How to Change Everything

An interview with The Ink, about where we are, how we got here and where we need to go.

George Monbiot

9th July 2024.

TI: Can you walk us through how you define neoliberalism" — the "Invisible Doctrine" of the book's title. And of "capitalism," for that matter?

GM: Let's start with capitalism. It's often portrayed as if it were some kind of natural law, a basic property of human relations. It is nothing of the kind. Capitalism is a very particular form of economic organisation, which, following the work of the geographer Jason Moore, we date to the island of Madeira in roughly 1450. This was arguably the first time and place in which land, labour and money were simultaneously commodified. The success of the Portuguese colonists, the first capitalists, set in train a particular mode of extreme and rapid exploitation, which led simultaneously to the explosion of colonial seizure and to the cascading collapse of ecosystems. We define capitalism as follows:

"Capitalism is an economic system founded on colonial looting. It operates on a constantly shifting and self-consuming frontier, on which both state and powerful private interests use their laws, backed by the threat of violence, to turn shared resources into exclusive property, and to transform natural wealth, labour and money into commodities that can be accumulated."

Capitalism expanded with few constraints in its early centuries. Its advocates demanded that governments "laissez-nous faire": leave us alone. But then it ran into a problem, a problem it has sought to solve ever since: democracy. When most adults got the vote, they sought to use it to improve wages and labour conditions, demand a greater share of productivity gains, and make other outrageous requests, such as not poisoning the air and rivers, adulterating food or charging extortionate rents. They even went so far as to demand the redistribution of wealth, effective public services and an economic safety net. Neoliberalism was hatched as a means of solving the problem of democracy.

By contrast to laissez-faire economics, neoliberalism demands active government: to tear up the democratic social contract, privatise public assets and public services, dissolve the welfare state, curtail trade unions and protests and exploit or create crises to impose unpopular policies. It provides an infrastructure of justification to make this shift seem as if it is the only rational destiny for society.

Neoliberalism is a doctrine that insists we should resolve our problems not through politics but through a mechanism it calls "the market": one of its many deliberately confusing terms. In this case "the market" means the power of money and those who possess it. Neoliberalism proposes that competition is the defining feature of humankind, and that by buying and selling in a competitive "market", we can discover a natural hierarchy of winners and losers. It insists that anything disrupting this hierarchy – tax, redistribution, trade unions, politics itself – impedes human flourishing and paves the road to totalitarianism. It is a series of convenient fictions designed to justify inequality, leading in time to oligarchy.

TI: We've talked to many people lately who've talked about how we are clearly at the end of the neoliberal era, that neoliberalism has obviously

failed, and they've focused, as you do, on the 2008 financial crisis as the clearest example.

GM: Neoliberalism will cease to exist only when it ceases to be useful to powerful people. It doesn't matter how many times it fails, materially, intellectually or morally. While it remains a useful tool for solving the problem of democracy, it will continue to be deployed. Remember, this is not about meeting the needs of society as a whole, though of course it is presented as such. It's about meeting the needs of oligarchs, corporations and the ultrarich.

The point of our writing is to smoke it out: to strip away the justifications and fairytales and challenge the fictions that sustain it in the face of repeated failure.

TI: Why do you think progressives have asked so little where the right has asked for — and gotten, and continue to get — some very big changes?

GM: It's an excellent question, and one we should all be asking. Throughout my career (39 years now) I've been told we don't have time for systemic change, only for incremental change. If we asked for anything more, we would frighten and alienate people. All the while, first neoliberals and now the radical right have been demanding and achieving systemic change. They have altered everything, including, as Margaret Thatcher proposed, the human heart and the human soul.

Our timidity is both fatal and irrational. Incremental change leads nowhere. Society is a complex system with two equilibrium states, that it flips between. One is called Impossible. The other is called Inevitable. Before systemic change happens, it is always impossible. Votes for women? They would never let that happen. Decolonisation? You have got to be joking. Civil rights? Don't make me laugh. Marriage equality, legal abortion, sexual liberation, the weekend ... all preposterous proposals! Then they happen, and everyone thinks "well that was inevitable, wasn't it?"

How did these shifts take place? Through a small group, expanding the circle of consent for change until a social tipping point was reached. That's how it has always happened. That's how the neoliberals did it. That's how the radical right is doing it today. The only things that stop progressives from doing it are timidity and ignorance about how systems work. What the history of change shows us is that the tipping points could be much closer than we think. Despair is irrational.

TI: As an example there, why do you think the response to the 2008 crisis — bailing out too-big-to-fail institutions, a few operational tweaks for regular people — went the way it did? Obama had a choice to go bigger, why didn't he take the high road?

GM: Another good question. Obama had the bankers in the palm of his hand. He could have demanded almost anything. He could have used the opportunity to promote change as sweeping as FDR's New Deal. Instead, he asked them what they wanted, and acted accordingly. He also failed to mobilise the great wave of popular support that brought him to power and which could have been wielded against the oligarchs. It was the greatest lost opportunity of our generation.

Again, it reflects that great progressive deficit: the failure of courage. Obama's evident grace and decency were not enough, and could never have been enough. You have to fight the bastards, cleverly and relentlessly.

TI: On that note, interested in your take on Biden — you take him to task for Build Back Better being a collaboration with corporate power, but a) what else would have been possible given the state of Congress and b) what to make of other actions, an empowered FTC and DOJ Antitrust division, etc.

GM: I recognise the constraints under which Biden operates. Obama's failure to build popular consent for sweeping change, reflected in Congressional losses, and Hillary Clinton's failure to offer much more than business as usual, opening the way to Trump, has greatly hampered him. He has ended up fighting an incremental battle when he should be pursuing a systemic one. He is up against a candidate whose backers and advisers know exactly what systemic change looks like and how to achieve it. Unless he presents a countervailing offer, a powerful new story of transformation, he is likely to lose (it may already be too late). Even if wins, he is likely to find himself further hedged in. Either way, the grip of oligarchy strengthens. If positive systemic change is to happen, it will not be led by Biden.

TI: Part of your prescription — and its something we have talked about a lot — is the need to tell a better story that competes with the "fairy tale" of capitalism. First, can you talk about why such a frankly unconvincing tale — the invisible hand, the notion that we're (realizing that "we" is pretty narrow) all potential millionaires — has had such a grip on humanity for the last century?

GM: I think it chimes with religious and particularly Christian beliefs: the idea of transformation against the odds. However humble you were in life, after death you will be exalted and sit at the right hand of God, smiling upon your enemies as they roast in Hell. By a similar miracle, capitalism promises that, however humble your station in life might be, you too can be among the elect. There are a few genuine Horatio Alger stories, albeit rare, which appear to vindicate this belief.

The invisible hand, and the mysterious ways in which it moves, is a clear substitute for God. Neoliberalism has strong Calvinistic elements: there are those who are favoured by the grace of the invisible hand, and there are those who are not, and you can spot the elect by their money. So both capitalism and its handmaiden neoliberalism are drawing on deep beliefs, what the cognitive historian Jeremy Lent calls "root metaphors".

What we want to believe and what is true are seldom the same thing. But what we want to believe tends to be a more powerful force in human relations than what is true.

TI: And beyond that, I'm curious about the mechanism for writing the next one — what do you think it takes to change the story? Do we need better leaders? One thing that's clear is that in the U.S, Trump tells a

better story than Biden, really gives people an organizing principle. Are those leaders out there?

GM: I believe that the story is more important than the leader. If you have a "restoration story" that is sufficiently compelling, that tells people where they are, who they are, how they got here and where they are going, all you need is a moderately articulate, moderately charismatic figure (think of Roosevelt or Attlee) to tell it to great effect. Charisma can partly compensate for a narrative deficit, but can never overcome it (see Obama, above). Trump's great strength is that he tells a restoration story: a story of resentment and humiliation caused by a powerful and nefarious elite, which will be confronted by a band of heroes, led by himself, who will overthrow it and restore harmony to the land. It might be total bullshit, but that doesn't matter. It has a beginning, middle and end, it conforms to the pattern of effective political narratives, it is easy to comprehend, and easy to find a place for yourself in it.

TI: You talk about the "dying star" of social democracy — for something that's been such a relative success (in the Scandinavian countries) for instance, why has the idea lost its hold even though it's a pretty compelling system?

GM: Social democracy was highly effective in the context of capital and foreign exchange controls and onshored industry, especially where Keynesian stimulus measures were concerned. In the absence of these factors, stimulating demand might enhance production not at home, but thousands of miles away, in offshored factories and export zones. Beginning in the 1950s, capital went to great lengths to pull down the Keynesian defences, and within 20 years had largely succeeded. It has not forgotten how to do it, and would immediately roll out its successful strategies were these defences to re-emerge.

At the same time, democratic structures have been hollowed out, and power transferred to places we cannot reach. We live, to a large extent, under the eye of a kind of offshore state, in which we have no vote.

It's also the case, I believe, that all political stories other than fascism (which keeps succeeding partly, I think, because it is so similar to the old autocracies, which became a kind of default political state in centralised nations) have a half life, and decay across time. They have to be replaced with new narratives and new strategies. What we have tried to do in the book is to propose both: a new approach to politics, and a new way of telling its story.

TI: You argue for participatory democracy as a solution, and while we've seen a few examples (the autonomous region of Rojava, Syria, for instance) and some cities in the US have adopted participatory budgeting — we are pretty far from this. Faced with the large crises looming — climate breakdown, fascism — what keeps you hopeful that people can build what you call a "politics of belonging"

GM: If we were to imagine that transformative political change took place in a linear, gradual and granular fashion, there would be nothing to hope for, and we might as

well give up and go home. But it doesn't work this way. It proceeds by means of sudden ruptures: flips between equilibrium states in a complex system. The first step is to decide what we want. The second is to explain it clearly, with the help of a new restoration story. The third, using this new story, is to build our concentric circles of consent for a new dispensation, outwards until they reach the social tipping point and are accepted as a new status quo.

Our task is not, as many imagine it, to persuade people in the opposite corner that we are right and they are wrong. This is the high school debating society model of politics. It has never worked this way and never will. Persuasion operates only among those already close to or open towards your position. Otherwise it is wildly overrated as a political tool.

What changes most people's position is a subconscious perception that the status quo has changed. Most people, for better or worse, align themselves with the status quo, whatever it might be. Even fierce opponents will swing round, without being fully aware that they're doing so. In certain cases, they will scramble to redefine themselves for fear of becoming a social pariah. After the Second World War, almost everyone in Europe became a member of the Resistance.

TI: And talk a bit about who you hope this book will reach, and what do you think it can do. It's a bit of a primer, but it's also more than that.

GM: We seek first to lift the veil from neoliberalism, to challenge its anonymities, its elisions and falsehoods. We then aim to produce a story that is just as powerful with which to replace it, and to suggest some of the mechanisms by which it might be realised. By ourselves, of course, we are entirely powerless, and we have no illusions that we could change the world through the power of words. All effective change is an ecosystem, composed of tens of thousands of people each deploying their peculiar skills. Nothing we do is of value unless other people are prepared to work with it, and we are prepared to work with them.

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9th July 2024.

<the.ink/p/rewriting-the-fairy-tale-of-capitalism>. Republished on 25th July 2024 on <monbiot.com/2024/07/25/how-to-change-everything>.