



AS EVIL DOES

BY FRED HARRISON

Reviewed by Simon McKenna

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If it were not immediately obvious from the titles and subtitles, the first few pages also confirm: *As Evil Does* is designed to raise ire and inform dissent. This polemical tone could even appear histrionic. Yet it should not be dismissed on this account. Instead, the rationale that informs this method and the result Fred Harrison achieves, warrant serious consideration by all concerned with Henry George and positive social change.

To Fred Harrison the land question is not merely a problematic subdivision of fiscal policy. The problem is psychological and cultural. It lies in socially accepted preconceptions regarding property, nature, history and the true value of human life.

Harrison variously describes this phenomenon as if it were a deadly social virus, a parasite and a deadly cult. Over the last several hundred years, it has ruinously "overwhelmed the innate, organic intelligence that informs the culture of free people". It has created institutions that serve private interests when they should serve the public good. It so governs our thought that we now cannot even imagine the existence of legitimate alternatives. To Harrison it is fatal and evil because it deliberately consumes human life for unreal economic advantage.

As Evil Does therefore offers activists an array of facts, case studies and moral arguments which reveal this infection. The author attempts to awaken the full horror of the malaise before our irrational attachment to what is sick can be replaced with reasoned acceptance of what is healthy. In doing so he traces the complex cultural and psychological history of the British people with our present day socio-economic conditions.

As a virus it manifests as a highly contagious infection that defends itself by encouraging selfish conformism. Take this fairly interesting example from the book: George Warde Norman,

a former director at the Bank of England, is, for Harrison, the example par excellence of a sick citizen. Norman was active in public life as a famous pamphleteer, an active utilitarian and a founding member of the Political Economy Club where David Ricardo first expounded his Law of Rent. Harrison relates how, ten years before Henry George was born, Norman had followed Ricardo's new theory of rent to its logical "moral" conclusion. Since all taxes come out of rent, a single tax is the most ethical way to fund government.

These revolutionary findings were supported by significant historical evidence available to him at that time. The data showed how, before *Magna Carta*, 100% of the tax burden rested on the shoulders of the landed aristocracy, completely funding the government. However, since the 1030s, when the right to private enclosure became protected by law, the government could no longer simply demand what it wanted of the Lords' property. The government could legally only raise revenue by creating sovereign debt and enforcing various kinds of taxes. By 1066-1216, land rent as a percentage of national revenue was already down from 100% to 95%. Over the next 800 years the tax burden was transferred almost entirely from landlords to landless wealth producers. By 1816-1845, only 5% of national revenue was taken from rent. Norman knew a 95% tax increase on the needy and hardworking was economically and ethically unjustifiable. Yet, despite his research, his professed belief in the 'greatest happiness for the greatest number' and his power to influence public discourse and public policy, Norman not only kept his research secret, he even published an article in defence of landlords. Norman had no appetite for any significant change because "he was too embedded in the culture of cheating".

Many of Harrison's most powerful observations stem from his evocation of man's naturally profound relationship with the land as the commons and the true meaning of rent. The commons are not merely the shared spaces but the entire phenomena of a culture. It is the "material embodiment of our humanity", created and shared among people. This holistic understanding of political economy represents an enormous challenge to the orthodox social and economic history of England.

Theorists usually attribute the proliferation of human suffering amidst immense social progress to industrialisation. In *As Evil Does* Harrison argues that, since communities evolve with natural reference with the land, theft of the land is of the deepest cultural significance. This relationship was characterised by vital dependency and natural responsibility. When private interests enclosed the land, the community lost its "sacred income". Folk culture and natural "common sense" were rendered anachronistic, the social mind debased. The individual was left homeless and isolated.

The uprooted consciousness of the nation was reshaped in accordance with a new culture founded on greed. Co-operative relationships beneficial for all were split-up and destroyed, sacrificed for private, 'objective' financial gain. This new arrangement was made possible by new laws, such as *The Statute of Merton*, which, alongside *Magna Carta*, "institutionalise[d] irresponsibility". A title deed was allowed to overrule the profound relation of a people to their homeland. The landlord's primary responsibility was now to the letter of the law rather than to the people of the earth. The government's duty became to protect the incomes of barons and princes. Following this logic the people were made to pay.

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As Evil Does attempts to describe how the historic enclosure of England was concomitant to a deliberate reshaping of time. "The timing of marriages, the affirmation of authority structures, the organisation of joyous festivals... were all spun around the rhythms of time that served everyone's interests." But all that changed when land, once appropriated, had to be kept out of public possession. The rent-seeking aristocracy adopted primogeniture, thereby stretching time and protecting their fortunes from redistribution, even beyond death.

Gifted with a guaranteed income from rent, landowning families were able to invest in the financial markets. To better fit the economic demands of this new, extra-geographical marketplace, time, socially understood, was almost completely divorced from the land. Work and leisure time no longer recognised natural regional irregularities such as festivals. Work time took priority over individual characteristics which had allowed people to suit themselves to their callings. "In place of the rhythms of the diversified household economy in rural areas, families were reduced to monotonous mono-cultures." Harrison evokes the image of a formerly noble people "congealed into clogs and cloth caps" to show how individuals became homogenised, anonymous, interchangeable agents of a 'work force.' Individuals were forced into an inhuman organisation where any one man was able to assume the garb of any other and 'work his shift', which is to say, instantly replace him. Work was then organised according to the calling of anonymous shareholders. If this was now made to seem almost normal, it was because the British people, the British countryside and time itself had been redefined to serve an abstract economy.

Likewise in the intellectual realm, a totalising metanarrative, a "doctrine of social progress" known generally as The Enlightenment, drowned out common sense, in Harrison's view, and made legitimate alternative voices incomprehensible. With no time to spend with family and only an attitude of self-interest to share with neighbours, the spread of anomie was inevitable.

The result is that most people are now simply convinced that the 'free market' is the best or most realistic means to happiness for individuals as 'consumers' and 'homeowners'. We have been so deeply infected by a culture of the private individual that even our intelligent acquaintances are apparently unable to accept land as the natural basis of community life. The people have been duped. They are so convinced by their new rights to home ownership and habeas corpus they cannot see themselves compliant victims of a fundamental injustice.

Harrison cannot be accused of standing alone on this issue. Hannah Arendt, who sought to understand why totalitarian and imperialist regimes emerged with modernity, found that people had first to be uprooted and separated from their traditional world which upheld natural limits. Enlightenment era imperialism rendered people 'superfluous', converted 'solid property into liquid wealth' and liberated commerce from any geographical limitation. But Harrison's analysis is more profound as he grasps the significance of land in a way few other theorists seem capable of doing.

Throughout the book Harrison cites many interesting studies to support his strong views. But what is most striking is not the facts but the philosophic nature of his argument. For while speaking of economic ideas, he brings our attention to the fact that life is not about economics but about happiness.

Some supporters of a land tax will be concerned that his emotive rhetorical style lacks the kind of rational legitimacy and dignity they desire for this project. They would seek to persuade people through explaining the logical cogency of a single tax. For Harrison this is a mistake because it presents a land tax reform as one among many questionable reforms to the status-quo. People are therefore entitled to presume that it will, like any other alternative, have its benefits and unstated pitfalls. The single tax seems arbitrary because in our time reason and logic no longer speak for the beauty of genuine happiness.

As Evil Does commends itself to anyone with an interest in land issues as a must read. Harrison crams a huge amount of fascinating data and unflinching insight gained from a lifetime's activism into this compact first volume of his new trilogy. Despite his self-declared split from the "British Georgist movement", this reviewer finds him to have an eloquent regard for human suffering akin to the Christian ethical concern found in Henry George himself, if with an oratory more vitriolic. Harrison has demonstrated there is much more at stake than can be remedied by a campaign for a land value tax. He has shown why the land question is an ethical problem of ultimate consequence. ■