



A quiet Sunday with Monbiot

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In the fall sun of this peaceful morning, a visit to George Monbiot.

For those who don't know Monbiot: he writes for the Guardian in the UK, and publishes the articles on [his site](#). Monbiot writes on many issues, the environment is one of his strong points, but by no means the only one. He is an excellent researcher who time and again manages to come up with sources that others 'ignore'.

On this Sunday, here are some articles he published this month. They cover a broad range: micro-generation, decreasing water supplies, war protesters, carbon offsets, and halting climate change. The material, the content, as well as Monbiot's unique and outspoken views make him highly relevant for everyone at TOD.

Hence this somewhat unusual angle: a TOD post written about what Monbiot writes (even better, in one article, he writes about what Fred Pearce writes). It's hard to summarize his articles, since they are truly 'information-dense', so reading the originals is recommended.

Wikipedia portrays [Monbiot](#) as follows:

He is currently visiting professor of planning at Oxford Brookes University.

Working as an investigative journalist after graduation he travelled in Indonesia, Brazil and East Africa. His activities led to him being made persona non grata in several countries and being sentenced to life imprisonment in absentia in Indonesia.

In these places he also claims to have been shot at, beaten up by military police, shipwrecked and stung into a poisoned coma by hornets. He came back to work in Britain after being pronounced clinically dead in Lodwar General Hospital in north-western Kenya, having contracted cerebral malaria.



Let's get to the articles:

[Small Is Useless](#)

Micro generation can't solve climate change

Monbiot rips into the claims, of which there are many in the UK, that micro-generation could replace a substantial part of dwindling fossil resources. No way, José.

In seeking to work out how a 90% cut in carbon emissions could be achieved in the rich nations by 2030, I have made many surprising findings. But none has shocked me as much as the discovery that renewable micro generation has been grossly overhyped. Those who maintain that our own homes can produce all the renewable electricity and heat they need have harmed the campaign to stop climate chaos, by sowing complacency and misdirecting our efforts.[..]

Similar constraints affect all micro renewables: a report by a team at Imperial College shows that if 50% of our homes were fitted with solar water heaters, they would produce 0.056 exajoules of heat, or 2.3% of our total demand(10); while AEA Technology suggests that domestic heat pumps could supply only 0.022 eJ of the UK's current heat consumption, or under 1%(11). This doesn't mean they are not worth installing, just that they can't solve the problem by themselves.[..]

Some campaigners accept that micro generators can make only a small contribution, but argue that they are still useful, as they wake people up to green issues. It seems more likely that these overhyped devices will have the opposite effect, as their owners discover how badly they have been ripped off and their neighbours are driven insane by the constant yawing and stalling of a windmill on a turbulent roof.

[The Water Boom Is Over](#)

Global freshwater supplies could start to determine whether or not we can feed ourselves.

In case there were any doubts left, we are running head first into a freshwater crisis that is hard to imagine. Peak Water may deserve more attention than it gets at present.

Many parts of the world, for reasons which have little to do with climate change, are already beginning to lose their water. In *When the Rivers Run Dry*, Fred Pearce, who is New Scientist's environment consultant, travels around the world trying to assess the state of our water resources(4). He finds that we survive today as a result of borrowing from the future.

The great famines predicted for the 1970s were averted by new varieties of rice, wheat and maize, whose development is known as the "green revolution". They produce tremendous yields, but require plenty of water. This has been provided by irrigation, much of which uses underground reserves. Unfortunately, many of them are being exploited much faster than they are being replenished.[..]

Even this account - of rising demand and falling supply - does not tell the whole grim story. Roughly half the world's population lives within 60 kilometres of the coast. Eight of the ten largest cities on earth have been built beside the sea. Many of them rely on underground lenses of fresh water, effectively floating, within the porous rocks, on salt water which has soaked into the land from the sea. As the fresh water is sucked out, the salt water rises and can start to contaminate the aquifer. This is already happening in hundreds of places.

As these two effects of climate change - global drying and rising salt pollution - run up against the growing demand for water, and as irrigation systems run dry or become contaminated, the possibility arises of a permanent global food deficit. Even with a net food surplus, 800 million people are malnourished. Nothing I could write would begin to describe what a world in deficit - carrying 9 billion people - would look like.

[Putting The State On Trial](#)

Protesters who have damaged military equipment are walking away from the dock

It will be hard to believe for many, especially in the US, that European courts fail to convict those who damage military equipment for 'ideological' reasons. In most cases, the equipment belongs to the US Army. Monbiot adds that it makes governments nervous, and even raises the prospect of putting Tony Blair on trial for the invasion of Iraq.

The defendants had tried to argue in court that the entire war against Iraq was a crime of aggression. But in March this year the Law Lords ruled that they could not use this defence: while aggression by the state is a crime under international law, it is not a crime under domestic law(3). But they were allowed to show that they were seeking to prevent specific war crimes from being committed - principally the release by the B52s of cluster bombs and munitions tipped with depleted uranium.

They cited section 5 of the 1971 Criminal Damage Act, which provides lawful excuse for damaging property if that action prevents property belonging to other people from being damaged, and section 3 of the 1967 Criminal Law Act, which states that "a person may use such force as is reasonable in the prevention of a crime". In summing up, the judge told the jurors that using weapons "with an adverse effect on civilian populations which is disproportionate to the need to achieve the military objective"(4) is a war crime. The defendants are likely to be tried again next year.

While these non-verdicts are as far as the defence of lawful excuse for impeding the Iraq war has progressed in the UK, in Ireland and Germany the courts have made decisions - scarcely reported over here - whose implications are momentous. In July, five peace campaigners were acquitted after using an axe and hammers to cause \$2.5m worth of

damage to a plane belonging to the US Navy. When they attacked it, in February 2003, it had been refuelling at Shannon airport on its way to Kuwait, where it would deliver supplies to be used in the impending war. The jury decided that the five saboteurs were acting lawfully(5).[..]

When the Fairford protesters took their request to challenge the legality of the war to the court of appeal, Sir Michael Jay, permanent under-secretary at the Foreign Office, submitted a witness statement which seems to contain a note of official panic.

"It would be prejudicial to the national interest and to the conduct of the Government's foreign policy if the English courts were to express opinions on questions of international law concerning the use of force ... which might differ from those expressed by the Government."

[Selling Indulgences](#)

The trade in carbon offsets is an excuse for business as usual

The quite brilliant comparison of carbon offsets with the former 'absolutions industry' run by the world's original global corporation, the church.

Rejoice! We have a way out. Our guilty consciences appeased, we can continue to fill up our SUVs and fly round the world without the least concern about our impact on the planet. How has this magic been arranged? By something called "carbon offsets". You buy yourself a clean conscience by paying someone else to undo the harm you are causing.

In August, BP launched its "targetneutral" scheme, enabling customers to "neutralise the CO2 emissions caused by their driving"(1). The consequences of an entire year's motoring can be discharged for just £20. [...] ... you need have no further worries about what you and BP are doing to the atmosphere (or, for that matter, to the people of West Papua or the tundra in Alaska).

It sounds great. Without requiring any social or political change, and at a tiny cost to the consumer, the problem of climate change is solved. Having handed over a few quid, we can all sleep easy again.

This is not the first time that such schemes have been sold. In his book *The Rise of the Dutch Republic*, published in 1855, John Lothrop Motley describes the means by which the people of the Netherlands in the 15th and 16th centuries could redeem their sins. "The sale of absolutions was the source of large fortunes to the priests. ... God's pardon for crimes already committed, or about to be committed, was advertised according to a graduated tariff. Thus, poisoning, for example, was absolved for eleven ducats, six livres tournois. Absolution for incest was afforded at thirty-six livres, three ducats. Perjury came to seven livres and three carlines. Pardon for murder, if not by poison, was cheaper. Even a parricide could buy forgiveness at God's tribunal at one ducat; four livres, eight carlines."(2)

Just as in the 15th and 16th centuries you could sleep with your sister and kill and lie without fear of eternal damnation, today you can live exactly as you please as long as you give your ducats to one of the companies selling indulgences. It is pernicious and destructive nonsense.

[Heat](#)

How to stop the planet burning

Last but not least, we let George shamelessly promote George. 'Heat' is the title of his latest book, published this month. Once more, Monbiot is outspoken: climate change can be stopped.

We know that climate change is happening. We know that it could, if the worst predictions come true, destroy the conditions which make human life possible. Only one question is now worth asking: can it be stopped?

In Heat, George Monbiot shows that it can.

For the first time, he demonstrates that we can achieve the necessary cut - a 90% reduction in carbon emissions by 2030 - without bringing civilisation to an end. Combining his unique knowledge of campaigning and environmental science, he shows how we can transform our houses, our power and our transport systems. But he also shows that this can happen only with a massive programme of action which no government has yet been prepared to take.

His exciting, disturbing ideas expose the cowardice of our politicians. By showing that we can save the biosphere without losing our comfort and security, Monbiot sweeps away their perpetual excuse for doing nothing: that it would be too painful and expensive to sustain life on earth.

In every case, he supports his proposals with a rigorous investigation into what works, what doesn't, how much it costs and what the problems might be. He wages war on bad ideas as energetically as he promotes good ones. He is not afraid to attack anyone - friend or foe - whose claims are false or whose figures have been fudged. HEAT also contains a breath-taking new exposure of the corporations trying to stop us from taking action.



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