

NB. My Word doesn't spellcheck in English!

## **The Excessively Post-Communist Manifesto of George Monbiot**

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**George Monbiot, *The Age of Consent: A Manifesto for a New World Order*. Flamingo, London, 2003. 274 pp.**

There has been a vacuum over the last 10-20 years where Social-Democracy used to be. This was a theory and practice, related to a major social movement (the labour one, for folks insufficiently aware, or born too late), that contributed signally to the birth and development of liberal democracy, acted as a loyal opposition within it, and - in government rather than power - brought about a considerable redistribution of income and significant social reforms out of capitalist growth. Social Democracy rightly claims credit for the welfare state, which was a reality in much of the North-West of the world, an aspiration in much of the Rest. (In other parts of the Rest there were aspirations for social revolution, but this could be seen as an attempt to get a welfare state with One Mighty Heave, in One Fell Swoop).

The forward march of labour, the success of Social Democracy, have run, respectively, out of movement steam and political puff. Unconstrained by an effective or even a noisy opposition, neo-liberalism has destroyed the previous social contract in the North-West, and the aspiration to such in the South. Neo-liberalism is an unabashed – a shameless - pro-capitalist theory and practice. It could just as well be called paleo-liberalism since it has actually reversed the political democracy the labour movement and Social Democracy once imposed on liberalism. Neo-liberalism has done this by appealing to the individualistic and competitive aspect of human nature under capitalism, trading in the demands of collective citizenship for the placebos of individualised consumption. Neo-liberalism, plus capitalist globalisation, has created a world increasingly plagued by de-industrialisation, forced migration, imperial war, civil genocide, environmental disaster, cultural disarticulation and world-spanning viruses (animal, vegetable and electronic).

It was clearly time for something to calm the savage beast. But this clearly was not and is not the impressively un-famous Third Way, connected in Britain with the Twin Tonys, one in Whitehall, one in the London School of Economics (the repetition of an original Fabian Socialist dream – this time as tragi-comedy).

The Third Way *has* achieved the quite remarkable accomplishment, given its distinguished and successful provenance, of being simultaneously without either theoretical coherence or popular appeal. It has drawn a considerable amount of inky ire from the Left – still better at opposition than proposition. But the voters (or, take your pick, the 'working class', the 'people', the 'multitude'), have remained ignorant of or impervious to its feeble appeals. No banners bear the strange device 'Third Way Now!', or 'One Single Solution, Third Way Evolution!'. And, finally, its attempt to do the political equivalent of a star-studded international stage spectacular, at the LSE itself, 2003 (<http://www.progressive-governance.net/index.php>, <http://politics.guardian.co.uk/progressive/0,13255,941300,00.html>), obtained less media attention than any equivalent international assembly of clerics.

It is no disparagement to say that the new book of George Monbiot looks more like a 21<sup>st</sup> century Social Democracy than the virtual one we have been so far proffered. Monbiot is a prominent public intellectual of the 'global justice movement' (his preferred term) in the UK. He stands for, and in his latest book gives shape to, one of its significant tendencies. Monbiot's alternative is a 'democratic' one which, in his own argument, distinguishes itself from both the anarchist (and other libertarian) tendencies and the Marxist (and other transformatory socialist) ones.

Monbiot's less-than-gripping title at least hints at where he stands: for the creation of a new world order by the extension of democracy to the global level. Globalisation, he says, has sucked power out of the national, shifting it to a higher level hallmarked by its signally anti-democratic nature. It is Monbiot's embrace of, extension of - or anyway dependence on - the liberal-democratic tradition that, I think, offers the makings of this Neo-Social Democracy. This would stand somewhere between or above the Neo-Liberal World Order, the Third Way, and the Marxist and/or Anarchist alternatives he rejects. The key lies in the extension of democracy, of consent, to the level or realm to which most significant decision-making has been removed.

Monbiot's book argues:

- that with globalisation the world is undergoing an epochal transformation, creating a new level of anti-democratic power, but simultaneously provoking a surpassing of previous mass identities, thus allowing us for the first time to 'see ourselves as a species' (Ch. 1).
- that democracy is (in a Churchillian thought) the 'least-worst' political system, and definitely superior to the two others with sway within the GJM, Marxism (because of its foundational denial of freedom, diversity and accountability), anarchism (because of its naivety about human nature and the unavoidability of some kind of simultaneously disciplinary and accountable power) (Ch. 2).

- that the arguments of the anti-globalisation localisers and the pro-globalisation reformers are misplaced or inadequate, but that it is both necessary, desirable and possible for us to concentrate on the level of maximum power, on the institutions of global (mis)governance: the political one, the trade one and those of trade (Chs. 4-6).
- that, finally, it is necessary to both understand reasons for popular inaction in the face of globalisation (particularly in the affluent North), but that the GJM (here called 'revolutionary') appeals to the ethical, to the human imagination, to self-enfranchisement, to the age-old sense of exultation, and that this movement is now energetically engaged in the dialogue to which the book itself is intended to contribute (Ch. 7).

In the rest of this note I will ignore the chapters on alternatives to the international financial institutions, leaving these for political-economic critics better qualified than I. In any case, Monbiot's principles concerning the democratisation of global institutions are made clear enough in Chapter 3, his longest one.

I am sympathetic to Monbiot's concentration on the global level or sphere. But this may be also because for me global means 'holistic' as well as 'worldwide'. And because I consider globalisation to be not only a level or sphere but a general condition, affecting, if unevenly, the universe (which includes both the local and a cyberspace he gives only marginal attention). The implication for me is that it is less a matter of prioritising the particular level/sphere as of developing a fruitful dialectic between such, based simultaneously in the globalised locales and the particularistic (because primarily Capitalist, White, Male, Crusading-Christian and Western) global.

I am myself heavily involved in the relationship between neo-liberal globalisation, labour, the labour movement and the GJM. It has increasingly appeared to me that whilst it is the locales that are being devastated and the national unions reduced, the terrains and discourses within which the alternatives are being most dramatically enacted and most energetically forwarded are those of the global. And it is here worthwhile remembering that both the old labour movement (19thC) and the first/second wave women's movements (early/late 20thC) had international or supranational aspirations, existence and strategy before they came into existence, in most places, nationally. Whilst this generally implied an internationalism defined Westocentrically, and whilst the international declined, as Monbiot notes, into *internationalism*, that sphere, those relations, have had a curious characteristic. Whilst, on the one hand, it has been at this most-distant level that capitalist modernity has advanced itself, it has also been the one with most freedom for the advance of counter-hegemonic aspirations. The space of maximum contradiction is today, indeed, best represented by the *super-global* cyberspace.

Monbiot's proposal for a 'world parliament' (Ch. 4), supplementing, supervising and eventually surpassing the UN, is, however, based on another understanding. It is that the democracy that exists, or once existed, at the national one needs to be raised to the global level. Dismissing as undemocratic the projects of UN reformers of right or left (that of an NGO chamber), Monbiot first proposes the principle of one adult, one vote. His somewhat-too-detailed working out of the advantages of and challenges to this project fails, it seems to me however, to confront the problem of representative democracy and the competitive party system, even at the national level.

When Monbiot says 'democracy' the referent, almost universally, is *liberal* democracy. Or to what one has to call democracy-under-capitalism. Or to what is historically, *capitalist* democracy. Now, this is not to be dismissed. And it *is not* dismissed by those living under capitalist or socialist autocracy, or under the Democracy Lite general to the Rest. But liberal democracy is, as careful news-watchers may have noticed, in deep doodoo, right in its Western heartland. (Do I need to mention 'Weapons of Mass Distraction?'). Being in deep doodoo, it should be further remembered, is often preliminary to being as dead as the dodo.

The point here is that liberal democracy has run seriously out of puff, even within the parameters for which it was designed. Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2000) talks of us living on islands of political democracy surrounded by oceans of social fascism. But it is on and from such islands that the oceans – local and global – are produced and projected. And the oceans underlie, or today undermine, the islands. (And, in using this metaphor I swear I was not even *thinking* about rising sea-levels).

So democracy, recently severely liberalised, is in desperate need of – what? – civilisation? socialisation? It surely requires, in any case, a radicalisation and democracy – from the global to the local. (And, as feminists will remind us, also to the kitchen and the bed).

What we surely do *not* need is the unthinking application at global level of what is in severe crisis at the national one. Monbiot makes friendly gestures in the direction of the US, or at least Americans, without reminding us that their current president was elected through a corporate-dependent *and* legally-dubious election, in which a whiter and richer 50 percent of the electorate took part.

Monbiot avoids mention, far less confrontation, with the notion of 'global civil society', generally understood in his and my movement as space liberated from state and capital (and patriarchy, war, racism, pollution). He therefore dismisses the notion of increasing NGO influence in or on the UN, because there are NGOs controlled by capital and state (unlike liberal-democratic states, parliaments and parties?). And, where he points to the

World Social Forum as some kind of prefiguration of a parliament of the world (95), he fails to note the extent to which this is itself largely an emanation of the international NGOs (Sen, Anand, Escobar and Waterman Forthcoming).

The point is, I think, that it is from such humble and ambiguous beginnings, where the principle is less representation of the people than *re-presentation* to the people, and where the NGOs meet the social movements, the movements meet the institutions, where international trade unions meet the GJM *and* tiny un-representative labour and labour-support groups (themselves re-presenting labour to the unions), that the seeds of a 'world allowing for many others' are beginning to be sown. Monbiot is not only building his new global castle in the air but, by so doing, appealing to the kind of people who *largely* inhabit this sphere – diplomats, international relations academics, international journalists, 'transnational advocacy networks', development NGOs. And, umm, international policy think-tankies, internationally-oriented left-of-centre web citers. And, of course, people like him and me. What the implications might be for the collective self-activity of locally-fixed women, workers, indigenous peoples is unclear. An Argentinean feminist and socialist sociologist, Elizabeth Jelin, herself sympathetic to my ideas on a new kind of internationalism, once pointed out to me that 70 percent of the population of Buenos Aires – no mean city – never moved beyond a radius of five kilometers of their homes).

I have mentioned in passing that Monbiot himself mentions cyberspace only in passing. Where he does so mention it, it is in a quite instrumental manner, as something the movement can *use* to achieve its political/institutional ends. In so far as cyberspace and globalisation are even more integral to each other than 'a horse and carriage' (and much more than 'love and marriage'), this disqualifies him from address to this 'real virtuality' (Castells 1996). Developing an idea of Marc Poster (1990), I would suggest that cyberspace is a Hammer, it is Germany, and it is also Utopia. This means: it is an instrument, it is a community, it is a nowhere-existing-but-desirable-place. Arturo Escobar (2003), a person engaged simultaneously with isolated Black communities in Colombia and cyberspace, states:

What we want is the full development of cyberspatial practices ('cybercultures') that fulfill the novel promises of digital technologies while contributing to, and providing a new model for, the pluralisation and democratisation of social, economic, and ecological life. In its utopian conception – and to some extent in actual practice – cyberspace builds on a decentralised, non-hierarchical logic of self-organisation. This logic can also be seen at play in many instances of complexity in biological and social life; at their best, this complexity fosters the emergence of unexpected cultures and forms of life. We want social movements and social actors to build on this logic in order to create unheard of forms of collective intelligence – subaltern 'intelligent communities' capable of re-imagining the world and of inventing alternative processes of world-making. Meshworks of social movements are the best hope to achieve this goal at present, although net artists and others are also making valuable contributions. The

result could be a type of world-scale networking based on internationalist principles (a Fifth International? The Cyberspatial International?).

Utopian and speculative though this argument may be, I have to say that this new space looks to me rather more promising for global dialogue, coordination and norm-creation than Monbiot's projection upward of the problematic parliaments we know rather too well. As I write this, for example, it looks possible that movie thug Arnold Schwarzenegger - your typically monosyllabic and politically-ignorant Aryan *übermensch* - who has been accused of preferring to molest live women than dead fellow-Austrian, Adolf Hitler, may be elected to the Governorship of California. It makes cyberspace look an attractive terrain for democratic dispute...

There are other areas of socio-political life in which Monbiot shows little interest. Unfortunately, and like the *Communist Manifesto* and books published back in the USSR, it has no index (amounting, as far as this reviewer is concerned, to cruel and unusual punishment). It means that one cannot search here for 'multinational corporation', 'workers', 'trade unions' (with maybe 150-200 million members in Monbiot-type representative-democratic organisations, articulated also internationally!). Where he does deal with these it is to recognise a threat, to identify victims, or as a problem to be addressed by an empowered global polity. In so far, however, as power has shifted to MNCs, and within corporations upwards to CEOs, then, surely, one should see the corporation as a promising site of struggle, the workers as having agency, the unions as significant (if presently largely hypothetical) actors within the GJM. Monbiot's idea of power, it seems, is largely if not wholly political. Yet both the theory and practice of 'politics' could be understood as precisely the alienation of decision-making power from people - its concentration in the hands of professional politicians and administrators, its expression in ritualised ways decreasingly relating to everyday life.

As some kind of libertarian socialist, firmly committed to an emancipation from capitalism - rather than to the democratisation of its cancerous globalised emanation - I nonetheless welcome this book. This is because it represents a challenge to both the movement and the public, because it questions my own preferences for both libertarian socialism and internationalism (another word Monbiot is less-than-keen on). I welcome it also because I consider a vigorous and convincing reform-within-capitalism complementary to a transformation-beyond-capitalism.

I feel that I may be here being somewhat more charitable to Monbiot than he is toward his Communists and Anarchists. Or to his Communism and Anarchism. Their contemporary expressions may be rather more attuned to democratic, empowering and effective action than Monbiot gives them credit for (Sen, Anand, Escobar and Waterman Forthcoming).

As Communists/Anarchists I proffer Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri (2003/1999), in the form of an exposition of their argument before their in/famous book was published (2000). Hardt and Negri propose an expanded contemporary notion of the proletariat, which they elsewhere – and unfortunately – call 'the multitude'. What they seem to be evoking is: all those who in one way or another work for capital/ism and/or all those dispossessed, exploited and alienated. Such lacks and denials are now extended by H&N to people's own bodies (the concept of bio-power). Whilst H&N do not address themselves to alternative forms of democratic global self-governance, as does Monbiot, they make a powerful case for a popular new internationalism. This means an appeal to a new sense of global solidarity and community that both recognises the most dynamic forces/powers of corporate globalisation (capitalism, statism and informatisation), and can potentially surpass such:

[P]roletarian internationalism was anti-nationalist, and hence supranational and global. Workers of the World Unite! - not on the basis of national identities but directly through common needs and desires, without regard to borders and boundaries...Internationalism was the will of an active mass subject that recognised that the nation states were the key agents of capitalist exploitation and that the multitude was continually drafted to fight their senseless wars - in short, that the nation state was a political form whose contradictions could not be subsumed and sublimated but only destroyed. International solidarity was really a project for the destruction of the nation state and the construction of a new global community. This proletarian programme stood behind the often ambiguous tactical definitions that socialist and communist parties produced during the century of their hegemony over the proletariat...Today we should all clearly recognise that the time of such proletarian internationalism is over. That does not negate the fact, however, that the concept of internationalism really lived among the masses and deposited a kind of geological stratum of suffering and desire, a memory of victories and defeats, a residue of ideological tensions and needs. Furthermore the proletariat does in fact find itself today not just international but (at least tendentially) global...[F]ollowing William Morris [we would say] that what they fought for came about despite their defeat, but then turned out to be not what they meant - and perhaps now we have to fight for what they meant under another name.

Back to Monbiot – who would presumably dismiss the above as so much undemocratic ideological detritus. What I want to say to him is this: that in creating an effective global justice movement there are other traditions to draw from, additional to that of an urban and urbane Euro-American democratic liberalism, somewhat over-fixated on institutions, their processes and even their radical reform. (There are also evidently other modes of expression, other rhetorics, but I think that Escobar and H&N speak for themselves here).

Let there be no misunderstanding: I am not setting up a binary, even less a manichean, opposition between the radical liberal-democrat, Monbiot (vicious), and the Libertarian Marxists, Hardt and Negri (virtuous). As I have already suggested, H&N are still searching for a single (if complex) agent of what I call global solidarity and human emancipation. 'Empire' seems to me a

most unfortunate concept (they deny it is a metaphor) for a condition of complex globalised hegemony. (I call this simply a 'globalised, networked and informatised capitalism'). And their utopia remains as intangible and unimaginable as that of Marx.

Somewhere between, somewhere beyond, these two parties, there lies a still-to-be-worked-out alternative. It should be neither excessively Post-Liberal-Democratic nor excessively Post-Communist/Anarchist. Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2003) suggests that any significant new social movement requires/invents its own sociology. This implies that it cannot be understood in traditional terms, either hegemonic or anti-hegemonic. So what we need to look for are the forces, methods, utopias unique to this new movement. But this requires less the dismissal than the re-exploration of the history of human emancipation.

In a not-dissimilar moment of crisis of an old emancipatory paradigm Regis Debray (1968) spoke of 'the revolution in the revolution'. I guess what we all ought to be looking for is 'the movement in the movement'. And, intolerant and dogmatic though I may here seem, I am remain unconvinced that 'consent' is the keyword in this new lexicon.

*Peter Waterman (London 1936) is a co-editor, with Jai Sen, Anita Anand and Arturo Escobar of The World Social Forum: Against All Empires, to be published by Viveka, New Delhi, before the 4<sup>th</sup> World Social Forum, Mumbai, January, 2004.*

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