

HUNTING FOR THE EXIT

CHRIS SMAJE finds much food for thought in George Monbiot's new collection of writings from the last decade, and unearths a few pointers towards a possible way out of the mess.

How Did We Get Into This Mess? Politics, Equality, Nature.
by George Monbiot. Verso 342pp RRP £16.99

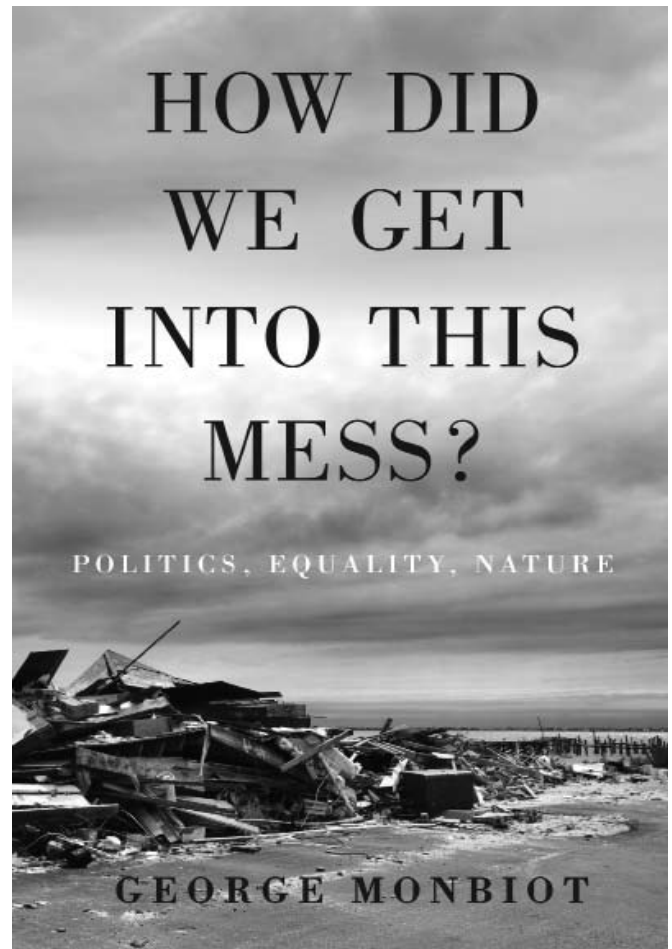
It's a poor reflection on the state of our civic culture that George Monbiot stands almost alone among journalists in the mainstream British media as a voice for the radical green left. I doubt it's easy facing the opprobrium not only of the usual suspects but also the not-so-friendly fire of radicals looking to him for public representation of their own particular agendas. So let me begin by giving credit where it's due. Monbiot's new book, a selection of his journalism over the last ten years or so, showcases an immense achievement.

Since everything here was originally an op-ed piece in *The Guardian*, each chapter is short and pithy, making the book as a whole an easy read. The chapters are arranged in thematic sections, including among others energy, food and farming, the marginalisation and demonisation of the weak and powerless (including children), the murky world of right-wing think-tanks and corporate lobbyists, the rise of neoliberalism, and wildlife, or "wild life", as it's better framed within the book. This last section is particularly strong. Whereas the tone in other sections is often strident (understandably so – as Monbiot ably documents, there's a lot to feel strident about), there's a kind of lyrical transcendence to his wildlife writings that encompasses and transfigures his more straightforwardly political pieces.

The book holds some frustrations, though. One of them is the inevitable downside of its punchy short-form journalism. Every piece stands up well in its own terms, but despite the shape given by the thematic approach it's disappointing to heft such a weighty tome in your hands only to find that the many fruitful lines of thought that Monbiot opens up often aren't followed through with the level of detail you'd hope to find in a book-length analysis. More importantly, that lack of detail enables Monbiot to run two different kinds of politics through the book without fully confronting their tensions. These are, respectively, a municipally-oriented democratic socialism and a more rurally-oriented producerism-cum-agrarian populism. Or, to put it crudely in terms of two periodicals that are dear to me, it's the voice of *The Guardian* versus the voice of *The Land*. There's much to be learned from both voices, but if we're to answer satisfactorily Monbiot's question of how we got into this mess – and perhaps more pressingly of how we're going to get out of it – some further probing is required, because the two politics have different implications.

Losing the Way

I'd summarise the democratic socialist story that Monbiot has to tell like this: The landowner ruling class in pre-capitalist Britain had the countryside and its riches pretty much stitched up. With the rise of coal, capitalism and colonialism, rural working people became an urban-industrial working class with little nostalgia for the dependent rural life they'd lost, though to his credit Monbiot takes resistance to enclosure in the



British countryside and in the country's colonies abroad more seriously than most. Urbanised and industrialised working people were instrumental in creating a more inclusive and egalitarian society, and with the enormous economic forces unleashed by fossil fuels and the globalisation of capitalist markets were eventually able to secure for themselves a share of wealth unimaginable to their forefathers in a "great flowering of freedom that has enhanced so many lives since the end of the Second World War"⁴. But the gains achieved in this statist, meritocratic, Keynesian society stalled in the 1970s. The monetarist doctrines of Milton Friedman and his ilk were waiting in the wings, and with the election of Reagan in the USA and Thatcher in Britain they were politically realised in the ideology of neoliberalism, whose 'growth at all costs' mentality now threatens to reduce "the world's diverse and differentiated marvels...to the same grey stubble"¹⁷⁷.

Meanwhile, the gap that early capitalist development opened between productive industrialists and parasitic rentiers is narrowing once more. The captains of the neoliberal global economy are parlaying their control of these global marvels into personal riches and a small, exclusive ruling class, at great cost to the majority of the world's people and to the natural world through the concentration of wealth, the dismantling of public services and the deregulation of business and financial markets. What's needed, then, is a reversal of this neoliberal

trajectory which “if unchecked, will catalyse crisis after crisis, all of which can be solved only by the means it forbids: greater intervention on the part of the state”²²¹.

The Peasant Awaits

The alternative producerist-populist narrative shares a good deal with this democratic socialist one, but frames it in bigger and less statist historical terms. It’s glimpsed in Monbiot’s writing when he argues that human freedom and self-actualisation are more important than comfort or the accumulation of material things. So while civilisation may be a good thing up to a point, it’s possible to have too much of it for various reasons. One is that “civilisation is boring”⁹⁵, stymying and limiting the full use of our mental and physical capacities while remorselessly reducing everybody to its purview: “the oddest insult in the English language [is] when you call someone a peasant,” Monbiot writes. “You are accusing them of being self-reliant and productive”¹⁴¹⁻².

Another issue is the environmental cost of servicing the non-self-reliant multitudes forged in civilisation’s image. In various chapters, Monbiot touches on the disproportionate call on global resources made by the wealthy (which includes most of us living in the global north), the difficulties of sustaining it in the face of long-term economic growth and a more equable global wealth distribution, and the life-denying pointlessness of much of our material consumption. Discussing the impossibility of endless growth, he suggests that industrial revolutions prior to the advent of fossil fuels were ultimately unable to sustain themselves, and collapsed. Indeed, the mathematics of compound growth suggest that “salvation lies in collapse”¹⁷⁵. He advocates an orderly retreat in the face of this reality before it’s foisted upon us more capriciously, for example by leaving the remaining fossil fuels in the ground to avoid runaway climate change.

The figure who awaits us if we do beat such a retreat is the peasant. Monbiot recognises, as so few do, that provisioning the world’s people adequately and sustainably is more about ownership, about widespread access to the land and its resources, than about the technocratic boosting of high-energy, low-labour agriculture. This is a populist or producerist, a peasant-centred, vision. But here is where the tensions between the social-democratic and the producerist strands of his analysis bite. Essentially, these turn upon whether you address problems in the manner of the rational-bureaucratic planner, asking how best to deliver services to the population, or whether you address them in the manner of the autonomous native, asking how best to inhabit and thrive in the land you call home.

So for example, in his well-known critiques of upland sheep farming, of livestock farming more generally and of the expansion of agriculture into what he calls “ever less suitable land”⁹⁷ Monbiot operates mostly in rational-bureaucratic mode, trying to reconcile the competing demands of conservation, food production and sustainability at the level of generalised policy. Much of this analysis is subtle and persuasive, as in his understanding of the disastrous disconnect between farm, forestry and conservation policy afflicting upland farming, and the social history underlying the emergence of an upland peasantry. But a more peasant-centred vision would find

scope for mixed upland silvo-pastoralism. Abolishing small-scale farming in these ‘unsuitable’ places which “in the face of global trade...cannot compete with production in fertile parts of the world”⁹⁷ would not only be another act of enclosure, but – as I’ve argued in an article in *The Land* (issue 18) – also an ecologically risky strategy that plays into the hands of corporate agribusiness.

Another case in point is his advocacy for nuclear power and his critique of “deep green” energy production – “Micro-hydro-power might work for a farmhouse in Wales; it’s not much use in Birmingham”¹⁶⁶⁻⁷. For sure, if we want to leave fossil fuels in the ground while hanging onto some semblance of civilisation in the short term we need large, concentrated sources of energy, and arguably there’s little in the cupboard besides nuclear. For those of us who advocate a peasant or neo-agrarian future, the fact that there are thousands of Birminghams in the world is indeed quite a problem. But it’s also a problem for nuclear advocates, whose favoured technology currently furnishes less than two percent of global energy production. Which is the more plausible strategy – to embrace something like a sixtyfold proliferation of nuclear power within a few short years along with the huge associated and currently unavailable technological changes that would be needed to keep all these Birminghams ticking along as they are? Or to embrace rapid energy descent, that salvational ‘collapse’ which Monbiot himself advocates? His critiques of pointless consumerism further raise the question of how much energy we actually need. He doesn’t provide estimates here, but it would be interesting to hear them – particularly if he spoke them with his wilder voice, the voice of a dweller in the land, rather than that of the rational planner or the urbane *Guardian* man.

Finding the Door

To get out of the mess, I’m sure that we need both approaches. But it’s this wilder voice that I prefer in Monbiot’s writing. I don’t always agree with it, as when he contrasts the ‘linear thinking’ of agriculture with the ‘rambling and responsive’ existence of the forager⁹² – an over-simplified distinction which effaces the possibilities for a rambling and responsive agriculture, for ‘wildness’ to be articulated within farming rather than against it.

Still, Monbiot’s wild voice gets closer to the source of the mess we’re in – and is also much rarer – than the social-democratic urge to blame everything on Thatcher and Reagan, lobby for a return to pre-1980s public provision, and hope that modern technology will banish woes like climate change. The malaise runs very much deeper than that, as Monbiot convincingly demonstrates. In this book, he stands at the doorway of the producerist or agrarian populist vision I believe we need if we’re to create a just and sustainable future. But he doesn’t quite step through. In future books or collaborations I hope he will, because few people are better equipped to articulate it convincingly while retaining the necessary critical edge. In the meantime, what he’s given us here is a passionate, deeply informed and endlessly thought-provoking analysis of our times. “To seek enlightenment about ourselves and the world around us: this is what makes a life worth living”¹¹⁵. We’re lucky that he’s set himself that goal, and done so much to share it.

Superscript numbers (thus ¹⁴⁹) refer to pages in the book.