed exactly the kind of good-humoured humility that was entirely lacking in the stony faces of those who had judged him. “I don’t think I’m sexist, But I remember my grandmother, the loveliest person I’ve ever known, but she was racist, but I don’t think she knew. I don’t know if I have some cultural hangover, I know that I have a great love of proletariat linguistics, like ‘darling’ and ‘bird’, so if women think I’m sexist they’re in a better position to judge than I am, so I’ll work on that.”

Brand’s intervention was not a bid for leadership; it was an inspiration, a call to arms. And I for one was inspired. Where a few months before, I would have stayed silent as the PoshLeft moralisers subjected Brand to their kangaroo courts and character assassinations – with ‘evidence’ usually gleaned from the right-wing press, always available to lend a hand – this time I was prepared to take them on. The response to Brand quickly became as significant as the Paxman exchange itself. As Laura Oldfield Ford pointed out, this was a clarifying moment. And one of the things that was clari-

fied for me was the way in which, in recent years, so much of the self-styled ‘left’ has suppressed the question of class.

Class consciousness is fragile and fleeting. The petit bourgeoisie which dominates the academy and the culture industry has all kinds of subtle deflections and pre-emptions which prevent the topic even coming up, and then, if it does come up, they make one think it is a terrible impertinence, a breach of etiquette, to raise it. I’ve been speaking now at left-wing, anti-capitalist events for years, but I’ve rarely talked – or been asked to talk – about class in public.

But, once class had re-appeared, it was impossible not to see it everywhere in the response to the Brand affair. Brand was quickly judged and-or questioned by at least three ex-private school people on the left. Others told us that Brand couldn’t really be working class, because he was a millionaire. It’s alarming how many ‘leftists’ seemed to fundamentally agree with the drift behind Paxman’s question: ‘What gives this working class person the authority to speak?’ It’s also alarming, actually distressing, that they seem to think that working class people should remain in poverty, obscurity and impotence lest they lose their ‘authenticity’.

Someone passed me a post written about Brand on Facebook. I don’t know the individual who wrote it, and I wouldn’t wish to name them. What’s important is that the post was symptomatic of a set of snobbish and condescending attitudes that it is apparently alright to exhibit while still classifying oneself as left wing. The whole tone was horrifyingly high-handed, as if they were a schoolteacher marking a child’s work, or a psychiatrist assessing a patient. Brand, apparently, is ‘clearly extremely unstable ... one bad relationship or career knockback away from collapsing back into drug addiction or worse.’ Although the person claims that they ‘really quite like [Brand]’, it perhaps never occurs to them that one of the reasons that Brand might be ‘unstable’ is just this sort of patronising faux-transcendent ‘assessment’ from the ‘left’ bourgeoisie. There’s also a shocking but revealing aside where the individual casually refers to Brand’s ‘patchy education [and] the often wince-inducing vocab slips characteristic of the autodidact’ – which, this individual generously says, ‘I have no problem with at all’ – how very good of them! This isn’t some colonial bureaucrat writing about his attempts to teach some ‘natives’ the English language in the nineteenth century, or a Victorian schoolmaster at some private institution describing a scholarship boy, it’s a ‘leftist’ writing a few weeks ago.

Where to go from here? It is first of all necessary to identify the features of the discourses and the desires which have led us to this grim and demoralising pass, where class has disappeared, but moralism is everywhere, where solidarity is impossible, but guilt and fear are omnipresent – and not because we are terrorised by the right, but because we have allowed bourgeois modes of subjectivity to contaminate our movement. I think there are two libidinal-discursive configurations which have brought this situation about. They call themselves left wing, but – as the Brand episode has made clear – they are in many ways a sign that the left – defined as an agent in a class struggle – has all but disappeared.

Inside the Vampires' Castle

The first configuration is what I came to call the Vampires' Castle. The Vampires' Castle specialises in propagating guilt. It is driven by a *priest's desire* to excommunicate and condemn, an *academic-pedant's desire* to be the first to be seen to spot a mistake, and a *hipster's desire* to be one of the in-crowd. The danger in attacking the Vampires' Castle is that it can look as if – and it will do everything it can to reinforce this thought – that one is also attacking the struggles against racism, sexism, heterosexism. But, far from being the only legitimate expression of such struggles, the Vampires' Castle is best understood as a bourgeois-liberal perversion and appropriation of the energy of these movements. The Vampires' Castle was born the moment when the struggle *not* to be defined by identitarian categories became the quest to have 'identities' recognised by a bourgeois big Other.

The privilege I certainly enjoy as a white male consists in part in my not being aware of my ethnicity and my gender, and it is a sobering and revelatory experience to occasionally be made aware of these blind-spots. But, rather than seeking a world in which everyone achieves freedom from identitarian classification, the Vampires' Castle seeks to corral people back into identi-camps, where they are forever defined in the terms set by dominant power, crippled by self-consciousness and isolated by a logic of solipsism which insists that we cannot understand one another unless we belong to the same identity group.

I've noticed a fascinating magical inversion projection-disavowal mechanism whereby the sheer mention of class is now automatically treated as if that means one is trying to downgrade the importance of race and gender. In fact, the exact opposite is the case, as the Vampires' Castle uses an ultimately liberal understanding of race and gender to obfuscate class. In all of the absurd and traumatic twitterstorms about privilege earlier this year it was noticeable that the discussion of *class* privilege was entirely absent. The task, as ever, remains the articulation of class, gender and race – but the founding move of the Vampires' Castle is the *dis*-articulation of class from other categories.

The problem that the Vampires' Castle was set up to solve is this: how do you hold immense wealth and power while also appearing as a victim, marginal and oppositional? The solution was already there – in the Christian Church. So the VC has recourse to all the infernal strategies, dark pathologies and psychological torture instruments Christianity invented, and which Nietzsche described in *The Genealogy of Morals*. This priesthood of bad conscience, this nest of pious guilt-mongers, is exactly what Nietzsche predicted when he said that something worse than Christianity was already on the way. Now, here it is ...

The Vampires' Castle feeds on the energy and anxieties and vulnerabilities of young students, but most of all it lives by converting the suffering of particular groups – the more 'marginal' the better – into academic capital. The most lauded figures in the Vampires' Castle are those who have spotted a new market in suffering – those who

can find a group more oppressed and subjugated than any previously exploited will find themselves promoted through the ranks very quickly.

The first law of the Vampires' Castle is: individualise and privatise everything. While *in theory* it claims to be in favour of structural critique, *in practice* it never focuses on anything except individual behaviour. Some of these working class types are not terribly well brought up, and can be very rude at times. Remember: condemning individuals is always more important than paying attention to impersonal structures. The actual ruling class propagates ideologies of individualism, while tending to *act* as a class. (Many of what we call 'conspiracies' are the ruling class showing class solidarity.) The VC, as dupe-servants of the ruling class, does the opposite: it pays lip service to 'solidarity' and 'collectivity', while always acting as if the individualist categories imposed by power really hold. Because they are petit-bourgeois to the core, the members of the Vampires' Castle are intensely competitive, but this is repressed in the passive aggressive manner typical of the bourgeoisie. What holds them together is not solidarity, but mutual fear – the fear that they will be the next one to be outed, exposed, condemned.

The second law of the Vampires' Castle is: make thought and action appear very, very difficult. There must be no lightness, and certainly no humour. Humour isn't serious, by definition, right? Thought is hard work, for people with posh voices and furrowed brows. Where there is confidence, introduce scepticism. Say: don't be hasty, we have to think more deeply about this. Remember: having convictions is oppressive, and might lead to gulags.

The third law of the Vampires' Castle is: propagate as much guilt as you can. The more guilt the better. People must feel bad: it is a sign that they understand the gravity of things. It's OK to be class-privileged if you feel guilty about privilege and make others in a subordinate class position to you feel guilty too. You do some good works for the poor, too, right?

The fourth law of the Vampires' Castle is: essentialize. While fluidity of identity, plurality and multiplicity are always claimed on behalf of the VC members – partly to cover up their own invariably wealthy, privileged or bourgeois-assimilationist background – the enemy is always to be essentialized. Since the desires animating the VC are in large part priests' desires to excommunicate and condemn, there has to be a strong distinction between Good and Evil, with the latter essentialized. Notice the tactics. X has made a remark/ has behaved in a particular way – these remarks/ this behaviour might be construed as transphobic/ sexist etc. So far, OK. But it's the next move which is the kicker. X then becomes defined *as* a transphobe/ sexist etc. Their whole identity becomes defined by one ill-judged remark or behavioural slip. Once the VC has mustered its witch-hunt, the victim (often from a working class background, and not schooled in the passive aggressive etiquette of the bourgeoisie) can reliably be goaded into losing their temper, further securing their position as pariah/ latest to be consumed in feeding frenzy.

The fifth law of the Vampires' Castle: think like a liberal (because you are one). The VC's work of constantly stoking up reactive outrage consists of endlessly pointing out the screamingly obvious: capital behaves like capital (it's not very nice!), repressive state apparatuses are repressive. We must protest!

Neo-anarchy in the UK

The second libidinal formation is neo-anarchism. By neo-anarchists I definitely do not mean anarchists or syndicalists involved in actual workplace organisation, such as the Solidarity Federation. I mean, rather, those who identify as anarchists but whose involvement in politics extends little beyond student protests and occupations, and commenting on Twitter. Like the denizens of the Vampires' Castle, neo-anarchists usually come from a petit-bourgeois background, if not from somewhere even more class-privileged.

They are also overwhelmingly young: in their twenties or at most their early thirties, and what informs the neo-anarchist position is a narrow historical horizon. Neo-anarchists have experienced nothing but capitalist realism. By the time the neo-anarchists had come to political consciousness – and many of them have come to political consciousness remarkably recently, given the level of bullish swagger they sometimes display – the Labour Party had become a Blairite shell, implementing neo-liberalism with a small dose of social justice on the side. But the problem with neo-anarchism is that it unthinkingly reflects this historical moment rather than offering any escape from it. It forgets, or perhaps is genuinely unaware of, the Labour Party's role in nationalising major industries and utilities or founding the National Health Service. Neo-anarchists will assert that 'parliamentary politics never changed anything', or the 'Labour Party was always useless' while attending protests about the NHS, or retweeting complaints about the dismantling of what remains of the welfare state. There's a strange implicit rule here: it's OK to protest against what parliament has done, but it's not alright to enter into parliament or the mass media to attempt to engineer change from there. Mainstream media is to be disdained, but BBC Question Time is to be watched and moaned about on Twitter. Purism shades into fatalism; better not to be in any way tainted by the corruption of the mainstream, better to uselessly 'resist' than to risk getting your hands dirty.

It's not surprising, then, that so many neo-anarchists come across as depressed. This depression is no doubt reinforced by the anxieties of postgraduate life, since, like the Vampires' Castle, neo-anarchism has its natural home in universities, and is usually propagated by those studying for postgraduate qualifications, or those who have recently graduated from such study.

What is to be done?

Why have these two configurations come to the fore? The first reason is that they have been allowed to prosper by capital because they serve its interests. Capital subdued the organised working class by decomposing class consciousness, viciously subjugating trade unions while seducing ‘hard working families’ into identifying with their own narrowly defined interests instead of the interests of the wider class; but why would capital be concerned about a ‘left’ that replaces class politics with a moralising individualism, and that, far from building solidarity, spreads fear and insecurity?

The second reason is what Jodi Dean has called communicative capitalism. It might have been possible to ignore the Vampires’ Castle and the neo-anarchists if it weren’t for capitalist cyberspace. The VC’s pious moralising has been a feature of a certain ‘left’ for many years – but, if one wasn’t a member of this particular church, its sermons could be avoided. Social media means that this is no longer the case, and there is little protection from the psychic pathologies propagated by these discourses.

So what can we do now? First of all, it is imperative to reject identitarianism, and to recognise that there are no identities, only desires, interests and identifications. Part of the importance of the British Cultural Studies project – as revealed so powerfully and so movingly in John Akomfrah’s installation *The Unfinished Conversation* (currently in Tate Britain) and his film *The Stuart Hall Project* – was to have resisted identitarian essentialism. Instead of freezing people into chains of already-existing equivalences, the point was to treat any articulation as provisional and plastic. New articulations can always be created. No-one is essentially anything. Sadly, the right act on this insight more effectively than the left does. The bourgeois-identitarian left knows how to propagate guilt and conduct a witch hunt, but it doesn’t know how to make converts. But that, after all, is not the point. The aim is not to popularise a leftist position, or to win people over to it, but to remain in a position of elite superiority, but now with class superiority redoubled by *moral* superiority too. ‘How dare you talk – it’s we who speak for those who suffer!’

But the rejection of identitarianism can only be achieved by the re-assertion of class. A left that does not have class at its core can only be a liberal pressure group. Class consciousness is always double: it involves a simultaneous knowledge of the way in which class frames and shapes all experience, and a knowledge of the particular position that we occupy in the class structure. It must be remembered that the aim of our struggle is not recognition by the bourgeoisie, nor even the destruction of the bourgeoisie itself. It is the class structure – a structure that wounds everyone, even those who materially profit from it – that must be destroyed. The interests of the working class are the interests of all; the interests of the bourgeoisie are the interests of capital, which are the interests of no-one. Our struggle must be towards the construction of a new and surprising world, not the preservation of identities shaped and distorted by capital.

If this seems like a forbidding and daunting task, it is. But we can start to engage in many prefigurative activities right now. Actually, such activities would go beyond pre-figuration – they could start a virtuous cycle, a self-fulfilling prophecy in which bourgeois modes of subjectivity are dismantled and a new universality starts to build itself. We need to learn, or re-learn, how to build comradeship and solidarity instead of doing capital’s work for it by condemning and abusing each other. This doesn’t mean, of course, that we must always agree – on the contrary, we must create conditions where disagreement can take place without fear of exclusion and excommunication.

We need to think very strategically about how to use social media – always remembering that, despite the egalitarianism claimed for social media by capital’s libidinal engineers, that this is currently an enemy territory, dedicated to the reproduction of capital. But this doesn’t mean that we can’t occupy the terrain and start to use it for the purposes of producing class consciousness. We must break out of the ‘debate’ set up by communicative capitalism, in which capital is endlessly cajoling us to participate, and remember that we are involved in a class struggle. The goal is not to ‘be’ an activist, but to aid the working class to activate – and transform – itself. Outside the Vampires’ Castle, anything is possible.

The Ted K Archive

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