George Monbiot’s *How Did We Get into the Mess?* does an excellent job of articulating the cultural dearth of our times and suggesting ways to counteract its causes and expressions, whilst resisting defeatism. Many of the arguments in the book first appeared as articles within the *Guardian*, where Monbiot is a columnist. His essays analyse the frameworks that enabled us to ‘get into this mess’, acknowledging and highlighting that those to whom we look for guardianship in government and among the economic elite often accelerate the decline of our conditions of life. He clearly illustrates the consequences of our complacency and attachment to comfort, allowing private corporations to encroach public space, and challenges the characteristics celebrated, championed and rewarded under neoliberalism. The prominence of such values, Monbiot argues, run the risk of making it easy for corporations to encroach all areas of life where genuine freedom, curiosity, play and joy may still remain.

Monbiot begins by introducing the problems with which he contends throughout the book. These were at times, overstated, particularly where individuals were portrayed as lacking in critical capacities within situations where they are often purposefully depleted of their power by structures designed to subordinate them. For example, a lot of emphasis is placed on the phenomenon of demonstrably critical graduates being dissuaded from pursuing their intellectual and spiritual values and directed towards worthless work, with the promise of security, flattery and prestige from large companies. Arguably, his criticism would be better directed towards those denying these opportunities, rather than well-meaning individuals who find themselves at the behest of such structures. Nonetheless, as the book progresses, it becomes increasingly apparent that his earlier arguments served to emphasise the values that are celebrated and rewarded in society, and the impacts of these, which he examines.

With these minor objections stated, one of the book’s great strengths is that Monbiot’s descriptions of our cultural malaise capture concrete reasons for moments of alienation we often all feel. He writes on several occasions that his work is intended for those who feel disconnected from our times. It is this sense of the book’s purpose that makes it so endearing to read, particularly when it is picked up and read in short bursts, which its constitution of being organised in multiple sections, and composed of collections of pithy, illustrative essays, lends itself well. Monbiot’s ability to articulate the degree to which a sense of alienation is often an appropriate response to our times, rather than an indicator of problems within individuals, has a comforting character to it. Rather than blaming the individual for being maladjusted, he offers consolation, thereby reminding us of Theodor W. Adorno’s proclamation in *Minima Moralia*: ‘Wrong life cannot be lived rightly.’ His main point of departure is that we are ripping the natural world apart, consistently surrendering freedoms and prospects of contentment for the sake of atomising, joyless hedonism, which, once having depleted all external resources, encourages us to prey upon ourselves, destroying our connectedness, which is the essence of our humanity. For such situations, as he argues, feeling content with such a scenario would appropriately be considered to be a cause for concern.

As part of his explication of the problems we face earlier in the book, within ‘Bug Splats’, Monbiot issues a regrettably relevant warning to beware of anyone who describes a human being as something other than a human being. He highlights the powerful deployment of animal language to dehumanise in order to mask severe breaches of human rights abuses, leading up to murder, and to underpin efforts to depoliticise minorities who are unfortunately geographically positioned and consequently at risk of becoming collateral damage. Recent examples include when David Cameron described migrants attempting to reach Britain as a ‘swarm’, Brexit posters that sought to animalise in order to ‘other’ migrants and Brazil’s president, Bolsonaro encouraging civilians to ensure criminals should ‘die in the streets like cockroaches’, echoing the tactics of President of the Philippines Duterte’s deadly anti-drug campaign.

Continuing his analysis of the various ways young people are treated in society, Monbiot’s essay ‘Rewild the Child’, takes issue with the increasing lack of time children spend outdoors, and the detrimental effects these have on a child’s education. This examination coincides with his arguments in ‘Dead Zone’ where he demonstrates that city centres are being privatised or semi-privatised, ignoring known connections between social exclusion and inequality. Monbiot highlights that, without the right of access to public space, young people are being fast-tracked into the criminal justice system via ASBOs (anti-social behaviour orders), which criminalise predominantly those who are young and poor, who are subsequently subjected to laws and penal codes created by the courts and enforced by the police. Consequently, people can be imprisoned for offences that are not otherwise imprisonable. Monbiot highlights, for example, that the Anti-Social Behaviour, Crime and Policing Bill (ISBO), which was put before UK Parliament in 2013, led to the introduction of Injunctions to Prevent Nuisance and Annoyance (IPNAs), where anyone over the age of ten became subject to its efforts to prevent one from ‘causing nuisance or annoyance to any person’ (29). He even informs us that the former director of public prosecutions pointed out that ‘it is difficult to imagine a broader concept than causing “nuisance” or “annoyance”’ (30). Whilst the breach of an ASBO is a criminal offence, the breach of an IPNA, which the children’s commissioner feared could prevent outdoor play, can still carry a custodial sentence, meaning that as Monbiot points out – without having committed any crime – one could potentially be imprisoned for up to two years. Monbiot thus shows that these laws are designed in such a way that they can be weaponised, or swayed by internal bias, to stamp out plurality and difference. Indeed, they are often used to pursue children who, by being together in a public place, have their well-being threatened by those who are supposedly there to support and protect them.

The extent to which Monbiot’s argument that outdoor space is increasingly being protected for private rather than public gains is now entrenched, and its repercussions, become evident when one considers Coca Cola’s ‘Ball Games Allowed’ campaign. This promotional activity illustrates how stripped backed council and policing services have created a void that large co-operations eagerly step in to fill, enabling such companies to add a veneer of public good to their otherwise problematic activities. Their campaigns provide services of benefit to the public, which have been systematically stripped from contemporary life, which these companies set up in order to capitalise. Coke’s campaign even explicitly refers to IPNAs with its name, so self-assured it is in its capacity to distract from the company’s significant contribution to public health problems. A recent study in *The Milbank Quarterly* that examined Coke’s interest in influencing policy makers demonstrated that the organisation’s efforts were to ‘advance corporate objectives rather than health, including to influence the World Health Organization’ (Maani Hessari, et al. 2019: 75). Indeed, as Monbiot argues, by allowing outside space to be encroached by corporate companies, we set a worrying precedent.

Relatedly, but extending his analysis to areas outside of town and cities, Monbiot shines a light in ‘A Highland Spring’ and ‘A Telling Silence’, on a lack of understanding concerning who owns land. In 2014, he informs us, the owners of only 26% of the land in Scotland had been identified, which has consequences for how much weight the argument for social mobility actually carries (Rural landowners are typically excused from a capital gains tax, an inheritance tax and the first five years of income tax.). These ideas have since been explicated further in his recent report ‘Land for the Many: Changing the way our fundamental asset is used, owned and governed’, commissioned by the Labour party and published in June 2019. Additionally, his argument for opening up more data was taken up in Anna Powell Smith’s excellent ‘Missing Numbers’ project, which holds the government accountable by highlighting gaps in its data. This project demonstrates the effects of these blindspots, such as hindering the public’s ability to monitor the police’s use of ‘stop and account’ powers.

Monbiot’s work concerning IPNAs and ASBOs brings to our attention the problems that may arise with laws which are broad enough to rely heavily on goodwill and a lack of bias of those enacting them. He also interrogates, specifically in ‘The Holocaust We Will Not See’ and ‘The Empire Strikes Back’, power structures from the perspective of questioning what histories are allowed to be told and why. He cites how states obfuscate and prevent justice, referring to a contentious archive containing documents concerning the treatment of the Mau Mau, which made it clear that the Attorney General was aware of the indiscriminate brutality occurring in relation to the uprising in Kenya resisting British colonists. The colonial secretary ensured that perpetrators, including British officers, who roasted prisoners to death, were given legal immunity. Papers that showed that the colonial secretary lied when challenged about this were held with the notorious ‘Special Collections’ files at Hanslope Park. Commonwealth studies researchers attempting to view these files were lied to and consistently denied access. This case and others reveal the limits of The National Archives’ claim to exist in order to preserve documents for the public to access and highlights their more austere role as an often secretive memory institution, with projects like Decolonise the Archives seeking to ensure that black voices are seen, heard and documented.

Employing such examples, Monbiot underscores the depths of institutional and official refusals to honestly attend to our histories, showing the ways nations refuse to face up to their racist, imperial pasts. These themes have been taken up in recent works like Akala’s *Natives: Race and Class in the Ruins of Empire*and Ibram Kendi’s *How To Be An Antiracist.* Monbiot’s arguments highlight the contemporary pertinence of Walter Benjamin’s assertion in ‘Theses on the Philosophy of History’ that ‘all rulers are the heirs of those who conquered before them’ (Benjamin 1968: 256), which reminds us of the naivety of expecting structures that arose from oppression to be trusted to address expressions of deeply entrenched ideas they supported for centuries. The continued influence of entrenched historical oppression enabled by establishments, whom Monbiot reminds us to hold to account, is also demonstrable in relation to patriarchal oppression. This consistently reveals itself in the way legal bodies and the media deal with and speak about issues concerning violence against women, particularly sexual violence, wherein the behaviours and appearances of women are constantly questioned, regardless of the degree of violence known to have been explicitly perpetrated against them by men.

Pulling together his ideas towards the end of the book, Monbiot uses the term ‘extrinsic values’ taken from a report titled ‘Common Cause’ by Tom Crompton, Director of Common Cause Foundation. He makes the compelling argument that it is these values, such as wealth, or the preservation of public image, which we allow to proliferate in contemporary life, which have caused us such damage. Following his explication of these values, he aptly turns his attention to the academic publishing industry, ruled as it is by Elsevier, in ‘The Lairds of Learning’. His discussion of the open access movement is here accurate and accessible. Moreover, his reminder elsewhere in the book of David Harvey’s analysis of subsumption is beneficial to consider for those developing new policies, which propose driving money into the hands of large publishers at a different stage in the research cycle, while claiming to be radical.

*How Did We Get into the Mess?* is a broad-ranging and relevant book with theoretical insights that reach to the core of issues pertaining to contemporary society, often reflecting these in a way that makes them available to a wide audience. Some of its contents have already been translated into important governmental reports and have the potential to further improve policies. Whilst the navigating thread of Monbiot’s argument was initially difficult to grasp, this was partly by virtue of the challenge posed by the work’s form as a collection of essays, and becomes clear as the reader proceeds. The book’s relevance is acute, particularly due to renewed public receptivity of the environmental crisis we face. Monbiot concludes on a positive note, issuing a compelling battle cry that we must be the change we want to see, reminding us of the possibility inherent in moments of wonder, and helping us note that we have evolved in attunement with nature and therefore still possess the capacities we have silenced: ‘we carry with us a ghost psyche, adapted to a world we no longer inhabit, which contains – though it remains locked down for much of the time – a boundless capacity for fear and wonder, curiosity and enchantment’ (89). Consequently, he leaves his reader with a sense of hope, empowered to help build a better future.

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References

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