

Thesis #10

Our societies are a thousand years behind their schedule of cultural evolution. We can catch up by building the world as it could have been. Paradise becomes practical once we banish the parasite in our midst. We just need to restore to good working order the financial feedback mechanism required by all healthy communities. It's either that, or remaining hostage to a culture that is devouring the material and moral foundations of civilisation.

Paradise & the Parasite

Fred Harrison

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Fred Harrison is Research Director of the Land Research Trust and author
of *The Traumatized Society*

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PARADISE is not a place. It is a state of mind. We have learnt that much from the failure of utopians like Plato and Thomas More. Their blueprints for justice-based communities could not be converted into practical solutions. But if we emancipate our imaginations, apply the basic tenets of morality and work with the plasticity of culture, we can create new ways of living. That means co-existing with each other and with nature in what we would happily call paradise on Earth.

An Italian artist, Michelangelo Pistoletto, evoked paradise symbolically by twisting the infinity sign into three circles. Nature was the first paradise. The human condition that emerged out of nature was the second paradise. And then, referring to the universal judgement portrayed in the fresco in the Sistine Chapel, Pistoletto argued that “the apocalypse does not end in nothing, but has a sequel: Heaven and Hell. For me the sequel is the Third Paradise, a heaven on Earth in which the reasons that have led to the infernal consequences which threatened to swallow up humanity today are absorbed and dissolved” (2010: 86).

Pistoletto does not rely on the religious concept of transcendence. His ideal is wrought through “the generative function of art”. But we need to fuse art with ancient wisdom, and test insights with the tools of science. By combining these elements, we would begin to reconstruct our communities. The moments of

paradise would be extended into ever longer periods of contentment. Paradise would be perceived all around us, in the beauty radiated by nature and society: from a sunset to the smile on the face of a child. Paradise is a dialectical experience: achieved by emancipating our minds from the limitations that restrain us from realising our full potential.

Barriers to the transformation of our earthly condition do appear insuperable. Freedom of the individual is the declared objective of philosophy, a legacy from

classical Greece. And yet, concurrent with the fine words was the violent disconnection of people from the natural rights that defined the state of liberty. Freedom is a hollow notion if children cannot grow into fully formed personalities because they are denied access to all of the social and ecological endowments that are necessary to achieve maturity.

We treat society as the subordinated servant of atomised individuals. Yet we derive our identities – and our pathologies – from

both nature and nurture. Self-fulfilment cannot be achieved if the potential of the whole population is not realised. So the first step towards paradise begins by striking the correct balance between the needs of the individual with the collective rights of all citizens.

The pre-histories of early humans is encouraging. There were *cul-de-sacs* episodes, but our ancestors re-orientated themselves back onto the path of evolutionary development. Ominously, this time may be different.

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Our central problem was identified by Cambridge University sociologist Gary Runciman (3rd Viscount Runciman of Doxford). Social evolution, he notes, can be constrained “by a parasitical practice which reproduces itself at others’ expense” (2009: 184). As we have explained in the Ten Theses, European cultures were deformed by a parasitic virus known as rent-seeking. *That virus has now pushed our civilisation to the point where the characteristics of parasitism are analytically inadequate.*

In nature, a balance is maintained between parasites and their hosts. Parasites do not devour their hosts, for that would extinguish the means of their existence. Early humans developed immune systems within their cultures to ensure the sustainability of their biological units. This enabled them to expand demographically into ever-larger societies. That process of growth could continue for so long as the immune system was kept in good working order. Switch it off and anarchy reigns. That is what happens when we permit rent-seeking to corrupt responsible behaviour.

*Rent-seeking is an autolytic process (Box 1). It is the anti-social parasite that rewards behaviour that devours the host when too many people are lured into living off the labour of others. That is when people cease to produce sufficient means for their social existence. Once incubated, the parasite is unrelenting in its quest for privileged greed. The accelerating trajectory terminates in self-devouring death. **This is how and why previous civilisations imploded.***

So, to construct paradise in the here and now, we must recover the natural and social laws that maintain our social galaxy in equilibrium. Early warnings of danger abound, but they tend to be ignored (EEA

2013). Too often, ignorance or complacency prevents action.

Box 1 Self-devoured Civilisations

In biology, *autolysis* (commonly known as self-digestion), refers to destruction of tissues or cells through the action of enzymes that are produced within the organism. The term derives from the Greek words *αυτό* (“self”) and *λύσις* (“splitting”). This is auto-digestion.

Urban civilisations became possible when people learnt how to produce a net income (economic rent). That income was required to create the cultural and material infrastructures that sustain complex settlements. When the ratio of predators to producers reaches critical levels – when too many people want to live off the labour of others – civilisations tip into depletion mode. For a while, they survive by devouring the accumulated capital, or by displacing some costs of living onto future generations. Eventually, the system becomes too heavy a burden for the producers, and it implodes.

Cultural intelligence

The task of social reconstruction begins by understanding culture, that matrix of values, rituals and institutions which are transmitted so that each generation does not have to “reinvent the wheel”.

Pre-civilised people were extraordinary because they cast their minds to the outer regions of the visible stars to work out the principles for what would become the cultural mainframe for sustaining their lives on Earth. As populations grew into larger settlements with new techniques for nurturing food from the soil, it was the genius of preliterate peoples that they could evolve techniques for disciplining the behaviour of themselves and others.

They fused an ethical economics into the cultural mainframe. Onto this they embossed the exotic features that dovetailed them into their landscapes. So long as they adhered to their ethical economics, they could sustain ever larger agglomerations of people in increasingly complex settlements.

Every generation relied on the wisdom embedded in the legacy of their ancestors.

- ❖ *In traditional societies*, elders told stories around camp fires to inspire new perceptions of what was humanly possible.
- ❖ *In the first city civilisations*, priests conducted rituals in sacred spaces to elucidate the divine guidance that secured the Good Life.
- ❖ *In classical Greece*, playwrights explored morality in amphitheatres to integrate personal behaviour with the ideals of the democratic state (Sternberg 2006).

Culture emancipates people to push the boundaries of their accomplishments. But it is all jeopardised when some individuals are allowed to capture culture and turn it into a private asset. That anti-social process unfolds when people's right to share their natural habitats is grabbed for the exclusive benefit of a minority. To unravel the damage this inflicts, and to heal our civilisation, we need prophetic language to renew our visions of what is humanly possible.

Prophetic Voices

We know from past episodes that change tends to be inspired by people with the courage to challenge authority. Their voices were generally suppressed. Occasionally, they were heard. If we listen carefully, we can hear those voices in our midst today.

❖ Language of the divine

Heads of the Christian churches are beginning to engage with the pain of the marginalised millions. Their declarations, however, do not suggest a deep appreciation of the structural causes that fragment our societies. But by re-reading their sacred texts, they can reactivate the mission that inspired their religion. In their midst they would find people like John Dudley Davies, an English chaplain who worked in Africa for 15 years.

On his arrival, Davies witnessed the way in which indigenous peoples were schooled into serving white masters. "At its worst, it is represented by Bantu Education in South Africa, which is designed to limit the black people to function in menial roles devised for and on behalf of the white minority" (1979: 15). He participated in a church group which reviewed the apartheid government's proposals for land reform in Zululand. The "reforms" were purely political, with no consideration for the well-being of either the people or the land. When he returned to Britain, this experience "on the ground" led Davies to emphasise the events from antiquity that informed the bible's teachings. Nehemiah's intervention "recalled the people, especially the leaders, to the proper stewardship of the land. He saw that when ordinary people have too little power, they lose their contact with the land, they lose their security of housing and work, they risk becoming slaves, they get into hopeless debt, they have value only as producers of wealth for the benefit of the rich. On the other hand, the rich decide how much anything is worth, especially how much any land is worth, because they have the spare wealth to pay for it" (Davies 1993: 29). We are reminded that the mission on which Jesus embarked was to find and nurture the dispossessed poor, who had

been displaced to the margins of society, “and the task of his followers is to take an awareness of it to the so-called centre” (Davies 2002: 157).

Eventually elevated to the status of bishop, John Davies is now retired. But Bishop Davies still ministers to the needs of his community, and he continues to remind religious leaders that they are the keepers of sacred visions. One of these is elaborated in *Leviticus*, the contemporary relevance of which he explores in compelling terms (in Rogerson: *forthcoming*).

❖ Language of the theatre

The process by which art may awaken the collective consciousness is laid bare in the notebooks of South African playwright Athol Fugard. He records: “The sense I have of myself is that of a ‘regional’ writer with the themes, textures, acts of celebration, of defiance and outrage that go with the South African experience” (1983: 8). His recorded observations empowered him to evolve narratives that turned into the plays which exposed the disgrace of apartheid to a global audience.

Artists utter truths that are uncomfortable to the people in power. The American playwright Eugene O’Neill was one of them. His 49 plays examine how lives are shaped by heredity, space, time and the hierarchies in communities. O’Neill explores how the individual interacts with society at large, to assess the way in which social conventions influence character. But he also interrogates the way in which, through the quest for personal freedom, the individual can break from the constraints inherited from the past.

O’Neill presents human beings and nature as parts of a whole. His characters struggle for re-birth. God occupied a

central place in his plays, but that God was not of the anthropocentric kind, an external Supreme Being, but was part of nature, which encompasses the individual. “Each individual must therefore search the depths of his soul so that he might attain a revelation that is undoubtedly of an almost divine nature but that will reveal his fundamental unity with a whole of which he had until this point been unaware even if at times he had sensed it” (Dubost 1997: 225).

Re-identifying the individual with the natural world implied a rupture in people’s perceptions of relationships and property rights. For social change to take place, people must control their personal destinies. O’Neill lays out the challenge. “When the individual is defined, he must remain faithful to himself, and to do this, he must have the courage to free himself from his chains, which take the most diverse forms” (Dubost 1997: 225). That challenge found one of its most dramatic expressions in a novel by Leo Tolstoy, in which he explicitly lays out the structural reforms needed to renew society (Box 2).

Box 2 **Unchaining the Peasants**

Count Leo Tolstoy was a land owner disturbed by his conscience. This led him to warn the czar that Russia was in a state of pre-revolutionary fervour. The czar ignored his advice. Tolstoy elaborated on his proposals in a letter to the editor of the *London Times*, in which he endorsed the British government’s budgetary proposals (in 1909) to shift taxes off labour and onto the rents of land (Redfearn 1992). Tolstoy interrogated the parasitic nature of land monopoly in the novel he called *Resurrection*. In this, an enlightened landlord seeks personal salvation by divesting himself of his land in favour of his tenants.

Mission to Renew

The quest for the Good Life is obstructed by the condition we call *induced ignorance* (Thesis #9). But we embark on emancipation by questioning the concepts that have been contorted to serve the rent-seekers. Linguistic analysis illuminates the parameters of new ways of living.

Scarcity, for example, is imbued with an ideological meaning that hinders us from understanding reality. We could all enjoy a life of abundance (where abundance is measured not just in material goods, but including the aesthetic riches that raise our levels of psychological contentment). Propagandists claim that resources fall short of what we need. They point to finite resources like petroleum which, once consumed, are gone forever. But concepts like scarcity are employed in post-classical economic theory to manipulate our minds. Our gaze is diverted away from the gluttony of rent-seekers who pillage nature's – and society's – riches (Box 3).

The threat to humanity has now grown to the point where people need to take control of their destinies in the confident knowledge that common sense is a good guide to the renewal of themselves and their communities. All they need is the assurance that common sense is consistent with the evolutionary insights which have been accumulated over tens of thousands of years.

Everyday ethical norms provide reliable guides that instil order in complex society. These would be reactivated if people were assured that they were consistent with

- i. *Religious teachings*: endorsements from ancient wisdom – pre-biblical rules like Jubilee debt cancellation and land restoration through to the parable of the vineyard as recounted by Jesus (Thesis #3);

- ii. *Scientific reasoning*, from the earliest Islamic and Enlightenment scholars (Thesis #3); through to
- iii. *Empirical evidence* accumulated by Nobel laureates like Robert Solow, Franco Modigliani and William Vickrey, who affirm that optimum results are achieved by a pricing mechanism that treats rent as public revenue (Noyes 1991).

There are no dark areas that need to be filled. The urgent task of rehabilitating our communities need not be postponed. To achieve a sustainable settlement, however, scale and form must be determined by people in free association.

Box 3

Attributing shortages to Nature

Many reformers, in seeking solutions to problems like poverty, aggravate the problem. Dennis Sherwood, for example, advises corporations on innovation and creativity in business practises. In his manual on systems thinking, he links population growth with scarcity of natural resources (land, water and oil). This "leads to COMPETITION FOR SCARCE RESOURCES, which in turn leads to FAMINE and WAR" (Sherwood 2002: 243, emphasis in original). But as explained in Harrison (2012), humans create all the value they need if they are free to work. Nature collaborates in generous ways, supplying the energy needed for the Good Life. Problems only arise when constraints are imposed by those who seek to live off unearned incomes by monopolising the resources of nature and, consequently, the riches of society.

The scale of the damage inflicted by the statecraft of greed is so enormous that it will take a huge investment to renew what it means to be human. Resources would be forthcoming out of the gains from transforming the financial system. Those

gains would be of a spiritual, moral and material kind. Personal liberty would translate into productivity improvements. So resources – material wealth and leisure time – would be available to fund the recovery of pathologically disturbed societies. The first tranche of gains would need to be devoted to rehabilitating wrecked communities and their habitats.

❖ Reconstituting the family

The family has been deconstructed under the influence of “liberal” doctrines that allegedly extend the freedom of the “individual”. A heavy price has been paid by children who endure increasingly fragile parental relationships. Britain is typical of western culture (anecdotal evidence is offered in Box 4). Rebuilding values and institutions to strengthen the family unit is a critical challenge for society.

❖ Rebuilding the nation

People need the confidence that would encourage them to inform politicians like Hillary Clinton that slogans will no longer suffice. The former US Secretary of State says that the 21st century’s mission is to “complete the unfinished business of making sure that every girl and boy, that every woman and man, lives in societies that respect their rights no matter who they are, gives them the opportunities that every human being deserves – no matter where you were born, no matter the colour of your skin, no matter your religion, your ethnicity or whom you love” (Rucker 2014). This is rhetoric without substance. The unequal distribution of endowments will drive ever-widening wedges in nations that are infused by rent-seeking.

❖ Re-wilding natural habitats

Damage inflicted on other species and their habitats is not contested. Nature will

eventually repair that damage, but we can redeem past assaults on living habitats by helping to re-wild the forests and uplands (Monbiot 2013).

Box 4
Pity the Children

In Britain, according to Lord Freud, a Coalition Government welfare minister, about 700,000 children in lone-parent families live in poverty. The annual cash costs of family breakdown are estimated at about £46bn (Bingham 2014). One indicator of the irresponsible society: many men fail to fulfil their duty of care to women who bear their children. At school, children now score below immigrant children in English. Children are so hypertensive that one head teacher recommends that they be given lessons in being quiet to avoid stress (Paton 2014).

First Steps

Our species has grown weary. The lust for life is suppressed by the consumption of narcotics or commercial products. We desire more leisure and kinder relationships, but these recede under the stress of working harder in ever harsher economic environments. *Self-confidence can be re-instilled by effecting change with the first small steps towards liberty.* All we need is the power of a vision to guide the direction of social evolution.

Many steps are already being taken. An example is the way some communities in the UK, Switzerland, Germany and the USA have supplemented national currencies with local forms of money (known as LETS - Local Exchange Trading Systems or Schemes). But these, and the grand plans for replacing national currencies, will not perform their revolutionary role if their adherents fail to concurrently work to re-design the structure of society. For national currencies are abusive and are based on a grand fraud.

The greatest part of “money” is a debt-based figment of bankers’ imaginations. And yet, taxpayers are held liable for the buying power of those currencies. Their ancestors did not consent to be the guarantors of the value of the dollar or sterling, and yet the citizens of Europe and the US are forced to indemnify banks (as in 2008). A new social contract must renegotiate the terms of such indemnities.

Transferring the right to create credit to a public agency is not sufficient. Money reformers fail to locate such advocacy in a holistic framework (Brown 2013; Jackson and Dyson 2013). The reality, “on the ground”, reveals what would happen if their plans for monetary reform were implemented. As the cost of credit declined, the net gains would be captured by current owners of land-based assets. Rents and land prices would rise to mop up the value of the benefit of the reform.

Complex societies need “money”, the value of which needs to be certain. How might that value be maintained? Australian reformer Shann Turnbull suggests that a currency could be linked to a natural resource, such as electricity produced from local renewable energy sources (Turnbull 2012). Why confine the backing of money to the value of just one natural resource?

A responsible society, one that treated the rental income of all natural and social resources as public revenue, would enjoy an unmatched reputation for integrity. Risks would be the lowest anywhere, and returns from working and investing in a tax-free regime would be high (Thesis #4). Confidence in the currency would be rock-solid, because it would be guaranteed by the best collateral of all – a nation’s rents (ask any banker). The cost of borrowing money would be very low, and the scope

for creating new enterprises and funding culture-enriching services high.

The net effect: as the first steps were taken in shifting taxes off the working population, people would embark on the thousand and one experiments in new ways of living. The choice on how to redesign their lives would be theirs, in association with their fellow citizens.

Box 5 **The real brave new world**

Aldous Huxley, one of the 20th century’s Prophets of Doom, visualised salvation through decentralised production and the diffusion of the ownership of capital (Huxley 1947). Technology need not lead to the robotic tyranny that is undermining the jobs and wages of skilled middle-class people. But in *Brave New World*, Huxley omitted to mention – as he subsequently admitted in a preface to that book – that future prospects would be different if taxes were replaced by the rents that people created in common.

Empowering local networks

Local communities would flourish. Compact development would conserve green fields. High streets would be revived, the charity shops replaced by self-help initiatives meeting the needs of a newly confident citizenry.

- ❖ Production would be decentralised. Low-cost capital would enable people to create self-employment enterprises to compete with the conglomerates, leading to a break-down in corporate monopolies (Box 5).
- ❖ Local media networks would spring up to serve people’s need to communicate, stimulating the regeneration of decaying neighbourhoods.

- ❖ Politics would become participative, reversing *Democracy in Retreat* (Kurlantzick 2013). New kinds of institutions would emerge to transform nation-states.
- ❖ Self-determination would become meaningful for indigenous peoples as they defined the terms under which they adapted their cultures to the opportunities of our world.
- ❖ The arts would receive the support they need to help us visualise the components of the symbolic space we need to inclusively reintegrate our material and moral worlds.

The list of creative possibilities is open-ended. But while embarking on this new voyage of discovery, we should never forget the risk of the rent-seeking virus re-incubating itself.

Citizen's Rent Dividend

The gains from reform of the public's finances would be enormous, and they would become a temptation to those who would like to claim the privileges associated with the rent-seeking lifestyle. People would need to be ever alert to this risk. One way to strengthen society's immune system would be to institute a Citizen's Rent Dividend.

Communities could allocate part of its rental gains as an annual payment to citizens, with the explicit intention of safeguarding the social status of this stream of revenue. The dividend could also be designed to encourage life-affirming forms of behaviour. The citizen's Rent Dividend, then, would serve two major purposes:

1. The social nature of rent would remain uppermost in everyone's minds. Citizens would be vigilant over the way this income was

measured and distributed, and they would be ever-ready to repel privilege-seekers. The covert deeds of corruption, such as those that now disgrace the deals between corporations and public agencies, would become a thing of the past.

2. The dividend would encourage the activities that enlarge the stream of rental revenue. Everyone can contribute to social welfare in ways that expand personalities and the cultural endowments of each community. These, ultimately, translate into higher rents.

As work-life experiences are re-balanced in people-centred neighbourhoods, these locations would become increasingly attractive as living spaces. More people would register their approval in the form of the willingness to pay higher rents for the benefit of locating in those areas. And as those rents are recycled back into the arts and education, the human condition is further elevated. The cumulative effects would be reflected in rises in the index of rent, enabling an increase in the Citizen's Rent Dividend.

That dividend would be open-ended. So comparisons should not be made with the annual dividend paid to Alaska's citizens from oil rents. These vary, topping \$2,069 in 2008. But notice the qualitative differences.

- ❖ Alaska's dividends are in part tied to the performance of stock markets in the boom-bust economy. And: oil is a wasting asset.

Reserves of petroleum will one day be exhausted. When that happens, Alaskan communities will atrophy, with an exodus of residents as the oil wells run dry.

- ❖ Rent created by people working in co-operative communities is infinite: *infinite in size and duration, contingent solely on everyone participating in the activities that generate improvements in the quality of life in common*. This is as close to a tangible measure of paradise on Earth as we are going to get.

Is this too good to be true? What would prevent the new prosperity from turning into a traditional boom/bust depression?

By recycling rent back into the public purse, we establish the financial loop that solves the major problem of instability in the economy. The Citizen's Rent Dividend would be a participating element in society's negative feedback mechanism.

- ❖ At present, increases in the value of land-based assets provide the incentives to speculate, which creates bubbles that inflate prices that turn into the vicious business cycle that has to implode.
- ❖ When rents are automatically recycled back into life-affirming activities (personal development, the arts, recreational opportunities and community services in all their varied forms, from nurturing the young to caring for the aged), growth becomes a virtuous circle of creativity (Box 6).

Learn, don't Lament

The process of enhanced self-realisation entails healing. This must include forgiveness for those who did terrible things in the past, and for what we are doing to ourselves today. But the self cannot be healed in isolation from healing the community.

The challenge is immense. The process of re-creating a community free of socially-acceptable forms of cheating, for examples, includes the need to cancel sovereign debt. To avoid "shock therapy", a controlled shift from irresponsible consumption to "pay our way" behaviour needs to be designed. The transition period will include disruptions that need to be sympathetically addressed.

Prophets preached doom in the past, and they were often proved wrong. But, at worst, it was their regionally-confined civilisation that was at risk. Ours civilisation is global in reach. In addition, we now command the power of total destruction. Can we risk clinging to a Do Nothing policy in the hope of muddling through? Don't we deserve better?

Box 6
The Feedback Mechanism

Negative feedback is a process that moderates fluctuations within an operating system. It facilitates self-regulation to secure stability. Negative feedback loops are used by living organisms and in electronic engineering. An early example of a control technique is the refinements to the water clock introduced by Ktesibios of Alexandria in the 3rd century BCE. To prevent steam engines from exploding, James Watt patented the governor in 1788. In the economy, the land market reveals the information needed to apply negative feedback policies. As the economy grows, rents rise faster than either wages or the profits of capital. If rent is re-cycled back into virtuous social uses, growth remains stable. If rents are privatised, amplitudes in the fluctuations become increasingly unstable. This creates the vicious cycle that eventually explodes in boom/bust property prices.

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