



Strategies of Resistance

George Monbiot

abstract

In this interview George Monbiot, political and environmental activist and author of *Captive State: The Corporate Takeover of Britain*, talks with Chris Land and Steffen Böhm about his recent investigations into the Private Finance Initiative in the UK, funding in academia and the possibilities for organized resistance in a world that is increasingly run in the interests of big business. Suggesting that a grass-roots democratic movement is the only way to effectively prevent the future from being sold from under unborn feet, he offers no simple solutions to the problems currently facing the left, but points to the continued importance of resistance and considers some of the dilemmas facing those engaged in that struggle. As the circuits of capital are increasingly global in their scale and reach, so the organization of resistance also needs to operate globally. As glamorous as this may be, however, the mundane, day-to-day and local business of mobilisation cannot be neglected. Simultaneously stern and optimistic, the points that Monbiot raises are important for everyone, particularly for those concerned with questions of globalisation, the organization of resistance, and the public sector.

ephemera: The first time that we personally came across your work was when you spoke at Warwick University as part of a 'Globalise Resistance' seminar organised by the Socialist Worker Student Society. At the time you spoke about the Private Finance Initiative (PFI) project to replace the two hospitals in Coventry, with one super-hospital, and suggested that not only would this new hospital have fewer beds than those it was replacing, but it was also going to cost millions more to build than it would have cost to repair the old hospitals. The rationale behind this seemed to be that private investors were only interested in expensive, large-scale, green-field building projects, and not in carrying out relatively minor repairs. By forcing funding to be raised through PFI, the government had effectively forced the health authorities into playing on business' terms. Have there been any developments at Coventry, and with the PFI more generally, since then?

George Monbiot: There are several things I would say. First of all on the specific issue of Coventry, the scheme still appears to be going ahead. The only change is that it has risen from an estimated 174 million pounds to 311 million pounds and yet it is still offering fewer beds than the two hospitals that it is replacing. It is an extraordinary thing

but this is actually very common to PFI projects: we see a huge rise in costs especially between what is called the outline business case and the full business case, and then again between the full business case and the final contract. What we are seeing in Coventry is that the taxpayer will get even worse value for money than the case outlined in *Captive State* and yet we are still seeing a severe reduction in the clinical services.

Now, on the broader question to do with developments in PFI, I have come across several things which are really disturbing since I wrote the book. The first is that I was sent some leaked documents showing that one health care consortium – a group called Octagon who have built the Norfolk and Norwich Hospital – were last year due to extract 70 million pounds from the scheme before it had taken a single patient. This was over and above all the service payments that they were due to receive and it was over and above all their anticipated income. They were due to just extract a cool 70 million pounds from the scheme. They were able to do this through a mechanism called ‘refinancing’ where you go back to your lenders and say, “We were able to build this project with much less project risk than we thought we were taking on, so can we renegotiate the loans at lower rates of interest and reap the difference all in one go?” So what that money represents is just part of the difference between the value for money which the taxpayer would have got had it been publicly financed and the value of money that we are getting as a result of the private financing. The 70 million is just part of the gap between the two. Now after I revealed that this was going to happen it seems to have blocked that plan, but what I have subsequently found is that the same sorts of deals have been happening throughout PFI projects and the tax payer has lost billions of pounds.

So that is one issue that I have come across. There is a further one which I think shows the absolute lunacy of the scheme more clearly than anything else and that is the issue of what is called ‘preferred bidder status’. What happens in the course of negotiating a contract is that before full contract negotiations begin the government will choose one consortium as the preferred bidder for a particular project. That will then be the only consortium with which it negotiates when it starts talking about the contracts. The result is that the consortium has the government over a barrel. There is no competition at all, so they can effectively demand whatever terms they want and the estimates that they give the government to start off with become completely irrelevant. They then find all sorts of ways of increasing the price of the project and there is no one else to say, “Well we can do it more cheaply”.

ephemera: Once they are in the process they can't really turn their back on this particular consortium?

George Monbiot: That is right. That is the only consortium left in the running so there is no one else to turn to.

ephemera: But what about the market? Surely that is what the whole idea of PFI and public-private partnership is about?

George Monbiot: Exactly. This is supposed to be a market mechanism but there is no competition involved so the market simply cannot work. What I have also found out is that in order to ensure that they receive money from the private sector, public bodies are

effectively rigging what is called the ‘public sector comparator,’ which is the comparison between what the private sector is offering and what it would have cost if it was done by the public sector. They do this in order to qualify for private finance because they know that private finance is all the government is going to allow them to get. This means that there isn’t any comparison with the public sector either. You have a situation where there is no competition within the private sector and then, because the public sector comparator is always set higher than what the private sector are offering, however outrageous the sums are, there is no competition with the public sector either. So, this whole market mechanism operates in the absence of competition.

ephemera: Perhaps that answers our next question. When we have seen discussions and debates on television and radio, or in the press, about the PFI and Public Private Partnership, the Blairite line always seems to be that the result is actually a net increase in investment in public services and yet you seem to be suggesting that with refinancing and rigged comparators, that this isn’t so. If this is the case, why do you think that this assumption is so rarely challenged?

George Monbiot: Because there has been a confusion between government spending and investment. There is no question that PFI represents a net increase in government spending, largely because it offers such appalling value for money. But that increase in government spending is represented as an increase in investment. What we are actually seeing is a decrease in investment in terms of providing the public services that we need. So right across the sector we see hospitals being built with fewer beds because the only way they can find the money to pay off the private consortium is to reduce the size of the hospitals being built and supply fewer doctors and nurses. The government's own consultants show that every two hundred million pounds spent on PFI in the National Health Service reduces the number of doctors and nurses by one thousand. So we are actually seeing far less investment, in terms of the delivery of services, than ever before. This is another of the profound ironies surrounding PFI. It is supposed to boost investment in public services and it is actually massively decreasing it.

ephemera: In a sense this connects to a question that is very close to our own institutional location. Warwick University is positioning itself at the forefront of a new kind of university – the University Of The Future if you like – by taking over 60% of its funding from non-governmental sources, or private finance. Recently on campus there has been some student resistance to this, primarily focusing on the need for a set of ethical criteria or guidelines by which the university should decide which investors are acceptable and which are not. For example, one protest was against McDonalds and ESSO funding the teaching of corporate ethics. Do you think that the strategy of developing a set of ‘ethical investor guidelines,’ or something similar, could actually make a difference? Or is it the very fact of private investment and private interest in the public sector that acts as a corrupting influence?

George Monbiot: I can understand why people are pushing for a more ethical pattern of investment, but I think there are also matters of principle at stake here and one of the principles is very simply that corporations will not give universities money unless they are expecting something in return. That something means a re-orientation of the subjects studied and the research conducted towards the needs of corporations rather than

towards the wider public need. That very clearly results in a reduced benefit, and in some cases actually a substantial loss, to the wider public as well as to academics themselves. So I feel that we should seek to resist corporate funding itself except as a very minor component of research funding. I don't see any great harm with a few specific projects being funded, but when we see not only the very rapid growth of direct corporate funding, but also the corporate takeover of the government bodies that hand out public research funds, then I think we have a very worrying situation indeed. What we see is the very rapid capture and co-option of academia, and in particular science, by bodies that are not aligned with the broader public interest.

ephemera: What do you make of the argument that you need to work with companies to get them to accept more ethical principles? For example, the Chairman of Greenpeace was fired recently because he was involved with consulting for companies that had a questionable environmental record. He took the line that working with them from the inside was an effective way to help reorganise and reorient them toward 'green' issues. Greenpeace saw things rather differently, and assumed that he had been co-opted.

George Monbiot: My experience suggests that the way you get companies to change is to work against them and not to work for them. What companies are extremely afraid of, and will go to great lengths to avoid, is protest, direct action, public embarrassment and exposure. What they are very happy with, and they have an infinite capacity to absorb, is dialogue and discussion and people attempting to work for positive change on the inside. In fact, what we see is a process which some people have described as "being dialogued to death," whereby the big companies that have come in for criticism have effectively managed to bring their critics into the fold, get the game back onto their home turf and set the rules according to their own prescriptions. The result is that not only are those activists effectively hamstrung, but campaigning and activism in general are too.

Now, there is nothing wrong with talking to corporations if you want to talk to them as long as you have no illusions about the utility of that process, but there is a lot wrong with taking their money whilst talking to them. One should also be aware that talking to them is not going to change anything at all. What is going to change them is public pressure and public pressure does not mean becoming their consultant with a great big salary and finding ways in which they can present themselves more effectively to the public. This isn't just Lord Melchett, it is also Jonathan Porritt, it is Sara Parkin, it is David Bellamy, it is Tom Burke, it is Des Wilson: some of the most prominent environmentalists of the past twenty years. These people have effectively become the subcontracted public relations agents for some of the most environmentally destructive companies on earth.

ephemera: So where does this leave the possibility for protest and resistance? In *Captive State* you suggest that we need to lobby government to be responsible to the interests of those they are supposed to represent – the voters or the citizens – rather than the concerns of business. At the same time though, your discussion of the way in which business has insinuated itself into government seems to suggest that, at least with New Labour, the nation state is no longer a source of protection from the corporate takeover.

So where would you see this leaving those who would seek to limit growing corporate power, and perhaps reverse this trend?

George Monbiot: Well I think we have to use a great variety of tactics and approaches if we are to have any chance of success. If we just vote for change and do nothing else then that vote is wasted. If we just take to the streets in protest then that protest is wasted. If we just write to our MP then that letter is wasted. We have got to do all of those things and many more besides if we are going to have any chance of precipitating genuine change. What we have to do is to reclaim the political process from control by corporations and by a few very powerful individuals.

Now there are several ways of approaching this. One is to engage in a tug of war to try and reclaim government. I think that is a valid activity to engage in and I feel that we desperately need a successful party on the left which is able to challenge government from the left, forcing it always to be aware that if it doesn't start moving in a progressive direction then it is going to lose votes. But at the same time we have to engage in much more active citizen politics, much more active attempts to reclaim our lives at the community level. There are some people doing this very effectively and I would point in particular to the Citizens Organising Foundation and the way in which they have been working with community groups to boost the presence of those groups, and the presence of individuals within those groups, to make them much more politically powerful.

ephemera: Can we just take this as a kind of spring board to bring in the subject of globalisation? So far we have talked very much about the British context – the local if you like – but many would argue that the local is always already global in some sense today. The problem is that a lot of activist organizations, for example the Unions, are still very much focused on the national level. Isn't that misguided in a way, and does a local concern have to be reconciled with some sort of global force of action?

George Monbiot: I think it is absolutely critical that we start to engage on every level. If we just engage on a local level we will be fighting the PFI hospital and not notice that the general agreement on trade and services is coming up behind us, threatening to make all such fights completely irrelevant. On the other hand if we just fight at the global level we can spend an awfully long time fighting the broad initiatives whilst the ground is being taken from our feet at home. We have somehow to engage on all of these levels: at the regional level as well as within the European Union. It is important to start engaging with policy making on all levels and to make our views felt.

Of course this is a huge task not least because there aren't that many people who are one hundred per cent dedicated to the task. There are a lot of people who will go to a protest every six months, register their discontent and then they go home again and don't do anything else. It is fine to register your discontent, that is definitely part of the process, but by itself it doesn't change anything. What we need to see is a hard grind of day-to-day activism, mobilisation and movement building which can actually start to exert some effect on all of these levels. Now, none of that is going to be easy and in fact my current challenge, in my next book, is to address how we can start to engage at the global level and reclaim governance from its crisis of legitimacy.

ephemera: Does that tie in with the idea of the World Parliament which you discussed in a recent interview by Caspar Henderson of openDemocracy (www.opendemocracy.net), and do you think that the World Social Forum that was recently staged in Brazil might work towards that end?

George Monbiot: Yes, the World Parliament is definitely one of the thought-experiments which, along with several other people, I have been looking at. The idea would be that it could begin to emerge from some body such as the Social Forum which slowly becomes, first of all a sort of representative of populations and communities, but eventually perhaps would become a directly elected body. That would have a moral power which no other body at the global level has, so that is one possible approach.

ephemera: Who would actually elect these people?

George Monbiot: Well, the people of the world would elect these people. I mean one model, perhaps a crude one, is to say that you divide the world into six hundred constituencies each of ten million people.

ephemera: But where does that leave the subject of protest? For example, there was a recent protest in Barcelona against EU and the EU summit, and you seem to be suggesting that people go there but that in the end they don't really change anything. Don't you think that there needs to be a kind of space for protest on that level as well?

George Monbiot: Oh yes! I am not saying don't protest. I am saying don't only protest. If you think that just going to protest is going to change the world then you are wrong. If you see that as well as protesting you have got to engage in the much less glamorous and much more difficult business of day-to-day mobilisation and activism, building community movements and all the rest of it, then that is a move towards the sort of political change which will work in the long-run. It is not a question of either or. It is a question of both.

ephemera: I am reminded of an article that you wrote in *The Guardian* responding to the May Day protests, in 2000 I think, in which you were basically denouncing the violence of the protest, and yet in the Troublemaker's Charter at the end of *Captive State*, and in the discussion that we have just had, you recognise that change won't come about without some kind of a struggle.

George Monbiot: Yes, absolutely. There has got to be a struggle and struggle is the prerequisite of change. There can be no change without struggle. But that struggle has got to be very cleverly plotted out and thought about very hard. We have got to use the best tactics and the best strategy and simply throwing rocks at the cops is not going to change anything.

ephemera: In the light of things like the recent Barcelona protest though, it seems that even the most peaceful protest can actually bring quite a violent retaliation from the police who are 'defending' the state's interest. It seems that those in power are all too prepared to respond violently to a peaceful protest, or even simply dismiss what would otherwise be a peaceful protest so that it doesn't get the media attention it needs to be taken seriously?

George Monbiot: Well yes, and these are all very good reasons for not engaging in violence ourselves. As soon as that starts you move the action into the court of the government, and governments are supremely good at violence. They understand violence better than anyone else. They can cope with violence better than anyone else. They are far more violent than anyone else, and if we try to engage governments on that turf we are doomed. We are finished. There is absolutely no way that we can match the organised violence of government with disorganised protest and we are lost if we think we can go down that route. Secondly, it is much easier to dismiss a protest, however many people are involved, as a meaningless rabble of people if there is violence that the TV cameras can film, that the newspapers can report and that discredits the movement. But even more important than discrediting the movement, it distracts attention from the aims of the movement. All you see is the means and you don't see the ends anymore. That does a great disservice to the movement.

ephemera: But what you have at the moment is that non-violent protest seems to be almost entirely ignored by the British media. So what you end up with is half a million people going onto the streets but then there is no mainstream media coverage at all. Don't you think that some kind of media coverage is central bringing certain social questions more centrally into the public consciousness?

George Monbiot: The question you have to ask though, in the context of a corrupt, corporate media dominated by people like Rupert Murdoch and Conrad Black, is whether no media coverage is better or worse than coverage of people fighting with the police? If that is the choice that you are faced with, I think actually no media coverage is best. This illustrates the point that we have to start to reclaim the media as well as reclaiming all other aspects of our lives.

ephemera: So how do you see your own role, as somebody working within the media and also then raising these questions concerning the political and economic constitution of the media and the state?

George Monbiot: Well, it is always going to be a very difficult balance and I find that now there are fewer and fewer outlets for the sort of issues that I want to cover. Things are changing quite rapidly now and especially since September 11th. There is much less willingness to have a broad range of discussion and to go over many of the issues which are most important to people around the world.

ephemera: Do you have practical examples of that? Have you experienced that censorship yourself, for example in your writing for *The Guardian*?

George Monbiot: Oh, there is huge pressure within *The Guardian* at the moment. I mean I am very lucky as the comment editor is very supportive. He is a very radical person himself, but ... I shouldn't name names. Put it this way: there is a strong fraction within *The Guardian* which for some time has been trying to get rid of me. So far I have resisted that and I am still there but one day they might succeed. It is just that in general the media is becoming a far more hostile environment for radical or progressive thought.

ephemera: Do you think that the more radical media networks, like Indymedia for example, can present a real alternative to the mainstream corporate media?

George Monbiot: I think that what we are seeing is generally a great proliferation of media sources. I mean one example of this of course is digital TV but another example is the Internet and the media which people turn to will fragment. I think we can make good use of that and we can start to find gaps in the armoury which weren't there before. Initiatives like Indymedia, and indeed many other outlets such as Schnews and Squall and Red Pepper magazine and scores and scores of very good internet magazines: Znet for example, One World, McLibel, Corporatewatch. There are many, many examples of very good alternative media outlets. There is a good chance that they could begin to grow in influence and increase our catchment.

the author

George Monbiot is the author of *Captive State: The Corporate Takeover of Britain*. His other books include *Poisoned Arrows*, *Amazon Watershed* and *No Man's Land*. He writes a column for *The Guardian* and has been involved in protests against road building, mahogany imports and genetic engineering. He helped to found the land rights campaign The Land is Ours. He is an Honorary Professor at the Department of Politics at Keele University and a Visiting Professor at the Department of Environmental Science at the University of East London. In 1995 Nelson Mandela presented him with a United Nations Global 500 Award for outstanding environmental achievement. He has also won the Lloyds National Screenwriting Prize for his screenplay *The Norwegian* and a Sony Award for radio production. He has been named by the Evening Standard as one of the 25 most influential people in Britain, and by the *Independent on Sunday* as one of the 40 international prophets of the 21st Century.