Land, Genes and Justice

George Monbiot

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Q1. You began you career producing natural history programmes for the BBC, yet somewhere along the line you turned into a campaigner and political commentator. How and why did that transformation take place?

A: Working for the BBC, several things became clear to me: first, that the "neutrality" we were supposed to apply to our work often meant swallowing accepted truths, whether or not they stood up to critical examination. Reflecting the worldview of the other media was considered a "non-political" approach, challenging it, "political". As most of the media, then and now, were dominated by a handful of perverse billionaires, being "non-political" or "unbiased" really meant accepting their peculiar version of events. I'm always astonished at the ease with which the ethics of the Daily Mail, the Sun, the Times and the Telegraph come to dominate reputedly non-partisan media organisations. Secondly, I came to see that the BBC's Natural History Unit would not and could not engage with environmental issues. I produced two major investigative documentaries there. One of them won a Sony Award, both of them made a big splash in the other media, but as far as the unit was concerned, they were a major liability, principally because they took up so much staff time and cost so much money. It became abundantly clear to me that the second one was the last I'd be able to make. Since the BBC was occupied by enemy aliens (John Birt became director-general a few years after I left), it is striking that the word "investigative" has been all but expunged from the vocabulary of senior management.

Moreover, I began to see that there were a number of huge stories unfolding in some of the remoter parts of the world which were receiving no coverage at all. I spent a few months working in current affairs at the World Service after leaving the BBC's Natural History Unit. It was a much livelier place, with a greater awareness of the wider responsibilities broadcasting entails, but there was a bit of a blind spot about the scope of its coverage. Places of little "geopolitical significance" were simply left off the broadcasting map. For many people struggling against human rights abuses and the theft of resources in countries without an independent judiciary or media, the international press is effectively the last court of appeal, yet even this option was being closed to them. It struck me that there was a major gap that needed to be filled, and that working at the BBC wasn't the way to fill it.

Q2. You seem to be saying both that the Western media is in thrall to political orthodoxy and the interests of big business, and that the 'international press is the last court of appeal' for human rights campaigners in third world countries. Can you reconcile these two views? Do you still believe that there is the possibility of an independent, critical media presence of the type you advocate?

A: In many of the parts of the world I've worked in, people suffering oppression are desperate for foreign coverage, in the hope that it will widen the scope of their campaigns and force the authorities at home to listen to them. More often than not, they're disappointed, not least because of the growing parochialism which, bizarrely, has accompanied news organisations' improved capacity to cover the world. Gathering

the material is the comparatively easy part of an investigative journalist's work, the hard part is persuading the papers, TV or radio networks at home to take it seriously. It doesn't matter how compelling the story is or how remarkable the scoop, if it concerns something happening to a bunch of foreigners a long way away, getting the story aired will always involve a monumental struggle.

The most interesting and exciting media I come across are those that belong to what's often described as the "underground press": magazines, weekly news sheets, list servers and videos produced on tiny budgets by dedicated groups of volunteers. I'm thinking in particular of the magazines Corporate Watch and Squall, the news sheet Schnews and the Undercurrents video newsreel. While some of their material has appeared elsewhere, much of their work is entirely new, challenging, interesting and truly global in its scope. It's not a lack of resources that's holding news gathering organisations back, it's a lack of will.

Q3.Your first book Poisoned Arrows almost led to a break in diplomatic relations between Indonesia and Great Britain as well as to your own death. What did you write to cause such stir?

A: With the photographer Adrian Arbib, I stole the necessary travel document from an unlocked office in the police headquarters in Jakarta, forged a signature and travelled to the parts of the province from which foreigners had been effectively screened. We spent six months there and managed, often with great difficulty, to reach all the places we sought to travel to. We brought back a story that had not been run in the western media before. One hundred and fifty thousand "transmigrants" from the inner islands of Indonesia were being moved, in some cases forcibly, to Irian Jaya, and settled in places which were simply not capable of sustaining them. The local people were being expelled from their lands and pressed into "model villages", while the new and desperate pool of transmigrant labour was used to strip their forests for timber and their gardens for industrial starch. Huge tracts of Irian Jaya had been militarised, and torture and summary execution had become commonplace. British armoured personnel carriers were deployed to suppress the resulting insurgencies, and the World Bank as well as several bilateral agencies were pouring money into the transmigration programme.

Q4. Your book and radio series Amazon Watershed examines the mahogany trade in connection to land ownership in Brazil. Has your publicising the hidden costs and causes of logging made much difference to the mahogany trade?

A: In the two years following publication (and the accompanying campaign started in conjunction with Friends of the Earth and Survival International), mahogany purchases in the UK fell by 60 per cent. Since then, they have continued, albeit more slowly, to decline. I was able to establish that timber illegally felled in Indian and biological reserves, whose extraction was accompanied by massacres of local people and massive environmental destruction, was ending up in British high streets, DIY stores and even the furniture restoration department in Buckingham Palace. The fight we had with the Timber Trade Federation and some of the companies it represented was,

I think, the nastiest I've ever encountered: never before or since have I come across such sugared mendacity and supercilious disdain for other people's lives (one trader arguing against me in a radio discussion claimed that the killings were acceptable because "life is cheap in Brazil". This prompted a major demonstration in Rio de Janeiro). The other main topic of the book was the seizure of land from small farmers in the north-east of Brazil by big business. What I saw there, in 1989, made me realise how critical landrights are to social justice and environmental protection worldwide, and how effective non-violent direct action (exercised, in this case, by the farmers seeking to resist the theft of their land) could be.

Q5. Your book and radio series No Mans Land also discusses the connection between land rights and environmental problems in a very different context, that of nomadism. Is there a general correlation between certain patterns of land ownership and environmental destruction? Could land reform be the most effective solution to many environmental problems? Why?

A: Land, in most parts of the world, remains the basis of wealth, and the only assurance of survival. While it stays within the hands of small producers, it tends to supply local needs. When it falls into the hands of large proprietors, who are typically well-capitalised and have developed national and international connections, it tends to supply the most lucrative markets, producing either speculative dividends or internationally-traded commodities. Food security depends upon small producers.

Small proprietors or commoners, who tend to live on the land they control and expect to bequeath that land to their descendants, recognise that their survival depends to a large extent upon the health of their land. They use it to supply a diversity of resources – food, fuel, fibres, building materials and medicines – so need to maintain a diversity of habitats and species. Big, well-capitalised proprietors, typically absentees in possession of a portfolio of investments, see the land as a source of a single commodity: liquidity. To achieve competitive rates of return from the land (typically ten per cent or more), they must exceed biological rates of return (three per cent or less), while concentrating on the production of single commodities, as they cannot optimise two variables. When the land is exhausted, they can disinvest and reinvest elsewhere. Land concentration is a recipe for environmental disaster.

Q6. G. Hardin, another biologist turned political theorist, also established in his famous "The Tragedy of the Commons" a correlation between a type of land ownership and environmental destruction. He then recommended privatisation as a solution. In your article "The Tragedy of the Enclosure" you challenge his diagnoses and his solutions, highlighting some contrary examples. But is his view always incorrect?

A: Hardin's mistake was to confuse a commons with an open access regime. There are two elements to common property – common and property. A common is the property of a community, whose interest in its maintenance is as acute as a private proprietor's. What Hardin ignored are the well-developed regulatory mechanisms governing the deployment of common resources worldwide. Take the Turkana of north-

west Kenya, for example. Outsiders see a series of unrelated people wandering into the Turkana's gallery forests, browsing their goats and camels there, then moving on. It looks like the anarchy Hardin described, that would necessarily lead to the destruction of the resource in question. In truth, the regime could not be more closely regulated. Before entering the forest, a herder must first strike a deal with the elders of the community that controls it. He will be told how many animals he can take in and for how long. It will vary according to the state and capacity of the forest. If someone enters and browses his animals there without permission, he will be tied to a tree and beaten. If he does it twice, he'll be beaten to death. The only threat to the gallery forests stems from the measures the Kenyan government has taken in order to prevent Hardin's presumed tragedy from unfolding.

These enforcement mechanisms have tended to be lost in translation. Hardin's thesis, which relies on the idea that everyone will take as much as he can, and no one will stop him, played conveniently into the hands of the governments, businesses and development agencies seeking to seize, nationalise or privatise common resources. There's a chilling continuity between his work and that of Adam Smith, who, as Eric Hobsbawm points out, took as his development model the English enclosure movement and the resulting capitalisation of agriculture. Smith's approach, of course, was already being deployed worldwide by the time Hardin's paper was published: it fell on fertile ground.

Q7. Why have you abandoned your focus on Third World countries to write about Britain?

A: I haven't completely abandoned it, but several things encouraged me to come back to Britain. I became very ill on my last long journey abroad, contracting cerebral malaria. It severely damaged my resistance to other diseases. I began, too, to see that if I kept pointing out what was going wrong in other countries, while ignoring what was happening in Britain, I would be open to the justifiable charge of hypocrisy. And, most importantly, I felt I had learnt things abroad that were applicable to Britain, but seldom applied.

Q8. What is the aim of The Land is Ours and why is it important?

A: The Land is Ours has a one sentence statement of principle: it "campaigns peacefully for access to land, its resources and the decision-making processes affecting them, for everyone, irrespective of race, age or gender". It is a campaign, not an organisation, composed of 20 or so local groups scattered around Britain, and a network of thousands of individuals. I kicked it off in 1994 because it struck me that many of the campaigns that had sprung up in Britain in response to years of social exclusion and environmental destruction contained elements of the land rights issues I had followed abroad. For example, roads protesters complained that the decision to build trunk roads takes place before the public enquiry begins – it was made, in other words, by remote, unaccountable people who did not have to suffer the consequences of that decision, just like the decisions to build dams in the Amazon or to plough up the pastoralists' savannahs for wheat in East Africa. Social housing campaigners pointed out

that sites which should have been used to build affordable homes for the poor were instead being used to build exclusive homes for the rich.

The link with landrights, however, had not been made explicit, nor had issues like these been overtly connected. It struck me that while the intended beneficiaries of development (whose purpose is surely to improve the lot of the worst-off) are effectively excluded from the development decision-making process, development will always serve only the developers and those with a surfeit, rather than a deficit of existing development. Riding the wave of direct action campaigning, we occupied what we considered to be key sites to make our points: we took over set-aside land close to the hill first taken by the Diggers in 1649, for example, to highlight people's exclusion from agricultural decision-making, and the concentration of rights and revenues in the hands of a tiny band of privileged landholders; we seized a huge derelict site in Wandsworth, in south London, which the owners wanted to turn into the ninth major superstore within a mile and a half, but local people wanted for affordable housing, a park and a community centre; we turned a rubbish tip in Bristol into a community garden (which is still there, eighteen months later); we occupied land on large estates, in defence of a right to roam. TLIO also helps people fighting to retain existing landrights (allotments, public spaces etc), by networking, pooling resources and providing access to a network of pro bono lawyers, consultants and planners.

Q9. It is not hard to imagine why Third World countries, where most people work on the land, agrarian reform could save lives, produce very important political changes and drastically affect environmental issues. But in highly industrialised societies where, say, two thirds of the population work in the area of services, and only some of the producers are agricultural producers, it is hard to believe that land, rather than other resources are really key issues. Why then do you focus so much of your attention on land?

A: While much of our current employment is only indirectly, if at all, affected by the distribution of landrights, the quality of almost every other aspect of our lives is governed by it. It determines, for example, whether we have access to sufficient housing (if the available land has been used to build superstores, empty office blocks or millennium domes, the answer will be no). It determines, for the same reason, whether a neighbourhood has sufficient community and free recreational resources. It determines transport policy (the weak distribution of landrights represented by the pre-1996 development planning system led, for example, to the environmentally and socially disastrous trend towards out-of-town shopping). It determines, for obvious reasons, landscape quality and habitability, in both towns and the countryside. It determines how our food is produced. In Britain, which has among the most concentrated patterns of landownership on earth, and had a large urban population before any other country, large-scale farming, the breaking of the links between producers and consumers, food adulteration and a total failure of accountability throughout the food chain have gone hand in hand.

Q10. You are obviously using various theoretical ideas – about power, dependence, the motivations of capitalist producers, the struggle over resources, and soon – and you have a record of political intervention which puts most of us to shame, but how do you conceive the relationship between the ideas and the action? Is your position like Chomsky's, in which it is enough simply to present the facts of many situations from which any half-decent person will draw the inevitable political conclusions, or do you see the need for intellectuals to interpret the world before (or as) they try to change it? How influenced are you by explicit theories of underdevelopment, by Marxism, by Gandhian ideas or others?

A: I'm sorry to say that I haven't devoted much time to development theory. Every big project I've worked on has involved months of intense reading, but generally on subjects such as history, geography, anthropology, current affairs, law, ecology, soil science, engineering, hydrology and human biology, all of which have been, depending on the project, essential to an understanding of what I've been looking at. I've read a bit of Marx, a bit of Gandhi and quite a lot of Chomsky, Galeano and Friere. I've found a fair bit in their work that accords with the things I've seen and some which doesn't, but I don't think I've ever worked consciously across a theoretical framework.

The issues I've been concerned with all involve threats to human life. In some cases there's been a chance that I could influence in some way the outcome of the story, either through the coverage itself or by campaigning. Placing this work within a theoretical framework, valid as it may be, would run the risk of alienating some of those to whom I'd be appealing, without contributing to the case. I do believe that the facts should and can speak for themselves. Some of the hardest people to reach are those who work to a well-developed theoretical framework, with whose assumptions your findings do not concur.

Q11.You have drawn attention to the way in which viable rural communities are undermined by second-home owners who drive up property prices and contribute little. But surely rural depopulation (for example in France) has been driven as much by the desire of people to abandon a stultifying and one-sided form of life in favour of an easier and culturally richer urban existence. The way of life depicted in a film such as 'Will it Snow for Christmas?' is surely one to be escaped rather than preserved?

A: In Britain, there's a desperate shortage of affordable housing in rural areas, worse, in many cases, than in the cities. I wouldn't like to live in the countryside, and clearly you wouldn't either, but there's a large number of people who were born and brought up there, whose friends and families live there, and who want to stay. I hope you are not suggesting that their needs and desires can be ignored because they are not the same as ours.

There's a keen sense of injustice among rural people unable to find adequate housing, who have to sit and watch while others transform their necessities into luxuries. At present, there are positive incentives for the ownership of second homes in Britain –

for example, you need pay only half the standard rate of council tax on a second home. Many are not used at all, but are held simply as speculative assets. There's a busy market in the Middle East, the Far East and the United States in new British homes built, our house-builders and political leaders constantly assure us, to meet Britain's urgent housing needs.

Q12. The title of your forthcoming book is Corrupt Britain. What sort of corruption are you documenting and what solutions do you propose?

A: I'm looking at the corporate take-over of public life. But that's all I want to say at the moment.

Q13. Another area where your politics and your biological training meet is genetic engineering, the topic of your Amnesty Lecture. Do you have a deep ecological principled opposition to it, or are you mainly concerned with its possible consequences?

A: The most alarming aspect of genetic engineering is its patentability – it enables biotech companies to exercise total control over the crops they produce, and to reap a disproportionate share of the revenues. Take the biotech giant Monsanto, for example. Not only has it spent billions in acquiring both seed and biotechnology companies over the last few years, but it has also formed a joint venture with Cargill, the multinational seed merchant which enjoys a near-monopoly on seed sales in many parts of the developing world. It's not hard to foresee a situation in which farmers have no choice but to buy genetically engineered crops, which remain within the contractual control of Monsanto and Cargill throughout the crop cycle. Within three years Monsanto has come to control 30 per cent of the US soya harvest, and 25 per cent of the maize harvest. What we eat, indeed whether we eat, will, in years to come, be up to a handful of huge and ruthless companies, whose ability to co-opt national governments and international bodies has already been amply demonstrated. They will make the oil lobby look like a corner shop.

Q14. Genetic engineering is presented by its adherents as the application of science and technology to solve people's problems, but of course such measures as the engineering of sterile seeds so that farmers are forced to go back to their supplies every year are clearly driven by profit. Opposition to genetic engineering is easily dismissed as based on ignorance of science yet so many scientists work for or are recipients of funding from commercial interests. To what extent have scientists in general allowed themselves to become the tools of big business and what can do you think can be done about this?

A: The barriers to feeding the world are not technical, but political and economic. They consist chiefly of the misdistribution of food itself and the means to produce it (namely land). The concentration of production in the hands of multinational conglomerates will exacerbate, rather than relieve this trend, irrespective of the technology they deploy. This problem is compounded both by the potential use of the "terminator technology" you mention and by the fact that the cutting edge of Monsanto's work

(and that of other corporations) is not food production but feed production – crops grown as fodder for animals. The use of land that should be feeding humans for feeding animals is already a major contributor to world hunger – this is likely to make it very much worse.

We have been badly let down by science. Just when we need to know how best to protect forests, when we turn to our scientists, we find them busy with minutiae of the molecular taxonomy of trees, in order to help timber producers maximise their profitability. While basic primary health care problems in the developing world remain unresearched, the most brilliant researchers devote their lives to non-remedial cosmetic surgery. Scientists, of course, are by no means solely to blame. The big money is deployed to answer the small questions, while the big questions go unheard. Science works for those who can pay, not those who are most in need, and what benefits the first category is generally what harms the second. But scientists cannot, as, for example, Professor Lewis Wolpert, chair of the Committee for the Public Understanding of Science, seeks to do, exonerate themselves from all responsibility.

Q15. You have been prominent in drawing attention to the threat posed to both democracy and the environment posed by international free-trade agreements such as the MAI and NAFTA. Yet all our major political parties, especially New Labour, embrace 'globalisation'. How can we hope to combat such measures in spite of the powerful vested interests in the media and business?

A: This is one of the greatest challenges we face, and the battle against treaties which threaten to remove the social, workplace, consumer and environmental regulations we've fought so hard to introduce and sustain will, I believe, turn out to be the most important political battle of the early 21st century. If we believe it will be easily won, we are deceiving ourselves. The treaties are being driven by people whose interests are entirely at variance with those of the rest of the world – a tiny number of big businessmen, their client heads of governments and the executives of multilateral agencies, such as the World Bank, IMF and World Trade Organisation. They are beyond democratic control, and threaten to bring about the end of representative government. No amount of evidence to the contrary will convince them that their extreme ideological prescription is flawed – even as Russia is bled dry by an unregulated outflow of foreign exchange, the recommended medicine is still less regulation.

Campaigners against the Multilateral Agreement on Investment have succeeded in raising serious concerns among ministers in several European governments, and we may yet be able to delay its adoption. The most likely outcome, however, is that the same clauses are inserted into drafts of a new World Trade Agreement. We'll need constant vigilance and ingenuity to combat this threat: we're up against the combined might of all the world's most powerful institutions.

Q16. You are well-known as an advocate of direct action; do you think that the prevalence of direct action as a form of political protest will ultimately undermine or reinvigorate traditional democratic institutions?

A: Direct action does not take place in isolation. It is one of a number of political tools, which tends to be used when standard democratic procedures fail to represent the public interest: when trunk roads are approved before the public enquiry begins, for example, or when developers can use something called "planning gain" to buy planning permission from the local authority, or when, despite requests for a moratorium from government agencies, a complete lack of meaningful public engagement and consultation, and serious public disquiet, the government signs hundreds of consents for the deployment of genetically engineered crops.

The direct action movement in Britain has become little short of an enfranchisement movement. Young people, excluded from politics by apathy, the poll tax and an understandable perception of a lack of real choice, have been able to engage once more in national life. They have brought with them fresh and fascinating perspectives, and insisted that the elected authorities attend to the needs of the most vulnerable, rather than just those of the most prosperous. It's been a shot in the arm of British political life, and has brought onto the political agenda a host of issues that had hitherto been ignored.

Q17. Your sympathies are very clearly with the dispossessed, wherever they may be found, and with democracy in the sense of local control. There is also a strong message that democratic interests and environmental interests go hand in hand. But I wonder if this is always so. The fundamental environmental problem created by contemporary humanity is presumably that human resource use is pressing against the reproductive limits of the bio-sphere (or at the very least, is channelling biological development into dangerously narrow paths). This problem is a function both of the ways that resources are used and the numbers of people around to use them. One can accept that the abuses are driven by anti-democratic corporate interests, but still acknowledge that people's lifestyles, values, preferences – therefore votes- are to some extent dependent on the consequences of these processes. Suppose that the environmental problem will only be solved in the long run by both reducing human fertility and equalising access to resources. Can this be achieved in a manner consistent with democracy and human rights, given the entrenched interests in existing ways of life?

A: There's a long-held assumption that environmentalists, being at odds with much of the world, seek to impose their views on the majority undemocratically, and there are certainly some who fit this description. I've documented and campaigned against the most appalling human rights abuses perpetrated by conservationists, particularly in East Africa. Here the Maasai have been excluded from nearly all their dry season grazing lands by a conservation policy first comprehensively formulated by Professor Bernhardt Grzimek, Hitler's curator of zoology. Local people entering parks and reserves in Kenya can be shot on sight: the reserves are to be maintained as "primordial wildernesses", even though some of them have been inhabited for three million years.

This approach, which has been maintained by wildlife protection agencies all over the Third World, is divisive, injust and, in most cases, self-defeating: humans are set at odds with wildlife. In nearly all circumstances, environmental protection is compatible with a human presence.

I see environmentalism as one of the foundation stones of social justice. To me, it's about acknowledging that you are not the only person on the planet, and acting accordingly. Inevitably, this approach conflicts with the ideas and beliefs of many millions of people, who have been rigorously schooled in the creed of inconsiderate self-interest. But this doesn't mean that it should be applied undemocratically, or that draconian measures are required to keep the world habitable. Again, I feel that the dissemination of hard fact is the place to start.

Take cars, for example. People argue passionately for the freedom to drive their cars when and how they want, and claim that any attempt to prevent them from doing so is an abuse of human rights. When you point out, however, that current transport policies mean that being hit by a car is the commonest cause of death for children between the ages of one and fourteen, that those in social class five (whose parents are the least likely to own cars themselves) are five times as likely to be hit than those in social class one; that 44,000 people, many of them pedestrians and cyclists, are seriously injured, permanently maimed or disfigured every year by cars; and that the two most carcinogenic compounds ever detected, 3-nitrobenzanthrone and 1,8-dinitropyrene, both come from the back end of a diesel engine, you find that people have no difficulty in seeing that NOT curbing the car is an even greater abuse of human rights. The only reason why people-friendly transport policies are not yet more popular is that most people in Britain simply don't get to hear about the problems inherent in current policies – or if they do, hear ten times as much about the freedom the car brings to society.

Of course, the wider the problem ranges, the wider the sense of responsibility you must appeal to, and this is where the real difficulties arise. It's often hard to persuade people in Britain that they should have any concern for the people of Bangladesh, for example, let alone for the unborn. As the media are generally hostile to an intelligent discussion of climate change, we have to use every trick in the book to show why it is important. This is another way in which direct action has been useful: as Andrew Barry of Goldsmiths has pointed out, direct action tends to involve two kinds of demonstration, a demonstration for or against a particular policy and a demonstration of a set of facts.

There's no question that population growth is an environmental problem, though I feel it has often been overstated by those who find it convenient to point to foreigners as the source of the world's ills rather than addressing their own activities. As has been demonstrated repeatedly, coercive and repressive methods of population control are doomed to failure. The two factors most closely correlated with high birth rates are female illiteracy and extreme poverty. As the experience of the Indian state of Kerala demonstrates, the best way to address population growth is to address these

associated problems. Subtract social justice from environmentalism, and you are left with nothing at all.

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