

Radio 4 Radicals

Kris King – September 18th 2011

<http://www.rantinaminor.co.uk/2011/09/radio-4-radicals/>

One of the bizarre things I've discovered about getting older, at least for me, is not that I find myself worrying about nature's great, big, ticking, death-shaped clock of impending mortality cessation; nor is it that I'm concerned with checking off the list of things one is supposed to be in possession of at this point (wife, kids, mortgage, dog, massive sense of futile despair at one's interminable existence etc.) – it's more that I've come to feel like I've sort of always been this "age", as if my personality were a suit that was at least 14 sizes too large and was just waiting for me to grow in to it. The suit might have had one or two minor alterations over the years, nothing drastic, but it otherwise remains pretty much exactly the same as when I first got it. As your tastes, opinions, and beliefs begin to coalesce in your twenties and thirties, you develop a far clearer understanding of who you are, what kind of suit you're wearing, and what radio station you should be listening to.

For a short while I had this vague theory that one could gauge how old a person was from learning which one of the national BBC radio stations they preferred (I had specifically chosen to ignore people who tuned in to national commercial stations on the grounds that their age was a moot point seeing as how they were already brain-dead). Based on my theory, Radio 1 was for the under twenties, Radio 2 for the late twenties to early thirties, Radio 3 was for anyone over 55, Radio 4 catered to the mid-thirties to early forties, Radio 5 Live was for the mid-forties to early fifties, and Radio 6 Music for the early to mid-twenties. As anyone vaguely familiar with the eccentricities of the human race will tell you, things are never that simple, and so my theory had to undergo significant revision in order to include not just age but socio-economic and cultural background, political affiliation, and general education level.

Armed with these additional criteria I now had Radio 1 as appealing exclusively to people who don't like music (and for whom it is mere wallpaper or background noise – a soundtrack to their tawdry, futile existences); Radio 2, on the other hand, was for those people who *do* like music, but only as it was 20 years ago. Meanwhile, Radio 3 was for people who love classical (and don't have the slightest sense of humour about it), and Radio 4 was for people who were interested in things like culture and the world beyond their doorstep but, if they were honest, didn't really go to either much. Radio 5 Live was for people who don't actually read the Daily Mail, but who absolutely think and hold opinions like they do, and Radio 6 Music was for people who like music made by proper musicians who were generally too busy being proper musicians to bother the charts. So how does my own station of choice fit in with my theory? I'm glad you asked ...

I was only 3 years old in the jubilee year of 1977, so getting into punk at that time wasn't really an option – that would have to wait until much later when I was at least old enough to not only understand the social and political issues that underpinned most punk songs, but to have also spent a good portion of my youth developing a proper sense of outrage and a punky sneer (I still haven't got that last part quite right yet – it looks more like I've been asked by my dentist to show him which tooth hurts right at the moment I'm about to sneeze). Fortunately, when it came to brewing up a simmering cauldron of repressed yet unfocused outrage, however, growing up working class in Britain in the 1980s would more than do the trick. To have spent my first decade and a bit in a time of record unemployment, strikes, riots, and deprivation at one end, while at the other there were people with stock portfolios, "mobile telephones", and lifestyles built around obscenely conspicuous consumption, was to have spent a youth becoming highly politically aware.

This is not to say that I was shaped entirely by having been brought up in an era of "Mrs. Thatcher" and seemingly endless power cuts (yeah, seriously, WTF? Every drawer in our house was filled with candles and matches, and we had several paraffin heaters dotted about the place, one of which cost me a Lego spaceship I'd made, returning, as I did, to find a melted puddle of futuristic-looking, translucent plastic on top of the heater that was now dripping slowly down the sides). I also don't want to give the false impression that we were this dirt-poor family living squalid lives in a filthy home without two molecules of hope to rub together; we were, generally, *okay* in the grand scheme

of things – sure, we lived in a council house on a council estate in a particularly uninspiring town built as an overspill for Birmingham and, yes, we experienced hardship – at the age of seven I learned what bailiffs were and why the front room was now empty – but we had a roof over our heads, and we didn't have to dodge flying molotov cocktails on the way to school.

Like a good number of people of my generation, my awareness of the world, and the political and cultural events that defined it, was significantly influenced not by the news but by television programmes like "Spitting Image". For those who don't know, "Spittum Iddidge" (as my baby sister then referred to it) was a weekly satirical sketch show involving latex puppets of well-known celebrities and politicians of the day that didn't so much hold up a mirror to life in Thatcher's Britain as it instead painted a grotesque, yet disturbingly accurate, caricature of it. Of course, nowadays, the situation is entirely reversed, with reality being played out on TV while monstrously distorted puppets run the country or pass themselves off as our celebrities. The satire of "Spitting Image" helped me, and many other kids, understand complex issues by putting names (and funny voices) to the grey suits and equally grey faces we saw on the news every day.

This confluence of the absurdity of real-world events and comedy in the form of satire has been an ever-present factor in my life, and has heavily influenced the way I see the world. I grew up in the middle of the alternative comedy boom of the early 1980s, where long-standing ideas of what constituted "funny", such as gentle character comedy, pleasantly banal sitcoms, or the misogyny, racism, and homophobia of working men's club comedians, were being forced kicking and screaming in to the dustbin of history. In its place we were given comedy that was politically aware, relevant, and with the potential to affect real change by encouraging its audiences to think for once. But, more importantly, it was comedy that was *inclusive* because, instead of making women, gays, and minorities the targets of the jokes, they made them *part* of the jokes. This is what was ultimately referred to as "political correctness".

Over the years there has been a tidal wave of bullshit about how, "political correctness has gone mad"; this has mainly been from twats like Richard Littlejohn (who pretty much owns the phrase), Daily Mail readers, and any of the contingent of right-wing, bigoted dickholes who would dearly love to return to a time when Jim Davidson could do his despicably racist "Chalky White" character, and "paki", "coon", and "chink" were considered perfectly acceptable words to use in family sitcoms. A time when, as comedian Stewart Lee pointed out, the Conservative party could campaign in local elections with the slogan, "If you want a nigger for a neighbour, vote Liberal or Labour". Political correctness (or PC) was about simply showing respect to people, not laying down a whole bunch of namby-pamby rules about how you couldn't ever talk about "poofs" or "darkies". PC promoted nothing more than the idea that it was possible to get on with life as one had always done but without demeaning others in the process.

The idea that one could criticise, mock, or even parody someone whilst still showing sufficient respect had a huge impact on me, although I was never really consciously aware of it at the time, or that it was helping to dictate the way I saw the world. That it was feasible to completely take something apart while operating within certain, eminently reasonable restrictions that would otherwise have made it seem impossible, has had a demonstrably profound effect on my cultural, social, and political outlook. I learned that it was possible to make jokes about anyone, regardless of how "sensitive" a target they might ordinarily have seemed to be, without degrading them (or condescending to them either). I learned that one could work within the confines of a system and still fundamentally change it without destroying the framework that held it together. And it was a good thing too, really, because I'm completely crap at making petrol bombs.

As much as I might like to kid myself I could never have been the true punky rebel or the marching revolutionary; I was simply not built, physically or psychologically, to lead the masses to Downing Street and storm number 10 demanding change, and I'm woefully far from being charismatic enough. To tell the truth I don't think I would have really liked it all that much if I was. Sure, I may feel the urge to scream "Smash the system!" whenever I hear news about banker's bonuses, but the more pragmatic part of me is saying, "No, don't *smash* the system – **dismantle** it, one piece at a time; that way we can see where it's broken and put it back together again more quickly and efficiently!" It's not nearly as romantic as we're led to believe the life of a revolutionary is, and it certainly isn't likely to inspire generations of protesting students to wear my face (or such a rambling slogan) on a T-shirt, but it is, in my mind, a more effective and elegant solution to a problem than setting it on fire.

So it is that I find myself falling into a class of people that can best describe themselves, to

paraphrase Mark Thomas, as “snotty, obstinate letter-writers”. The Channel 4 series, [“The Mark Thomas \[Comedy\] Product”](#) taught me that one could be an activist without wearing a beret; one could get involved by writing letters or making phone calls that applied the right kind of pressure in the right places without the need for putting a brick through the window of my local branch of McDonald’s (although I can see how that would be extremely pleasurable and hard to resist). It taught me that you don’t have to march on parliament in order to protest against an injustice, you simply had to raise your voice and make yourself heard. And while I never had the opportunity to join in on the [“Mass Lone Demonstrations”](#), I felt that applying for permission to demonstrate against the need to apply for permission to demonstrate beautifully reinforced the idea that one could affect change within a system by using the system against itself.

In addition, it was becoming increasingly obvious to me that the vital components of our infrastructure could be used to challenge that which established them in the first place, and people could be mobilised into action by the very tools that would normally be used to perpetuate one’s apathy and ignorance. Social media sites like Twitter and Facebook have proved to be incredibly useful weapons in the activist’s arsenal, allowing campaigns, protests, and other forms of direct action to be organised like never before. Whilst advertisers with the News of the World would almost certainly have pulled out anyway as the hacking scandal grew larger, a coordinated Twitter campaign encouraging people to bombard the respective companies with questions over their increasingly untenable positions accelerated the process in a way that would not have been possible 5 years ago.

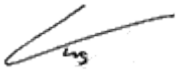
Online surveys, petitions, social media campaigns, blogs, and the ability to contact elected representatives directly, and en masse, have all allowed us to subject the mechanisms that comprise the system to a greater level of scrutiny, as well as giving us the means to put significant pressure on the caretakers of these numerous mechanisms to ensure that they keep them running smoothly and either repair or replace them when they break down. While you’ll usually see people from every conceivable walk of life getting involved in this kind of activism it’s almost always the geeks, the pedants, the IT nerds, and the endless variety of passionate obsessives who seem to be leading the charge, as well as making up the overwhelming majority of the people involved. Every one of the eight people who [met with our local MP to discuss the lamentable Digital Economy Act](#), myself included, more than fulfilled the above criteria.

When I got involved in the local campaign to encourage a “yes” vote on the Alternative Voting system earlier this year, I found myself in similar, and indeed familiar, company, not least because one of the group was a good friend that I’d known (and worked with) for some time. Simon, like myself, is a geek and a passionate obsessive, especially when it comes to things like politics and the environment; we share similar work backgrounds (we, in fact, met at one job, and then re-met again some years later at another), as well as having similar tastes in both television and radio comedy. “Ah, radio!”, you may exclaim (or you may not). “Comedy!”, you may cry (but you almost certainly won’t). “You mentioned both of these things earlier! Are you now going to skilfully tie all of this together in order to both bring it to a satisfying conclusion *and* justify our having wasted valuable time at your turgid little site?” Indeed I am ... well, apart from the second one.

If there was ever a place for geeks, pedants, and obsessives who harbour repressed revolutionary tendencies or fantasies that their passions could one day change the world (even if it’s just one person at a time), it’s BBC Radio 4. If, like me, you’ve grown up on a steady diet of political satire, current affairs, and alternative comedy, then a station that not only plays host to [“The Manifesto”](#) (with Mark Thomas), [“The News Quiz”](#), and [“The Now Show”](#), but has also provided a home for both [Mark Steel](#) and [Jeremy Hardy](#) for the last 20 years, is almost certainly a place where you will feel a warm, comfortable glow, rather like the one coming off the screen of the laptop you’re currently using to write the third angry email to your MP since this morning. If you’ve often felt that one of the most effective, and irretrievably British, ways of getting your point across is to write a snotty, obstinate letter, then the BBC’s spoken word and comedy station will be right up your street.

On the eve of the general election last year, Simon and I got together at my place, not to watch the results come in, but to enjoy a few cans of Guinness and a movie we both have a great love for, [“V For Vendetta”](#). As pedantic, geekish, letter-writing, repressed revolutionaries with a taste for satirical comedy, the final scene of that movie really is like porn to us; to see the destruction of such a familiar landmark, and with it the notion of a corrupt and unjust system brought down from within, represents a latent urge within us both to grow beards and ride a motorbike across Bolivia. But we know, deep down, watching the simulated explosion of our government’s most recognisable office complex is as close as we’re ever going to get because the whole Che Guavara thing really isn’t us and, sadly, never will be – we’re not built for it.

We're not latin revolutionaries; we're Radio 4 radicals ...

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'LMS' or similar, written in a cursive style.