“It was sweet, creamy, faintly smoky, like alpine butter”, George Monbiot (2014:1) muses after eating a beetle larvae in his garden. The Proustian memory that this munching provoked sends him back in time, recalling a brave environmentalist exploit of his against wicked capitalists on another continent. Perhaps the best known left-wing Anglophone environmentalist, Monbiot’s trademark is to pen detailed analyses of energy and land-use policy alongside a mystical chronicling the consumption of strange, salubrious fauna and thrilling adventures. Once, while paddling off the Welsh coast to fish for mackerel (“I yanked the line, then pulled it in, hand over hand … It bounced around on the deck, then drummed on the plastic with rapid shivers. I broke its neck” [2014:17]), he returned to shore but found the sea too rough to safely land his kayak. Suddenly:

… [f]rom the stern I heard a different sound: a crash and a rush of water. I turned and a gigantic bull dolphin soared into the air and almost over my head. As he flew past, he fixed his eye on mine. We held each other’s gaze until he walloped back into the water. I stared at the spot, willing him to resurface, but I did not see him again. I turned and faced the shore once more, now without fear. Instead I felt a heart-wrenching exhilaration that lent me, for a moment, clarity. I studied the seawall and noticed something I had not seen before: a distant slipway taking the force of the waves. In its lee were two or three yards of calmer water. (2014:25)
Foodie-ism (“piggery triumphant” in Angela Carter’s [1993] words) and travelogues clearly sell well, and if it makes environmentalism more popular, so much the better perhaps. Yet, does this add up to a foundation for Left environmentalist thought?

* * * *

Fans and critics alike have to confront Monbiot’s work because it is vast, well known, and influential in its field; a mighty boulder lying astrew the green progressive avenue of thought. He writes a column in *The Guardian* which attracts a broad audience,¹ has written eight books on green and leftist issues,² and has been accepted into the fold by those gatekeepers of the British intelligentsia, the *London Review of Books* and *New Left Review*. He has held to his position as the foremost green public intellectual for 30 years, adapting to the crests and plunges of various green waves. Upon graduating university he created *de novo* his dream job of an environmental investigative journalist. He earned this position in 1985 after a year of badgering the BBC to hire him as its first journalist covering the green beat. Yet, only a couple of years later his radio program was axed during Margaret Thatcher’s vengeful war on public broadcasting. After leaving the BBC he created a new gig for himself by combining travelling, activism, and book-writing in dangerous places.³

This second newly-concocted job was extremely dangerous. He recounts being roughed up by “gunmen” while tracing a network of illegal mahogany exporters in Brazil. When working on a story of forced migration in Indonesia—still under the reign of a genocidaire—he got lost in a jungle and almost starved. Perhaps it was then he acquired his taste for bugs, as ever since then nearly all of his books include an anecdote of this sort. Not long afterwards he lived amongst

---

¹ See https://www.theguardian.com/profile/georgemonbiot (last accessed 21 April 2017).
³ See http://www.monbiot.com/about/ (last accessed 26 April 2017).
Maasai pastoralists, where he contracted cerebral malaria, a condition that drove him temporarily mad.

These youthful adventures came more or less to an end once The Guardian hired him in 1996 as its green columnist. It was then that he settled down again in the UK and began tracing the links between neoliberalism and environmental degradation, as well as sketching a political alternative. The slew of books he has written over the past 20 years have been guided by his attempt to comprehend these two pernicious trends, and his most recent work, a collection of his Guardian op-eds, represents the culmination of this intellectual effort.

The eponymous essay of How Did We Get Into This Mess? is an example of Monbiot at his best. In August 2007—more than a year before Lehman Brothers’ collapse—he warned of a “financial crisis caused by unregulated lending could turf hundreds of thousands out of their homes and trigger a cascade of economic troubles”, a potential catastrophe he linked to “booming inequality” and “runaway climate change” (Monbiot 2007). Brimming the miniscule word-limits of a weekly column, he then goes on to argue that these three problems are due to the ideology of neoliberalism—a concept not discussed often outside of a few disciplines before the Great Recession began a decade ago, and even more rarely outside of the academy.

Monbiot also proves that his bravery extends beyond a willingness to get beaten up by bad guys, as he can be equally critical of putative allies. In an op-ed entitled “Bug splats” he compares children of the global South blown up by US drones to those murdered in Newtown five years ago (Monbiot 2012). “Innocent until proved dead” is a thorough critique of that former constitutional lawyer for emptying ‘due process’ of any meaning during his presidency. “If Obama and his nameless advisers say someone is a terrorist, he stands convicted and can be put to death” (Monbiot 2013). Most environmental journalists do not extend their remit to the White House’s “kill-lists”.

Nevertheless, whenever one ruffles through the paper to his column s/he cannot be sure whether to find the opinion of a sage or fool. He self-blurbs before an essay that “as far as I can
tell, this was the first article calling for fossil fuels to be kept in the ground. It began the
discussion that eventually helped lead to the development of a global movement” (p.147).
Another is prefaced by the maudlin reminiscence that “I told myself that I was writing this
column so that I could tell my children that I had at least tried. To my astonishment, the article
went viral, and TTIP [Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership] was suddenly on the
map” (p.249). Can one imagine Jean Jacques-Rousseau boasting in the Discourse on Inequality
“so, I was the first to talk about modern democratic theory. It went viral”. To be fair, Friedrich
Nietzsche actually did entitle chapters “Why I Write Such Good Books” and “Why I Am So
Clever”.

Conceit is perhaps forgiveable if it stems from a formidable enough oeuvre, which begs
the question of how to judge Monbiot’s work. Surprisingly, it is actually easier to sketch the
contours of his worldview than one would expect of a writer who opines on everything from
drones to dolphins. It is founded on two pillars: a love for a child-like primordialism and a
loathing of modern neat-freak authoritarianism.

This binary may not be obvious at first when reading his own favourite book, Feral
(Monbiot 2014). This book about “re-wilding” describes the revival of ecosystems through the
re-introduction of extirpated species. In an excellent translation of the scientific literature for a
lay audience (the man does his homework), Monbiot explains how newly returned wolves
reshaped their Yellowstone National Park habitat:

When they arrived, many of the streamsides and riversides were almost bare, closely
cropped by the high population of red deer … But as soon as the wolves arrived, this
began to change. It was not just that they sharply reduced the number of deer, but they
also altered their prey’s behaviour. The deer avoided the places—particularly the valleys
and gorges—where they could be caught most easily.
In some places, trees on the riverbanks, until then constantly suppressed by browsing, quintupled in height in just six years. The trees shaded and cooled the water and provided cover for fish and other animals … (2014:84)

This example can be multiplied manifold, as Monbiot deftly describes how whales circulate nutrients between the surface and depths of the ocean or how beavers create new habitats for fish by building dams.

Yet for Monbiot, re-wilding is not simply about the complexity of ecosystems. It is just as much about a state of mind, of bringing to the surface from subconscious depths one’s wild instincts. These atavistic figments are the key to a happy and exciting life, an escape from the “ecological boredom” of the manicured landscaped of a stifling civilisation. Re-wilded areas are for those who “seek refuge from the ordered world”. This understanding of the natural world explains Monbiot’s fascination with mega-fauna: extinct monsters, like giant sloths, dire wolves, and saber-tooth cats. They may be gone, but he stresses that substitutes can be found and indeed calls for Europe to be stocked with elephants, hippopotamuses, and rhinoceroses. By bringing back these big animals Monbiot hopes to re-connect us with our primordial selves; he is reaching for a megafauna sublime. He recalls in Feral of being by the excavation of an almost 8,000-year-old Welsh village and there:

I looked again at those footprints receding across the marsh and into time. I heard the noise of the children playing in the mud, saw the tense, grave faces of the hunting party, watched in my mind’s eye the women and elders wading along the estuary with their spears and prongs, and I felt I knew better who I was; where I had come from; what I still am. (2014:39)
Here and elsewhere Monbiot cites children’s natural proclivity to gleefully dive into nature, to horseplay in fields and ponds, as another route to re-wilding ourselves. Too often, however, this tendency is obstructed by the state. Greenfield sites are developed for speculation and a safety-obsessed culture cloisters children. For Monbiot, this is the essence of neoliberalism.

Emphasising the unruliness of both nature and humans strengthens Monbiot’s rhetoric, but it is a very personal environmental ethic, with little attachment to left-wing thought or progressive political alliances. Is re-wilding oneself a potential basis for environmentalism or does it just signal an individual’s middle-age ennui? When Monbiot meets savage men steeped in nature—like his herdsmen friends in Kenya and Wales—he thinks such a man “had something else few people possessed: he knew who he was. I envied him that” (2014:172). Re-wilding matters, but it is tarnished by a very bourgeois search for authenticity, hardly a solid foundation for any attempt to construct a Left green worldview.

Monbiot’s penchant of reducing politics to the level of the personal extends to his analysis of his enemies. It is doubtful that the UK environmental movement is weak because Britons have a unique “nature-phobia”. Is it perhaps not better to look at the concentration of land ownership or a parliamentary system that stunts an independent green party? Is the reason why people often prefer to live next to a coal-fired power plant rather than a nuclear one really because the former is “central to our identity”? Perhaps there are good reasons to oppose nuclear. Bizarrely, Monbiot declared in 2011 “as a result of the disaster at Fukushima, I am no longer nuclear-neutral. I am no longer nuclear-neutral. I now support the technology”.

He crowed that the disaster in Japan proves how safe nuclear power is. “A crappy old plant with inadequate safety features was hit by a monster earthquake and a vast tsunami … Yet, as far as we know, no one has yet received a lethal dose of radiation” (Monbiot 2011). This, however, ignores that an estimated 5,000 Japanese will die from cancer caused the catastrophe and that immediately afterwards the infant mortality rate in the area spiked by a fifth (Fairlie 2015; Scherb et al. 2016). Even now, the clean-up crews at the Fukushima Daiichi plant do not even
know where the fuel-rods belonging to three destroyed reactors are. Nor can they retrieve them because the radiation is strong enough to short-circuit the wiring of robots sent to fetch them. Furthermore, as bad as things are, they nearly were much much worse. Had the prime minister, Naoto Kan, not ordered the flooding Fukushima Daiichi’s reactors against the Tokyo Electric Power Company’s objections, then the radioactive cloud would have been large enough to render Tokyo uninhabitable. Naoto Kan nearly mandated the evacuation of the capital and its environs—some 50 million people. He compares the costs of such a dislocation to “losing a huge war” (Gilligan 2016).

Yet, what happened in Fukushima will almost certainly happen again. According to the “largest statistical analysis of nuclear accidents ever undertaken” another disaster on the scale of Fukushima in 2011 or Pripyat in 1986 has a 50 per cent chance of occurring before 2050 (Wheatley et al. 2015). The threat of disaster looms even if environmentalist David Brower’s aphorism that “nuclear plants are incredibly complex technological devices for locating earthquake faults” may not apply to Monbiot’s own country. Even tectonically placid northern Europe has not been free from catastrophes or near-catastrophes. The reactor at the Windscale plant in Cumbria caught fire in 1957 and burnt for three days. Filters had only been added atop of its chimneys at the last minute against the wishes of the plant’s operators (who called them “Crockcroft’s Folly” after the bureaucrat who imposed them). These, however, caught 95 per cent of the radioactive dust released—had they not been there northern England would be a wasteland. That five per cent, though, sufficed to cause at least 240 cases of cancer. Even that paragon of nuclear virtue, France, stumbled into a crisis late in 2016 when the utility Electricité de France endured outages at a third of its 54 fission-powered facilities; eight have been shut down for months. Many of the reactors were built with faulty steel—impurities that could have caused them to crack catastrophically had there been a rapid change in the steel’s temperature.

Soon after embracing nuclear power, Monbiot went on to support its most dangerous and expensive variant, so-called “breeder” reactors. They are called “breeders” not for the oppressive
heteronormative society they embody, but because they produce more plutonium than they consume (a bomb-making material *par excellence*). Monbiot neglects to mention the many shortcomings of this technology. Liquid sodium is used as a coolant, but unfortunately this combusts upon exposure to air. Most breeder reactors spend nine-tenths of the time offline for repairs. This capacity factor pales next to supposedly fickle wind and solar power, and certainly renders a breeder plant useless as a “baseload” power supply. The only facility with an enviable track record is Russia’s BN-600 reactor in Zarechny, which uniquely and terrifyingly continued operating during 14 liquid sodium conflagrations in 17 years. Although Monbiot trumpets the advantage of breeders in producing little toxic waste from spent fuel, this ignores that the coolant—the oft-exploding sodium—becomes radioactive through use.

If his proposed green political economy of mystical giant sloths and risky thorium “breeders” rests on weak intellectual foundations, then his analysis of his declared foe, neoliberalism, is also riddled with errors. His conception of neoliberalism can be encapsulated by the Mosquito™, a “youth dispersal device” that emits a high pitch whine that can only be heard by those under 25. The wildness of children must be contained and their enviable greater sensitivity to the sensual world’s cacophony is used against them. For Monbiot, neoliberalism is little more than a brutal fastidious state that abhors the messiness of democracy and the unprofitability of natural children’s play.

Neoliberalism, however, is more than a killjoy, but rather an extremely robust intellectual machine. The neoliberal worldview was meticulously constructed over decades by its adherents to not only formulate a new market-based utopia, but also a means to devise policy on any issue. This remarkably coherent ideology needs to be taken seriously to fight it more effectively. Rather than representing policies of privatisation and austerity per se, neoliberalism is more usefully seen as a series of practices that produce a novel form of government and political
It is not synonymous with libertarianism. Strong states are necessary to create, defend, and legitimate markets. Society is then governed through markets rather than directly through state institutions (Mirowski 2013:85). Unlike classical liberalism, neoliberalism does not accept that the market can fail (e.g. monopolies, extreme inequality, etc.) and thus non-market interventions are never necessary according to its logic. The solution is always more markets (Mirowski 2013:56).

The definition of neoliberalism is not mere pedantry. By not really knowing what the foe’s ideological apparatus is Monbiot is not only unable to diagnose the problem, but his own solutions often unconsciously conform to neoliberal logic. In an op-ed, he warns his friends to avoid using neoliberal neologisms like “wealth creators” or “consumer democracy” (Monbiot 2007), but contemporary Newspeak is so insidious that he is unaware that he frequently uses neoliberal concepts himself, such as “transparency” and “governance” (Rodan 2004). Words matter, for they conceal as much as they convey. Monbiot calls for greater “transparency” in journalism and even has an online “registry of interests” to show his relative independence from financial influence—but is, as Monbiot argues (p.223), a lack of transparency really the reason why the fourth estate is dying? “Government” is rule by the state, but “governance” is power wielded by non-state actors, like, say, corporations. Both “governance” and “transparency” normalise the privatisation of politics and allow neoliberals to side-step the concept of democracy itself. The term originates from the belly of the World Bank in the late 1990s as it attempted to deflect blame from its role in promulgating an unjust and unstable international order. The “Asian Flu” economic crisis in 1997 did not cause the World Bank to rethink its policies, but rather its rhetoric—greater “transparency” would cure the ills of globalization (Rodan 2004). Monbiot forgets that the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house.

4 One of the best theorists on neoliberalism is Philip Mirowski. For his argument on how neoliberal subjectivity is created see Never Let a Serious Crisis Go to Waste (2013), especially Chapters 2 and 3.
5 For a history of the term “governance”, see De Angelis (2005).
In *Heat* (2006) he proposed, as a solution to global warming, to give everyone a personal quota of carbon emissions, which they can sell. This, however, would be a *privatisation* of an international commons—the atmosphere. It apes the privatisation-voucher schemes widespread in Eastern Europe during the 1990s. In Czechoslovakia, individuals could buy a voucher booklet of shares in state enterprises, a form of populist neoliberalism intended to make privatisation politically palatable. Individuals then sold their vouchers to newly emergent IPFs (Investment Privatization Funds)—limited liability companies that quickly concentrated control of erstwhile public assets on the cheap. Within a decade of the first round of voucher-based privatizations, three-quarters of Czechs considered the scheme a disaster (Willoughby 2005).7

Without knowing how neoliberalism functions as an ideology Monbiot’s program can’t get beyond muddle-headed half-measures. Frequently he laments frivolous consumption, yet does not demand any cuts in production. If production is to be kept at high levels, he reasons, then nuclear power becomes necessary. Even veganism, a mild exercise in green asceticism, was only recently countenanced by him, perhaps because he was loath to drop the *ersatz*-spiritual thrill of the kill (e.g. him speaking to a fish: “My fellow predator, cold-blooded daemon, brother disciple of Orion” [2014:17]). Yet, if he wants to re-wild the world, the easiest way to do it is returning to nature cropland that currently feeds livestock. Most crops, especially in meaty societies, are grown for animals, and pasture, which accounts for double the land-area of all cropland, is completely unnecessary for vegans. Billions of hectares could be returned to nature, and indeed must be to avert the “Sixth Extinction”—the rapid extinguishing of half the world’s species of flora and fauna this century (Kolbert 2014). Veganism is not a panacea, but it does hint at how a careful reconsideration of land scarcity within political economy could open up new avenues of Left environmental thought. In short, humanity will need to leave a fair bit of the Earth in benign neglect, but everyone could still have the means to live the “good life”.

---

7 For an excellent summary, see Hristova (2002).
Monbiot is a frustrating figure for the green Left. No journalist can match his prolific output, his political eclecticism, and his wide audience. Perhaps his nearest peer would be Bill McKibben, but McKibben’s bourgeois “emersonian” ideology⁸ pales next to Monbiot’s fervour. Despite all of the hard work he has done–few have gone further in breaking a path through the thicket of contemporary popular environmentalism–Monbiot’s flaw is that his conceptual rigour trails behind his sense of justice, and at crucial moments intellectual flabbiness slows down his entire train of thought. Unfortunately, Monbiot’s combination of a crypto-neoliberal voucher program and the romance of the hunt fails to add up to a solid foundation for a new political economy of the green Left–a project that is so desperately needed now in the era of climate change.

References

Fairlie I (2015) Fukushima: Thousands have died, thousands more will die. Ecologist 17 August
http://www.theecologist.org/News/news_analysis/2984986/
fukushima_thousands_have_died_thousands_more_will_die.html (last accessed 26 April 2017)
Gilligan A (2016) Fukushima: Tokyo was on the brink of nuclear catastrophe, admits former prime minister. The Telegraph 4 March

⁸ On which see White (2011).
Monbiot G (2007) How the neoliberals stitched up the wealth of nations for themselves. The Guardian 28 August
Monbiot G (2011) Why Fukushima made me stop worrying and love nuclear power. The Guardian 21 March
Monbiot G (2013) Innocent until proved dead. The Guardian 4 June
    http://www.monbiot.com/2013/06/03/innocent-until-proved-dead/ (last accessed 21 April 2017)
    http://researchrepository.murdoch.edu.au/id/eprint/13104/1/
    Neoliberalism_and_Transparency_Political_Versus_Economic_Liberalism.pdf (last accessed 24 April 2017)


*Troy Vettese*

*Department of History*

*New York University*

*tgv208@nyu.edu*

*February 2017*