



systemic change



Alan Sugar on the Apprentice: "She is ruthless. She'll walk over anybody, chew them up for breakfast and spit them out. That's what I like about her."

Human nature is just fine

Most people are perfectly nice – kind, friendly, honest and with a desire to leave the world a better place than they found it. But some people aren't. It's only a small minority, but some people are selfish, greedy and ruthless. The problem is that in this system, those kinds of people will do very well, and reach positions of influence. In fact, the current system is biased *in favour* of people like that. And so we need a new system – one that rewards good qualities rather than bad ones. The problem is not 'human nature', and it's not enough to replace 'bad' people at the top of the corporate ladder, because similar people will quickly replace them. The problem is the system.

Lifestyle change is not enough

99% of this website is about ways in which people can change their lives, one topic at a time. But it's not enough, because not enough people will do it. Think about the most popular food, furniture or clothing brands, retail outlets, newspapers, magazines, TV programmes and books; about the ubiquity of advertising; about the most popular political parties; about the ability of the corporate media to shape opinions – then ask yourself if enough people are going to change. The corporate system we live under, apart from promoting bad human qualities, is inherently damaging to nature and to democracy, and therefore has to be replaced. Incremental lifestyle change without systemic change is a case of one step forwards and three back.

We can't get a better system with violence

If change has to be more than incremental, that means it has to be – well, revolutionary. But we don't mean revolution as in violent revolution. That won't work – it's been tried before, and the people who lead the violence always keep the power after the revolution, instead of distributing it as promised. Karl Marx's revolutionary idea was the last (implementable) one as far as systemic change is concerned – but the 20th century showed that it wasn't the right one. Some will say that Marx's idea was never really tried – but if we go down the route of violent revolution, we'll always get a Stalin or a Mao in the end.

It's all about implementability

So if incremental change is not enough, and violence doesn't solve anything, but we definitely need to change the system, we need a strategy to do it. But remember that ideas have to be implementable. It's a waste of time saying that your idea is to get corporate money out of politics, or to stop manufacturing weapons if you don't have a strategy to make it happen. We can all wish for things that are basically unimplementable – that's the easy part.

Taking a 'left' or a 'right' position affects implementability. We have to talk – Christians to Muslims, socialists to conservatives, vegans to hunters. If we don't, we're making enemies of each other and that can only result in stalemate. Left and right can surely agree that we need a better system, that promotes the most honest, compassionate and intelligent amongst us.



Mikhail Bakunin warned Marx that taking centralised power by force would result in totalitarianism. Unfortunately, he lost the debate.



How about pure democracy or no leaders?

Some people point to new technologies and suggest that they could be used to help us transition to a system of pure democracy – electronic referenda on all issues, for example. That may well be an improvement on the current corporate system, but a potential problem is that the vast majority of people don't really understand the issues, and many people will vote in their own self-interest rather than in the interest of all. This could be very bad news for minorities or for the environment. This kind of pure democracy has been described as 'two wolves and a sheep voting on what's for dinner'.

So what about no state at all – libertarianism? Well, without government we'd need to organise well to prevent corporations from running the show (although mutualists like Kevin Carson argue persuasively that multinational corporations would lose their 'economies of scale' without state assistance). Anarchists take it a step further – let's remove the power of the state *and* of corporations – it's more consistent. It would take time however, and it could be argued that there's no way to transition from the current system to a leaderless system in one move – the current system is too entrenched. Furthermore, there are issues around technology: cloning, nuclear weaponry, genetic modification, nanotechnology, artificial intelligence – all these things present huge risks for the future of humanity. Currently, decisions about whether we use these technologies or not are made on the basis of how much money can be made from them, which is clearly a bad idea – but in a leaderless system, who would make those decisions?

Let's discuss ideas. People who suggest this are often ridiculed for not already having the big idea that will change the world, as Jeremy Paxman did to Russell Brand. But that's asking too much of an individual, and it may not be a good idea to have a blueprint for a new system. We have to start talking.

To summarise

1. Individual lifestyle change is essential – but not enough, because only a minority will do it.
2. The other things we advocate – small companies over corporations, land reform and a steady-state economy are not possible under the current system, because corporate power will prevent them.
3. It's not about corrupt individuals or corporations. People die, and companies come and go – think Lehman Brothers or Enron. It's the system itself that's the problem.
4. Systemic change can be initiated by relatively few people – in fact systemic change has always been initiated by relatively few people.
5. We need to talk.

resources

- see lowimpact.org/systemic_change for more information, links and books, including:
- Roy Madron & John Jopling, *Gaian Democracies*
- David Korten, *the Great Turning*
- George Monbiot, *the Age of Consent*

For some ideas on system change, on Wikipedia, look up: simultaneous policy; sortition; ujamaa; philosopher kings; participatory budgeting; open-source governance; Iroquois Confederacy; Cleisthenes; contraction & convergence; demarchy; the Mondragon Corporation.



Whatever you think of Russell Brand, it's unfair to expect him to come up with a new system in a TV interview, just because he's not too keen on this one.

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