



Review of *Out of the Wreckage: A New Politics for an Age of Crisis* by George Monbiot. 2017. London: Verso. 214 pages, ISBN 978-1-7866-3289-0 Paper (\$16.95)

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A crisis besets us. A perfect storm whipped up out of predatory capitalism, a democracy deficit, cultures of violence, and climate disruption. Since the 1930s, at least in much of Europe, there have been four decades of Keynesian-inspired social welfare democracies followed by four decades of neoliberal, now hyper-financialized, capitalist globalization—an impasse with no visible exit other than the desultory remnants of social democratic parties and the scary xenophobic hatred of hard-line rightwing parties. In George Monbiot's view, what we need is a new story that makes sense of the crisis and offers enough people a plausible direction to climb out from under it. The world right now is also ripe for such a story to turn this moment of danger into one of opportunity.

George Monbiot is perhaps the best political journalist at what may be the best English-language newspaper in the world, the UK *Guardian*. Previous books include the instructively titled *How Did We Get Into This Mess? Politics, Equality, Nature* (a title I freely borrowed for a class I am teaching called *What's Wrong with the World?*), *Manifesto for a New World Order*, and *Heat: How to Stop the Planet from Burning*; he is clearly a person who likes to take on the biggest issues around.



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And he is very good at it. His work is thoughtful, well-documented, based on original research, and very well written. I typically find myself not only in substantial agreement with the vast majority of his conclusions—save a very few, such as his controversial position that the climate crisis requires the re-activation of the nuclear industry—but with his political judgments and ideas about what we might do to, well, get out of the mess we are in. Make no mistake about it, we are on new ground here in the age of the Anthropocene, staring down a climate crisis that poses existential questions to humanity, questions that our present economic, political, cultural, and social lifeways are so woefully short of rising to the occasion to answer that the future looks more uncertain and increasingly bleak with every passing year.

Along with a growing number of other thinkers I read, Monbiot's prescription is this: it's time that we elaborate a new story capable of simultaneously diagnosing the interlinked crises that beset us and inspiring action in the name of a vision that is radical, inclusive, and holistic enough to take us into the whirlwind that the middle third of this century is going to be, with some prospect of emerging more or less intact by, say, the year 2050.

Public sociologists and scholar-activists alike need to join this conversation and contribute to it. We need to talk about story-telling, its power, its capacity, and its origins. Sujatha Fernandes (2018), professor of political economy and sociology at the University of Sydney, reminds us that

In his seminal essay "The Storyteller," published in 1936, the German philosopher Walter Benjamin decried the loss of the craft of oral storytelling marked by the advent of the short story and the novel. Modern society, he lamented, had abbreviated storytelling. Fast forward to the era of Facebook, where the story has become an easily digestible soundbite on your news feed or timeline. The popular stories on social media are those that are accessible. Complexity is eschewed in an effort to create warm and relatable portraits of others who are just like us. If modern society abbreviated storytelling, the digital era has eviscerated it. (2018)

And she raises the question that haunts me: "But are stories really the magical elixir we imagine them to be?" In the context of her study of our Facebook lives, the answer may well be that they fall short. Can any story, then, make a decisive contribution to the kinds of radical social transformation the world cries out for?

Enter Monbiot's book. Unlike most of the others he has written, he confesses, this one took about one year rather than three, and was written in a "mad rush, because we felt there was this great opportunity, as the old system begins to collapse and new systems begin to emerge.

Obviously, all sorts of new monsters could emerge, and they will do so if a more coherent vision of a better world is not produced” (Dowson 2017). He goes on to tell us “[t]he reason we need a narrative is that narratives translate into what we perceive as common sense.... For a government to take power which is sufficiently radical, we need that new political narrative, and we need it to be accepted across the majority of the political spectrum as common sense, as Keynesianism and neoliberalism have been. The only way you can change a story is to offer a new one. And you can do so only by producing a better story” (ibid).

Out of the Wreckage is an exciting book and grew on me as I got further into it. At first, I thought, “OK, I know the message: ‘We need a new story. Stories win, they transform the world.’” So, I wanted to see what George Monbiot’s new story was. Instead, we get analyses, of many interesting issues and topics, but no new story per se. And I found that frustrating. But, like much of George Monbiot’s work, it is intelligent, politically astute, and cumulative, and in the case of this book, it became more powerful as it unfurled.

Starting from observations about the epidemics of loneliness and consumerism, the stresses of competition and individualism that Monbiot sees in societies like the UK and the United States, he lays these at the feet of neoliberal austerity as the global elite’s response to the crisis. At the same time, he castigates the old Keynesian social democrats for having lost the debate and compromised their original values, instead taking up the language of the right with Blair’s third way and the Clintons’ triangulation. Obama only went in the same direction, leaving the door open for Trump when the Democratic leadership did Bernie Sanders’s campaign in: “Nothing was learned.... The Democratic Party’s groveling ensured that the very rich owned both halves of the presidential contest” (50). When England was saddled with Brexit, Jeremy Corbyn tried to reorient the identity of Britain’s Labour Party but has yet to come up with a fully compelling new narrative, some “wider story of change.”

Socially, schools have become conveyor belts of alienation, which new forms of celebrity or social media entertainment only deepen; “Man was born free, and he is everywhere in chain stores” (65). “We are alienated from each other, from the systems that govern our lives, from the spirit of inquiry, from the natural world, and from tangible reality. Socially, emotionally, intellectually and physically, we are in a poor state of health. The political consequences can be catastrophic” (66).

Monbiot seeks a new politics grounded on “belonging” and rooted in the community, and he sees initiatives along these lines sprouting into life all over the world. Once drawn in, people blossom, and a participatory culture starts to thrive. When ten to fifteen percent of a community is engaged, tipping points are breached, and this can propel such experiments up to the city level, as in examples taken from Rotterdam, Barcelona, and elsewhere. What he would like to see is a further scaling up of these hopeful initiatives into political movements based on these experiences

and techniques, building outward from new participatory communities to the national and global levels. He thus acknowledges that at some point state power must be contested.

The second half of the book elaborates on how a new hybrid economy with elements of the market, the state, the commons, and the household could develop. Local consciousness of living within limits must scale all the way to the global level, and here he introduces the work of Kate Raworth, “whose work is the most considered and far-reaching of the materials I have read while researching this book” (122), and whose book *Doughnut Economics: Seven Ways to Think Like a 21st-Century Economist* (also reviewed in this symposium) merges the “Planetary Boundaries” earth systems thinking of John Rockström and other scientists with the Degrowth perspective of Giorgos Kallis and other social scientists to pull the global economy back from the brink before it destroys the physical and natural bases of life on the planet, while still achieving a socially just outcome across the world. Part of this comes back to the community, where the model of “participatory budgeting” that comes out of Brazil might be generalized more widely.

So, then, how to go about this? In large part, it requires the reframing of the commonsense stories we live by to see all of this as possible and preferable. It would certainly be opposed by the present holders of economic and political power. The book therefore concludes by exploring political projects such as convening constitutional assemblies, crowd-sourcing new democratic charters, referenda, innovative voting methods such as the Single Transferable Vote (where voters rank candidates to ensure that whoever wins garners majority support), and others, up to the idea of a world government, as discussed in depth in Monbiot’s earlier *Manifesto for a New World Order*.

The book concludes with another look at the 2016 Sanders campaign, as theorized just afterward by staffers Beck Bond and Zack Exley (2016) in *Rules for Revolutionaries: How Big Organizing Can Change Everything*. From it, Monbiot draws these lessons for changing the world: have big ideas, display radical trust in people and ask them to do things, and devolve decision-making, or at least operational power, to the local level. For Monbiot, it is time to “start imagining how campaigns of any kind—not just to win elections but to win the battle over climate change, or rights for asylum seekers or for universal healthcare—can be transformed. It is to understand how we can mobilise the enthusiasm of the many against the control of the few. And it shows us how a political campaign can belong to everyone who chooses to participate, rather than just a small cadre of professionals” (173-4). “By allowing people to appreciate how powerful they are and how useful they can be, and how politics and government can belong to all of us rather than only a remote elite, we will become unstoppable” (181).

But do we need a single encompassing story? I tend to agree with Drew Dellinger and the Zapatistas that what we really need is rather many more stories (or perhaps chapters) that fit

together into a new and better world, what Dellinger (2018) calls a “kaleidoscope of stories.” Most obviously missing from Monbiot’s tale is a sense of the spiritual, non-material roots of many of the stories struggling to be born or retold around the world. Dellinger points out that already forty years ago, in 1978, Thomas Berry wrote an essay called “The New Story,” which prefigures Monbiot, as it opens with these lines: “It’s all a question of story. We are in trouble just now because we do not have a good story. We are in between stories. The Old Story—the account of how the world came to be and how we fit into it—is not functioning properly, and we have not learned the New Story.” In this genealogy lies other voices and traditions, ecological, indigenous, and Buddhist among them. The new story is likely to be plural, and its co-creators many, across multiple generations and continents. And these are stories that will be carried by movements and taken further by networks that span time and space.

They are popping up everywhere, and we have only to look for them and amplify their voices so others can find them and they can see each other. Let’s join them wherever we are and forge networks of the like-minded, with all those who choose life, love, hope, and embrace beauty, dignity and creativity. Out of the wreckage of the present, toward the horizon of the future. Those stories are the next book we need. Perhaps George Monbiot, or one of our readers, will help write it.

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