



'Gentleman' George Monbiot's 'Left Hook'

Reviewed by [Simon Belt](#) May 2011

George Monbiot has a reputation as one of Britain's foremost environmental activists. When I saw the advert for **'Gentleman' George Monbiot's 'Left Hook'** was part of the [Writing on the Wall](#) (WoW)

Festival 2011 in Liverpool, I thought I'd pop across to see for myself who would be interested in his peculiar mix of self-promotion and social commentary, and why.

As soon as I was eligible to vote, I used my vote to protest at Labour's contempt for the public that elected them, by voting for the Green Party. Ok, Ok, I was still at school, lived in a trendy and safe Labour seat, and hadn't read what the Greens actually stood for. When I later found out what the Greens actually stood for, rather than what I hoped they stood for, I was a little shocked at how futile the gesture was. Left with no outlet for bringing about a socialist society, I began something of a long search for some coherent and progressive ideas, including spending some time in Liverpool around the time Militant were having their heyday. Expecting a City like Liverpool, with its socialist reputation, to provide some criticism of George Monbiot's environmentalism I started to do some online research.

There's clearly two parts to this discussion, the Festival it sits in and the speaker this discussion

is organised around. The Writing on the Wall 2011 Festival has a fairly wide variety of seemingly radical subjects and people speaking at it, with a self-conscious pitch that attempts to situate the discussions taking place as in some way linked to the riots of 1981 and the uprisings in the Middle East and Africa, or at least use those as a reference point. This discussion in the Festival had a tagline of 'The gloves are off for a barnstorming evening with The Guardian's heavyweight intellectual and one of the UK's foremost environmentalists', and I rather expected to hear an unpicking of George Monbiot's attempts to limit human ambition and economic development.

The ' [Gentleman](#) George Monbiot's 'Left Hook' ' show wasn't something specifically developed for the Festival programme but a repeat performance, of a series of shows he's been performing in since February. And as I read the blurb on George's own blog I quickly realised that the construct of him taking on all comers is his own - quite like the drunk at the end of the night who wants to slug it out with anyone prepared to give him the time of day. Only this setup has been in place since January this year and clearly isn't the construct of a drunk, but of someone with an intellectual adrenalin rush or paranoia that they face combatants or antagonists everywhere they look. Else it's just naff marketing, vainly puffing up something to promote it.



Physical – good, intellectual engagement bad

The advertising warned us to 'get ready for a bare knuckle battle for hearts and minds', and yet upon arrival I was greeted by a delightfully calm and pleasant welcome by the nice lady in the Art & Design Academy at Liverpool John Moore University. In the lecture theatre though, the naff marketing was back in play with 'Eye of the Tiger' from Rocky III and other 80's classics like 'Living in America' by James Brown. I was so thankful George Monbiot came to save us from the music, but the boxing ring announcement of bout of the century and flashing lights to welcome him on stage just compounded the awkward separation between speaker and audience - 'if you dare, then ask him questions', honestly I kid you not.

Thankfully George has come to realise that the format he created for his talking tour just isn't productive for developing a talking show, maybe good to big it up, but his first words to explain how he's changing the format after having done a few shows now, and he'll talk for much less of the time and have more time for interaction. How damn fine of him, though somewhat alarming that someone of his years has only just worked out how to develop a dialogue in public discussions with a speaker. So a discussion of two halves: first half his topic of choice, <now> brief introduction followed by questions and other comments, then second half will be topics he selects from what people submit to him in the interval. Questions, would though be taken in a strict politically correct order of man, woman, man, woman. Such structural and physical attempt at balance rather than political balance, but that's in keeping with the George as physically muscular boxer image I guess.

Nuclear good, coal bad

The opening topic of George's choice was nuclear power and his conversion to the cause after the earthquake and tsunami off the coast of Japan, resulting in the 'disaster' at the Fukushima nuclear power plant. It was somewhat refreshing to hear a straightforward argument for nuclear power on the basis that it's the most efficient and relatively cleanest technology to use for the production of large quantities of electricity, and even the old and obsolete character of the nuclear power plant at Fukushima has proved itself quite resilient. The fact that scientists have been saying this to Greens and environmentalists like George for decades without them engaging in a proper discussion, does make you think that it's probably an emotional change of heart rather than logical working through of logic that's behind it.

Indeed, George Laboured the point about dangers involved in mining coal, like the incidence of Coal Workers' Pneumoconiosis (CWP), and his concern for those dying cruel deaths and castigated those against nuclear for ignoring these facts. It didn't take him long to return to the familiar 'end of the world is nigh' theme, and it's all the doings of rapacious consuming humans message with a plea to grasp with both hands this 'wonderful window of opportunity to use nuclear power to help us reduce our energy needs' and save the planet. So he still thinks humans are the problem for destroying the environment. There's an acceptance that energy needs in the short term will have to increase dramatically in order build the low carbon economy he wants to see, which is at least closer to the truth and more balanced than the environmentalists and catastrophists who endlessly jet around the country or planet to tell everyone how they should be using inefficient and expensive solar panels that require so much

more energy to produce energy than on balance they produce.

He also made a useful point about the irrationality of trying to skew the market in energy by artificially fixing payments for energy produced from solar panels which hides its true cost, and extolled the virtue of a proposal to turn much of north Africa into a very efficient producer of electricity through solar power for use locally though primarily export to Europe. After farming off much of the energy production to the Africans, talking about the eyesore of wind farms close to where he lives in north Wales, the '**not in my back yard**' approach was dealt with on the nuclear front by declaring the new power plants can simply be built alongside those already in existence. Yes there's some new thinking and angles, but there's also so much environmentalist not in my back yard anti progress nonsense still there writ large. His widespread use of the word stupid for anyone who didn't agree with his view set out his stall that there wasn't to be much intellectual engagement to understand or explain, simply to beat into submission.

Nature – not so good, humans worse

What I found quite interesting though was the way in which the natural environment itself is becoming more of a problem to little old humans than I think it used to be. So for example, when talking about the estuary where he lives, it wasn't so much the diesel boats of old that cause all the problems, but a big emphasis was put on the impact that tidal flows and waves cause to animal and plant life, as well as humans. This is surely a consequence of the way they've been arguing for a diminished human impact for so long and now the political ambitions within western economies has diminished, the sense of humanity being able to control nature has been diminished and nature is more feared for its relative increase in perceived power, like in catastrophe movies. There was such a lump in his throat when the next logical step would be for humans to improve their relative power to the natural world, to the extent that electricity pylons across the countryside, once seen as conduits of progress, are understandably (rightly) in his view seen as eyesores and should be hidden from view by the few people that see them.

With his finger on the cultural pulse, George has bought into the increasing use of therapeutic language and explanations of all things political, especially those aspects of individual or collective behaviour that are objectionable. Alongside relentless labelling of people who he disagrees with as stupid, he uses the whole language of denial to setup those he thinks don't agree with him as in denial, and like drug users who are in denial about their behaviour, they must be forced to go cold turkey. So, to those stupid people who just don't understand what the science says, they are in denial and have created a deception that requires more consumption to maintain the denial, else we would all wake-up to realise the catastrophe we face. Joining the next Salon discussion entitled [Talking therapies: good for people and politics?](#) would be a useful counter balance to this trend.

There was an interesting question raised about the way in which reliance on peer review of science by organisations receiving most of their funds from the state when those funding decisions follow a political trend isn't necessarily the same as science that's independent from politics. That question was probably the most serious blow to George's framework of 'trust the science', when he could obviously switch sides on the nuclear issue even though the science hasn't changed. The other tritely used phrase to express finger on the pulse credentials was that of the neo-liberals having taken over the political agenda. As always though, these mythical people not only have no names, but as it wears thin as a get out clause, their numbers get smaller every time I hear them mentioned.

Population not so bad, consumption definitely bad



George kicked off the discussion after the interval on the topic of whether the growth in population is a problem, and what the limits to it might be. I haven't really been involved in any public discussions on this recently, and although the audience were on the whole liberal lefty professional types with a high familiarity of life at university, I was shocked at how much consensus there was on this issue. The more critical voices were those arguing that it was wrong to point the finger at the world's poor for increasing in numbers, when it is the increase in consumption by people realising their aspirations for more wealth that was the real problem. Over consumption was definitely the universally acclaimed problem with the solution being working out ways to consume less.

The second topic after the interval that George selected was education, and funnily enough, the previous abstract demands for reducing consumption didn't materialise as concrete demands for reduced consumption of resources for education. This was though the most structural and technical discussion of the evening with George proposing support for an approach to selection for university places to not go on the grades by students balanced across society through national exams, but that the places go to the top performing students within each school regardless of whether better candidates exist in other school. The hoped for outcome would be that pushy parents from better schools would move their kids to less well performing schools in the hope that their kids would perform better relatively speaking in a poorer school and hopefully raise the standards in the poorer performing schools. The impact on the overall decline in quality of intake to higher education was ignored.

The discussion on education focussed on technical tweaks with a heavy dose of resentment for parents who spend money on their children's education, with one alternative proposal for example wanting to force parents to pay double for their children's university education compared with what they paid for their children's school education. Well wadical, not! The notion that students of adult age should have parents paying for them to get an education was seen as given, and the free talk of using the education system as an arena for bringing about change in society was the norm. Education was discussed as though it was no longer an arena for society to pass on the best of what it currently knows, and also develop the critical faculties of the next generation to go beyond that knowledge and push the boundaries further. For it to be talked of as an arena for social manipulation was definitely the most alarming aspect of the night.

I wonder if George Monbiot would categorise himself as a denier to the claim that all his talk of the need to reduce consumption is a great help to those in the government looking to reduce state expenditure. Still, there were some hundred and fifty people paying their £10 to consume some George Monbiot insights, and personally signed books so guess some consumption can be excused if it's the right kind. His closing remarks of having tried to get all the environmentalists and progressives in one room to coordinate activities has so far not got very far was telling, even though his miserablist and I know best what's good for you attitude is now common political orthodoxy. Thinking about what slogan he would use to rally people, it is clear why it's not such a dynamic movement - 'What do we want? Us all to have less!', doesn't explain why you would build something to achieve it as that's a tad aspirational.

Be good to hear about some more of the discussions from the Festival - if any of our readers go along to them, do please send links to your reviews.