

Biotech colonialism? Comedian Russell Brand claims Bill Gates is ‘buying up stolen land’ to ‘take over the global food system’. Here’s what he got wrong

“W

hy Is Bill Gates Buying Up Stolen Native American Land?” British comedian and actor Russell Brand asked in [a recent YouTube video](#). Relying largely on anti-GMO activist Vandana Shiva, Brand spent nearly 17 minutes warning about the dangers of billionaires taking over the global food system. Here’s what he got wrong.

Russell Brand is a genius comedian. I’m especially fond of his character in the film “Forgetting Sarah Marshall,” a self-absorbed rock star named Aldous Snow who writes cliché ballads about saving the planet.

Recently, it seems, Brand has adopted some of his on-screen character’s environmental and economic concerns. According to an [April 18 YouTube video](#), he’s especially worried about Bill Gates’ efforts to promote sustainable agriculture as a means of addressing climate change. His specific concerns are that Gates and other billionaires are buying up large amounts of US farmland and spending considerable resources lobbying to support technologies like genetically engineered (GE) crops.

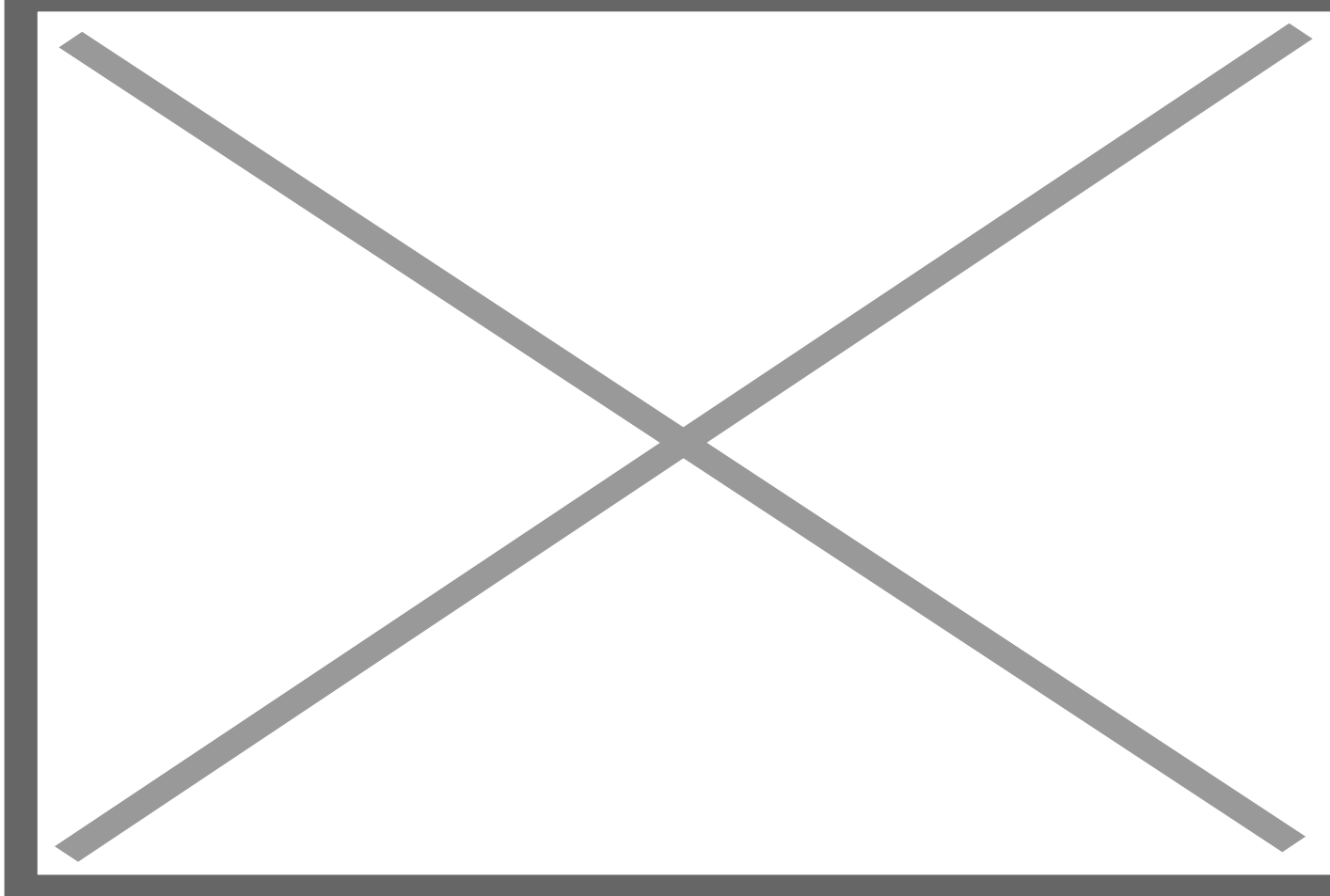
These efforts, the comedian says, are part of a larger resurgence of Western colonialism, which is driven partially by industrial agriculture that is destroying biodiversity and monopolizing the global food supply. The World Economic Forum’s so-called [Great Reset](#) is the latest example of this project in action.

There’s certainly nothing wrong with criticizing billionaires and big corporations when they act unethically. But Brand doesn’t have a convincing case in this instance, largely because his complaints have been sourced from The Guardian, a British newspaper with an [inconsistent interest](#) in scientific accuracy; and Vandana Shiva, one of the world’s foremost anti-GMO activists, who lacks [any interest whatsoever](#) in scientific accuracy.

Billionaire land grab

So, why is Gates buying up so much farmland, and should we be worried? In a word, no. The tech billionaire announced in March that the acquisition is related to seed research and biofuel development. “The agriculture sector is important,” [Gates said](#). “With more productive seeds we can avoid deforestation and help Africa deal with the climate difficulty they already face. It is unclear how cheap biofuels can be but if they are cheap it can solve the aviation and truck emissions.”

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Bill Gates. Credit: PA Images/Sipa USA

He's absolutely correct about seed productivity; higher-yielding crops [result in](#) more food produced per acre, reducing our need to expand farmland and thus protecting biodiversity. There is far less certainty about the benefits of biofuels. Some experts [have pointed out](#) that producing them requires large quantities of fossil fuel and additional cropland. It also drives up the cost of animal feed, which in turn boosts meat and milk prices for consumers.

It may be that further developing biofuels to fight climate change just isn't worth the high cost. But even if Gates turns out to be wrong about biofuels, his land purchase still isn't all that alarming. The fact is, land consolidation has been ongoing for centuries and it's easily explained by economics.

As societies industrialize and grow wealthier, many people find the prospect of life on a farm less appealing. They move into cities to work manufacturing and service jobs and enjoy the amenities afforded by their new environment. The farmers who stay behind [buy up the vacant land](#) and cultivate it. As time goes on, they utilize new technologies to work more efficiently and—Boom!—we get modern, industrial farming. By the way, 97 percent of farms are [still family-owned](#) operations, representing 87 percent of US farmland.

GMOs and colonialism

Brand may have found Shiva's analysis about GE crops and colonialism novel, but it's decades-old now and still baseless. The argument [goes something like this](#): big seed companies fund research in developing countries to buy support from local scientists. They promise higher yields and other sustainability benefits to “hook” farmers. This gives these firms undue influence over food production because they now have a guaranteed customer base in farmers who have to buy their seed, and academic allies in scientists dependent on them for research funding. Any movement to restore local control stands little chance against the lobbying might of these colonizing corporate behemoths.

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It's a nice David vs. Goliath story, but it doesn't square with some easily verifiable facts. As I wrote in a recent story for the [Genetic Literacy Project](#):

Never mind that farmers all over the world have expressed their desire to cultivate biotech crops, and some growers will even break the law to acquire them. Also ignore the fact that scientists in the developing world have engineered biotech crops to help farmers in their native countries — such as in Bangladesh where insect-resistant Bt brinjal (eggplant) was distributed at little or no cost to poor farmers.

One of the reasons farmers in many developing countries can't get these enhanced seeds is because activists like Shiva and their [billionaire backers](#) lobby to keep them out, an effort sometimes referred to as “[Green Neo-Colonialism](#).” It may surprise Russell Brand, but many people in these nations aren't thrilled at the prospect of pests destroying their harvests as they're denied modern tools that could help.

Brand strikes me as a thoughtful guy trying to use his celebrity to do some good in the world. Moreover, he's not wrong to express skepticism of the Great Reset, which the [World Economic Forum](#) openly acknowledges is about transforming the global economy. But there are thoughtful ways to criticize corporate influence in the world without promoting false and harmful ideas.[1] Brand, it seems to me, hasn't figured out how to do one without the other.

Notes:

[1] Former New York University liberal studies professor [Michael Rectenwald](#) has written a [series of articles](#)

critiquing the Great Reset from a libertarian perspective.

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