

MANNA FROM FINLAND

Does the free lunch promised by the biotech industry spell the end for farming?

George Monbiot has a probing mind and so it comes as no surprise that he should take his vegan views to a logical conclusion. In an article in the *Guardian*, published in January 2020 in conjunction with a Channel 4 documentary and a speech at the Oxford Real Farming Conference, he announced, not just the collapse of the livestock industry, but the death of all farming:

“Before long, most of our food will come neither from animals nor plants, but from unicellular life. After 12,000 years of feeding humankind, all farming except fruit and veg production is likely to be replaced by ferming: brewing microbes through precision fermentation.”

He could be partly right. This is precisely the kind of solution to environmental problems favoured by biotech-capitalists beavering away in their lavishly funded “start-ups”. The Finnish technology he highlights cultures a rich bacterial soup out of hydrogen extracted from water and there are other laboratories pursuing similar alchemy. Monbiot echoes the forecasts of outfits like Rethinkx who predict the wholesale “disruption” of the agricultural industry over the next 20 years. Their precursor, 14 years ago, was James Lovelock, who predicted the manufacture of synthetic food made in factories from “tissue cultures of meats and vegetables, and junk food made from any convenient organism” (see “Apocalypse Soon”, *The Land* 3).

The difference between Lovelock’s vision and Monbiot’s is that the former takes some account of socio-political factors. The junk food, he predicts, will be fed to “the poor” while “the privileged” will be dining on “real food . . . grown in soil”. Given that modern capitalism has done nothing to diminish the contrast between rich and poor, Lovelock’s seems a more realistic scenario than Monbiot’s. In Britain, like it or not, there are those who dine out in fancy restaurants and keep dozens of cookery books on their shelves, and those who frequent the take-away and pile their supermarket trolley high with instant processed foods. If this microbial manna does become cheaper than farmed food, as Rethinkx predicts, then it will compete for the bottom of the market with factory-farmed meat and plastic white loaves – where it would arguably be the lesser of two evils – while organic meat, cheese and bread will likely become even more desirable commodities for those with the means to pay.

Moreover, if lab grown protein becomes cheaper than soya, as its manufacturers anticipate, then farmers will feed that to their livestock instead of soya. It could be used to fatten factory farmed pigs and chickens; but since the meat from industrial units will be undercut by lab-grown products, farmers are more likely to use this cheap protein as a supplement to grass and grain in the production of quality meat and dairy on farms that conform to the discriminating consumer’s picture of what a farm ought to be.

There are an estimated 500 million family farms in the world, housing close to a third of the world’s population. It is highly



unlikely that these resourceful people would all desert their land if a new cheap source of protein arrives on the market. They would be fools if they did; it would make more sense to use the protein to feed their livestock, which in turn would provide more fertility for their crops, rendering them less dependent on artificial fertilisers.

Why George Monbiot should want them to leave their land and double the population of cities that are already bursting at the seams is beyond comprehension. Unfortunately he has positioned himself as a leading exponent in this country of what the French call “agribashing”. “Food production is ripping the world apart,” he claims in the same article. “Farming is a major cause of climate breakdown.”

But where is the evidence for this? The peasants that Monbiot would see removed from their lands have lower per capita carbon emissions than any other social group. An average British consumer emits 84 times as much carbon as an average Ugandan. A glance at the national tables reveals that by and large the more big cities a country has, and the more industrialised it is, the higher its carbon emissions.

Humans have been farming for over 12,000 years. Fossil fuels have only been extracted and used on any scale in the last 200 years. It is precisely those two centuries that have witnessed the accumulation of carbon in the atmosphere and the warming of the Earth’s climate.

Farming has its environmental problems like most sectors of the economy. But the drive over the last few years to shift the blame for global warming onto farmers, and the pathetic attempt to wangle a few more years of fossil fuel indulgence by planting more trees (see “Quality not Quantity”, *The Land* 26) are at the root of the agribashing that targets the livelihoods of more than a third of the world’s people. It is a shame that George Monbiot, who founded the organisation that gave birth to *The Land* magazine and who has done so much to expose the destructive nature of modern capitalism, should be at the forefront of this misguided movement.

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