

As Evil Does by Fred Harrison

reviewed by Simon McKenna

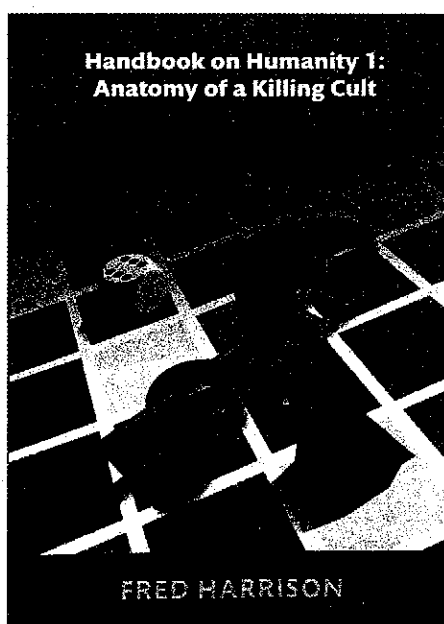
Re-published from Land and Liberty, Spring 2016

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



Handbook on Humanity 1: Anatomy of a Killing Cult, As Evil Does by Fred Harrison
Geophilos London 2015
ISBN 978-0993339806

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.