

George Monbiot: Muppet of the week!

Anarcho

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Part 1

George Monbiot, the green activist and writer, has never let his ignorance of anarchism stop him from commenting on it. It takes a wilfully ignorant person to write the nonsense about anarchism contained in his self-contradictory book, “**The Age of Consent.**” Sadly, many of those reading and reviewing that book were equally ignorant (Johann Harri, please take a bow) and so he had little to worry about.

One thing seems sure, like many a liberal and Marxist he dislikes our ideas and seeks to smear us by means of “guilt by association.” This he did recently in **The Guardian** when discussing neo-liberalism. As he put it, the neo-liberal “*project was assisted by ideas which arose in a very different quarter. The revolutionary movements of 1968 also sought greater individual liberties, and many of the soixante-huitards saw the state as their oppressor ... the neoliberals coopted their language and ideas. Some of the anarchists I know still voice notions almost identical to those of the neoliberals: the intent is different, but the consequences very similar.*” (“**How the neoliberals stitched up the wealth of nations for themselves**”, August 28, 2007)

Yes, indeed, how could those in the Parisian streets fighting the riot cops who had attacked their protests possibly consider the state as oppressive? How could they fail to see how wrong they were to consider the state as the defender of social hierarchy as well as the capitalist class and its power and property? How did we anarchists fail to note how neoliberalism was, in fact, really fighting against wage labour and factory fascism? How could we fail to note Milton Friedman’s and Frederick von Hayek’s outspoken opposition to profits, rent, interest, wage labour, hierarchical authority and patriarchal family structure? How could we fail to see the neoliberals proclaim with Proudhon that property is both theft and despotism and urge its abolition?

Equally strangely, the “*US oligarchs and their foundations*” who have “*poured hundreds of millions into setting up thinktanks, founding business schools and transforming university economics departments into bastions of almost totalitarian neoliberal thinking*” have not been as forthcoming funding anarchist projects and organisations. Don’t these people realise that we share their “*language and ideas*”? Apparently not.

True, the neo-liberals do waffle on about “liberty” a lot, but then the Stalinist bureaucrats used to waffle on about “solidarity” a lot, too. Presumably, that means we anarchists “*still voice notions almost identical*” to those of the Stalinist dictators? Unlikely, although some on the right (like, say, the neo-liberals) say we do. Perhaps we can look forward to Monbiot’s critique of Rousseau by noting he talked about democracy and republics a lot which means that Democratic Republic of China’s rulers have “*coopted*” his “*language and ideas*”?

The underlying mentality is interesting. Rather than anarchists being in agreement with ideas of neo-liberalism (or vice versa), it is in fact Monbiot who agrees with them. Clearly, for him, freedom simply means being free to exploit, to oppress, to be anti-social and anti-ecological rather than, say, the freedom to be yourself and manage your own affairs in association with others and in harmony with the planet. Thus freedom is associated with capitalism and our radical helps push back the struggle for an ecological society by associating it with statism and rule by (at best) well-meaning, but ultimately clueless, politicians, bureaucrats and intellectuals. Monbiot’s logic is clear: people cannot be free to govern themselves as this will lead to the excesses of capitalism – and the neo-liberals join in and proclaim “*hallelujah, another convert!*”

In reality, a lot of state violence was required to create capitalism and, of course, to maintain it – the state has always been an instrument of minority rule and capitalism, like any hierarchical

system, depends on it. When left alone, people form communities and associations to determine and look after their own interests and to defend themselves against those seeking to exploit or oppress them – something no ruling class happily tolerates (particularly as such popular organisations create the potential of a new world while fighting the old). Hence the neo-liberal assault on unions, community organisations, and protest in general. This is a truism, given the nature of capitalism as a system but also given that its vision of humanity is at odds with real people. Neo-liberalism, at heart, aims to make the real world resemble the model of neoclassical economists which, in turn, allows the latter to appear more realistic than it actually is. As Bakunin warned, to impose the abstractions of scientists (to be generous to mainstream economists, ideologues would be more accurate) onto the world would be both devastating to the general public and require state force.

Unsurprising, then, the authoritarianism at the heart of neo-liberalism – even a superficial look at the politics of neo-liberalism shows that it is firmly in favour of “archy.” Obviously, this applies economically within the workplace (wage labour gives them no problems) but it also applies politically as well. The neo-liberal agenda has always turned to the state, just as capitalism has always done. Even Monbiot recognised this: *“The conditions that neoliberalism demands in order to free human beings from the slavery of the state – minimal taxes, the dismantling of public services and social security, deregulation, the breaking of the unions – just happen to be the conditions required to make the elite even richer.”*

Breaking of the unions? That has always required state power, as does dismantling public services and so forth. Anarchists, of course, prefer direct action – like, for example, strikes and organising workers on the shop-floor – you know, the kind of thing neoliberals use the state to stop. What better example do you need that we anarchists “*voice notions almost identical to those of the neoliberals*” than that? Nor should we forget that the “*first neoliberal programme of all was implemented in Chile following Pinochet’s coup, with the backing of the US government and economists taught by Milton Friedman.*” Some socialists may subscribe to the parliamentary road to socialism, but no anarchist advocates the military dictatorship way to anarchism.

So, implicitly, Monbiot presented enough of reality to show that anarchists and neoliberals really do not share anything in common. In fact, neoliberalism has always explicitly pursued a statist political strategy and goal, namely the state reduced to its “minimum” role as protector of private property and the power which goes with it – i.e., the kind of regime anarchism cut its teeth on opposing in the nineteenth century. As anyone even vaguely aware of anarchism would know.

Within a week, he noticed the contradiction. “*After my column last week,*” he wrote, “*several people wrote to point out that the neoliberal project – which demands a minimal state and maximum corporate freedom – actually relies on constant government support. They are, of course, quite right.*” (***“This great free-market experiment is more like a corporate welfare scheme”***, September 4, 2007)

So why say otherwise in the first column and suggest that anarchists and neo-liberals share common aims and ideas? Do anarchists support the neo-liberal agenda of “*constant government support*” to ensure a “*minimal state and maximum corporate freedom*”? Of course not. We just realise that freedom is too important a word to leave to the supporters of capitalism to monopolise and that the state, even Monbiot’s beloved social-democratic one, exists to keep capitalism going and ensure that the general public do not free themselves from both state and corporate rule.

That the corporate elite may object to certain functions of the state should not blind us to the fact that they need it. Nor to the fact that they will always turn to it when required — even to accept social democratic reforms if pressured by direct action from below (particularly if the alternative is genuine social transformation). We anarchists argue that without that pressure, things will get worse. That is why we support direct action, solidarity and popular self-organisation and struggle — as the neoliberal era shows, relying on politicians to do it for you is doomed to failure. Only pressure from the streets and workplaces can countermand the power of capital on the state— and, ultimately, get rid of both once and for all.

Part 2

Recently, I exposed the silly claims of George Monbiot as regards anarchism and its (non-existent) similarities with neo-liberalism. After proclaiming that both neo-liberalism and anarchism aimed to destroy the state, Monbiot had to admit a few days later that the former was all in favour of state intervention — as long as it was for the rich. A fact he was well aware of, before deciding to smear anarchism via guilt by association.

Monbiot is, unfortunately, at it again. In a wonderfully self-contradictory article, he takes the claim of right-wing free market capitalists to being “libertarian” at face value and proclaims that “*Governments aren’t perfect, but it’s the libertarians who bleed us dry*” (**The Guardian**, October 23, 2007).

The article is not total nonsense, though. It does, via the life-story of Matt Ridley (the chairman who got **Northern Rock** into its recent misfortunes), expose the utter hypocrisy of most supporters of free market capitalist who attack state aid for everyone — bar themselves and their class. Ridley, Monbiot notes, “*railed against all government intervention and mocked less enlightened beings for their failure to understand economics and finance*” yet when his “*libertarian [sic!] business model failed, Ridley had to go begging to the detested state.*” Yet, anyone with any understanding of capitalism and its history will know that this is standard practice, although it is rarely discussed in public. After all, it is hard to justify cutting the welfare state for the many while supporting it for the few. As Monbiot put it: “*So much for the virtues of unregulated free enterprise.*”

Sadly, while exposing one aspect of today’s doubletalk, Monbiot accepts another by allowing the right to appropriate the term “*libertarian*” to describe their deeply hierarchical and authoritarian system, capitalism. How “*libertarian*” is a system in which the wealthy few order about their wage slaves while the latter’s liberty is little more than changing masters?

Perhaps this is not too surprising, given that Monbiot accepts the worldview of the very people he claims to oppose. “*Ridley’s core argument*” is that people “*act only in their own interests. But our selfish instincts encourage us to behave in ways that appear altruistic. By cooperating and by being perceived as generous, we earn other people’s trust. This allows us to advance our own interests more effectively than we could by cheating, stealing and fighting.*” Government should “*withdraw from our lives and stop interfering in business and other human relations*” (except, Monbiot fails to note, to defend private property and the hierarchies it produces).

“*Like Ridley,*” Monbiot is “*a biological determinist*” and “*accept[s] the evidence he puts forward, but draw[s] completely different conclusions. He believes that modern humans are destined to behave well if left to their own devices; I believe that they are likely to behave badly.*” Co-operation only

works if we are “part a small group of intelligent hominids, all of whom are well known to each other.” However, “[i]f, on the other hand, you can switch communities at will, travel freely, buy in one country and sell in another, hire strangers then fire them, you will gain more from acting only in your own interest.”

Yet who are these “strangers” who allow you to act in this way? Who are the people in these “communities” who tolerate such anti-social behaviour? Do they not have any interests of their own? So it appears that only some people have self-interest – the rest are merely walking and talking automations who have no notion of what is in their best interests and tolerate such anti-social people. So, the reformist agrees with the capitalist: “Ridley and I have the same view of human nature: that we are inherently selfish.” Yet, for some strange reason, these “inherently selfish” people act against their own interests and let others “gain more” than themselves. How strange.

Even stranger, our political rulers are of a different species than the rest of us. What other conclusion can be drawn? For Monbiot argues that “we can no longer be scrutinised and held to account by a small community. We need governments to fill the regulatory role vacated when our tiny clans dissolved.” Are governments not made up by the same “inherently selfish” people society is made up of? Are politicians, police, bureaucrats and officials not seeking, like the rest of us, to “gain more from acting only in your own interest”?

What is to stop our political rulers acting as the rest of us, namely (to use Monbiot’s words) when “allowed to pursue their genetic interests without constraint, they will hurt other people. They will grab other people’s resources, they will dump their waste in other people’s habitats, they will cheat, lie, steal and kill. And if they have power and weapons, no one will be able to stop them except those with more power and better weapons.” So to stop people acting “without constraint” we are to give some of them (the government) “power and weapons” even though, as Monbiot states, this will mean “no one will be able to stop them except those with more power and better weapons.” Which explains his support for world government, presumably. Except, of course, who will stop the world government?

Incredibly, Monbiot is coming out with the same self-contradictory arguments anarchists have been refuting for over one hundred years. For “while our opponents seem to admit there is a kind of salt of the earth – the rulers, the employers, the leaders – who, happily enough, prevent those bad men – the ruled, the exploited, the led – from becoming still worse than they are” we anarchists “maintain that **both** rulers and ruled are spoiled by authority” and “**both** exploiters and exploited are spoiled by exploitation.” So “there is [a] difference, and a very important one. **We** admit the imperfections of human nature, but we make no exception for the rulers. **They** make it, although sometimes unconsciously, and because we make no such exception, they say that we are dreamers.” (Kropotkin, **Act for Yourselves**, p. 83)

Looking at states, we find them acting as Monbiot claims humans do: “we should appease those who are more powerful than ourselves and exploit those who are less powerful. The survival strategies that once ensured cooperation among equals now ensure subservience to those who have broken the social contract.” The words Bush, Blair and Iraq spring to mind! And Monbiot wants to give the state even more powers? Why would centralising power on the world level be any better than centralising it at the level of the nation state?

Somewhat ironically, Monbiot vaguely recognises this. He states that the “democratic challenge ... is to mimic the governance system of the small hominid troop. We need a state that rewards us for cooperating and punishes us for cheating and stealing. At the same time, we must ensure that the

state is also treated like a member of the hominid clan and punished when it acts against the common good.” Except, of course, the state is based on a delegation of power into a few hands, who have the means of enforcing their decisions (i.e., “punishes us” for disobedience to its decisions and laws). That is why elites have always turned to the state – it disempowers the many so that the few can rule and fleece them. This is the case under laissez-faire capitalism as any other regime:

*“while all Governments have given the capitalists and monopolists full liberty to enrich themselves with the underpaid labour of working men [and women] ... they have **never, nowhere** given the working [people] the liberty of opposing that exploitation. Never has any Government applied the ‘leave things alone’ principle to the exploited masses. It reserved it for the exploiters only ... nowhere has the system of ‘non-intervention of the State’ ever existed. Everywhere the State has been, and still is, the main pillar and the creator, direct and indirect, of Capitalism and its powers over the masses. Nowhere, since States have grown up, have the masses had the freedom of resisting the oppression by capitalists... The state has **always** interfered in the economic life in favour of the capitalist exploiter. It has always granted him protection in robbery, given aid and support for further enrichment. **And it could not be otherwise.** To do so was one of the functions – the chief mission – of the State.”* (Kropotkin, **Evolution and Environment**, p. 96)

So if, as Monbiot asserts, “[h]uman welfare ... is guaranteed only by mutual scrutiny and regulation” then our task is to get rid of the state. For, ultimately, how are the powerless to punish the state when it “acts against the common good”? How is that “common good” to be determined when the communal institutions required to formulate it (federations of community and workplace assemblies) are replaced by the state? If the people are in a position to formulate “the common good” and have the power to “punish” the state when it contravenes it then why have the state at all? Why give a few political, economic and social power when you know that they will abuse it and you need to organise to resist it? Hence the pressing need to abolish state along with capitalism and other social hierarchies.

Thus we have the central contradiction in Monbiot’s ideology. If people are as selfish and self-seeking as he claims, then giving only some of them power is a bad idea. If we do give an elite such power, then we will need to organise to resist it. And, as anarchists have long argued, if we organise to resist it then we are more than able to do without it – i.e., govern ourselves directly.

The state has the power to act against the common good for a reason – it is an instrument of minority rule. Its history is rooted in destroying popular organisations which can contest elite rule (see Kropotkin’s “**Mutual Aid**”). As such, Monbiot is rewriting history to assert that “[s]elf-serving as governments might be, the true social parasites are those who demand their dissolution.” Governments have, in fact, always been the means by which “social parasites” have ensured their position in society. Unless, of course, the various monarchies, oligarchies, dictatorships and bureaucracies the general public have been subjected to have, as they claimed, really expressed the “general will” after all – which is a highly unlikely situation.

We need not bother too much in wondering whether the current pseudo-democratic state is any different. Clearly, it is not – as Monbiot himself has documented the neo-liberal agenda is being imposed by such regimes as well as by dictatorial ones. Nor do we need to ponder whether the state is regulating society and the economy for the many or to ensure that the few are secure

in their position. For, as Malatesta noted, the “*government cannot want society to break up, for it would mean that it and the dominant class would be deprived of sources of exploitation; nor can it leave society to maintain itself without official intervention, for then people would soon realise that government serves only to defend property owners ... and they would hasten to rid themselves of both.*” (**Anarchy**, p. 25)

In the meantime, anarchists argue people subject to exploitation and oppression to organise to defend themselves and society from the negative effects of market forces and concentrations of power – to collectively practice mutual aid and direct action in their own self-interest. That is, precisely the kind of popular self-organisation and self-activity the state represses in the interests of the few (as seen, for example, by Thatcher’s attacks on the unions).

Monbiot, like many a reformist before him, simply confuses actions to secure the health of the system as a whole (which can often clash with the interests of specific capitalists and firms) with a fundamental antagonism between state and capital. It is something else he shares with the so-called “libertarian” right. And, it should be stressed, few right-“libertarians” seek to dissolve the government. Most are minimal statist, seeking a state which will defend private property and (usually unstated) the social hierarchies and economic power that goes with it. The few (so-called “anarcho-capitalists”) who seek the abolition of the public state simply want to privatise its defence of property functions – in other words, private police protecting private power. Very few anarchists, needless to say, consider this remotely libertarian – we seek to dissolve the state at the same time as we dissolve private power (capitalism).

So genuine anarchists have always been aware that capitalism requires state regulation to keep it going. We would agree with Monbiot’s statement that “[u]nless taxpayers’ money and public services are available to repair the destruction it causes, libertarianism [sic!] destroys people’s savings, wrecks their lives and trashes their environment.” That is why we argue capitalism needs to be replaced by a genuine libertarian system, one rooted in community and workplace self-management. We disagree that free market capitalism has anything to be with “*libertarianism.*” Sadly, Monbiot is aiding the right by allowing them to appropriate “*libertarian*” for their agenda of replacing the state with private serfdom.

Perhaps if Monbiot had read, say, Kropotkin’s “**Mutual Aid**” or “**The State: Its Historic Role**” he would not write such ignorant and self-contradictory nonsense. But, as he has proven so many times before, ignorance of something does not stop him waffling on about it – particularly if it has something to do with anarchism.

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George Monbiot really does not have a clue about anarchism. It is a shame he keeps exposing that ignorance to the world. He really should read Kropotkin's Mutual Aid!

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