

# From Slavery to Cybernetics

by Clifford Cobb

**R**ecently, I got involved in a discussion with some Libertarian/Georgist colleagues about the "enslavement" caused by the income tax system. Undeniably, the income tax, as it is currently structured, is extremely demoralizing and corrupting of the spirit. Why are the sheep so willing to be sheared by the payroll tax, with nary a bleat? Perhaps two-thirds of the population pays more in payroll tax than in income tax. Why are these taxes accepted with so little question? How can we effectively educate people about an infinitely better way of raising public revenue?

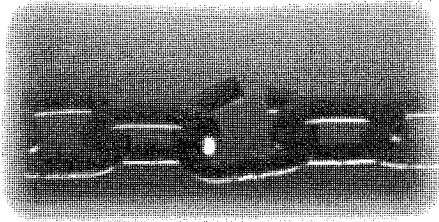
The current system breeds both cynicism and fatalism. It teaches people that who you know matters more than what you know. It promotes dullness of mind and of spirit. Eliminating the payroll tax would be a vast improvement, as would reforming the income tax to take more unearned income. But if we succeeded in that, without deepening public understanding of what was at stake, we would have won a pyrrhic victory. We must see ourselves as something more than an anti-tax crusade and even more than a new economics movement if we are to inspire large numbers of people (and stay inspired ourselves). Consider an issue that raises a passionate public response: crime. By denying real opportunity, the system as a whole promotes crime. A 1991 film, *Straight out of Brooklyn*, captures this well. A young black man sees a single act of violence as his only hope of escaping from the projects. The "walls" in his life are simply too high to scale, and those he sees climbing over those walls are engaged in crime. Which of us, facing the same conditions, would not seek a quick, decisive, way out?

The problem, from our perspective, is that the crime and suicide are visible, but the underlying cause is not. Another young person lies dead in the street. But our funeral oration is not about gun control or the evils of the drug trade; it's about land values. How odd we must sound.

We sound odd because we offer an explanation for social decay that contradicts a fundamental premise of modern thought: one problem, one cause. The obvious cause of crime is guns or drugs. There is a lot of money available to study those "causes" because they fit within the accepted intellectual framework. They assume that causes are visible and proximate to the effect. If children are hungry, the problem appears obvious: inadequate nutrition. If teen-

age girls are pregnant, the cause is presumed to lie in weak morals or inadequate contraception. Seldom do researchers look behind the veils to find underlying causes that perpetuate hunger, homelessness, and despair.

If we are to be successful, I predict it will be as part of a larger social movement that brings together people from various disciplines and movements, each of whom has run into a wall of orthodoxy. Each group will, for its own reasons, have come to reject the



standard explanations. They will have embraced evidence that seems paradoxical and enigmas that contain hidden truths. (Georgists believe, for example, that higher taxes on land will cause the price of housing to fall — this seems paradoxical to most

people.) Each group will feel outnumbered and alone before it discovers that there are many others that share its disdain for the simplistic, modern view of causality.

This movement I am envisioning need not throw out the "old" forms of scientific understanding; it must incorporate them into a broader vision, which looks beyond individuals to the behavior of entire systems. And such a vision has political implications: if we are to form a winning coalition that will move toward large-scale transformation (and not just local property tax reform or income tax reform), it is not likely to be on the basis of traditional economic interests. The coalition will be composed of those who have made the same sort of intellectual breakthrough in a wide range of endeavors: the breaking away from the idea of direct management to the concept of self-generating, self-healing, self-regulating systems.

Libertarianism, with its faith in the market as a self-regulating system, approaches that view. However, there are at least two fundamental flaws in libertarian thought. First, it takes the individual, not the system, as the primary object of analysis. In biology, the behavior of a cell or an organism cannot be fully explained in terms of the behavior of the constituent parts. The same is true of social units. Libertarians have an almost magical faith in economic markets, but few that I know of have made much of an effort to extend that insight into other systems. Michael Rothchild's *Bionomics* is an attempt to move in that direction, but it tends to read libertarian ideas about economics into biology rather than the other way around.

Second, as a result of their overwhelming bias against any form

of management, many libertarians go too far toward assuming that all systems are inherently benign if left to themselves. It is as if they deny the possibility that a thermostat can break down, that a human is needed to regulate the thermostat from time to time. (Ironically, another group that shares that kind of faith are the Earth First! activists who believe that all human activity is inherently evil because it disturbs a primordial good natural balance.)

Unlike the extreme libertarian or Earth First! models, a cybernetic approach to systems does not imply a completely hands off approach. It looks for the very limited number of places within a system where positive feedback plays a destructive role and seeks to alter the conditions that give rise to breakdown. We need better language to describe the act of managing cybernetic systems. To speak of "regulating economic instruments" suggests micro-management and elaborate bureaucracy, even if all we have in mind is something equivalent to resetting the thermostat.

I also presume that cybernetic language is likely to turn off more people than it grabs. It sounds mechanistic, engineering-oriented. The thermostat example reinforces that image. I believe that the enduring language of social transformation is religious or spiritual, and that systems theory at its heart is a recognition of some fundamental mysteries that have historically been framed as religious issues. Across the varied traditions of tao and torah, grace and satori, a common theme flows: that good things can happen just by letting them happen, without trying to control them, if we trust the system to work its own magic.

That is a hard lesson to learn, both individually and culturally. Like the person trying to get out of a Chinese finger trap, we are imprisoned by our efforts to free ourselves.

That is the ultimate paradox, and one that we as evangelists for freedom need to be especially wary of.

We must be wary, and not get stuck on Georgist hagiography, or even on a particular tax policy. Great leaders and useful images ask us to see through them, not to stare at them. Literalism is the great curse of those of us cursed with literacy. Let us not allow the truth to weigh us down as if it were excess baggage. If it does, perhaps we need to wander about the world a bit to see what we are missing by being tied too closely to what we already know. **GJ**