



WE ARE RENT

BY FRED HARRISON

Reviewed by Edward J. Dodson

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What follows is a sympathetic summary of the first book from Fred Harrison's new *#WeAreRent* trilogy. For me, an objective review of the trilogy is not practical, as I have for many years agreed with almost all he has written.

One of the great tragedies of our time is that these books are needed at all. What Harrison provides is, to at least some of us, common sense. However, for many others – even those who are well-read or who have a sincere commitment to creating a fair and just world for all – the books will challenge much that they believe to be true about our history. Harrison has surveyed the scientific disciplines for evidence to support his own theory of human cultural evolution and escalating disintegration. His conclusion is that the evidence is plentiful, indeed. He concludes that we are the victims of a spiritual genocide:

In Europe, the process began late in the 15th century. That was long enough in the past for the foundation injustices to be expunged from people's memories. Through a turbulent period of 500 years the free riders systematically worked to curb the critical faculties of rational people. Their crime, the appropriation of the commons, was legitimised and institutionalized as the private ownership of land and Rent. With the passage of that amount of time, what originated as perverse behavior of the rent-seekers, unjust in the eyes of the victims, became accepted as normal. Such a society, therefore, is not aware of its psychotic state.

For nearly a half century, Fred Harrison has been an energetic proponent of the systemic reforms called for by the late nineteenth century American political economist Henry George.

Harrison's body of work in support of this campaign has been continuous and included not only books and articles but hard-hitting videos documenting the history and contemporary efforts exerted to focus our attention onto the problems caused by (as stated in the above quote), "the private ownership of land and Rent". Book 1 of the trilogy *#WeAreRent* comes out of his desire – one more time – to call upon us to take crucial corrective action before we run out of time. His opening statement tells the reader what is ahead:

We no longer have a choice. Humanity has arrived at a crossroads. At stake is our species. To survive we must move beyond the dual between capitalism and socialism. To relaunch onto the evolutionary path into the future we must learn from the hard-won lessons of the past.

With this, Harrison asks us to join him on a journey of discovery into our very distant past and the first appearances of complex social organization within groups. He explains that as the human population increased and began to establish fixed settlements, the most important strengths of the early social groups were consciously and systematically eroded by those who managed to gain and hold power over what others were required to do and how they were permitted to think. This was accomplished, he explains, by the transfer of *rent*: "...the value that remains after deducting the wages of labour and the profits from capital formation and enterprise" from producers to those having the power and authority to take without offering anything in exchange. The eventual result is "depletion of the pillars that support the social structure" and "the collapse of civilization."

The evidence Harrison presents is damaging to the case made by the defenders of either *capitalism* or *socialism* as they argue that just one of these systems is best for humanity. One must look to how early humans once organized to identify the solutions to our modern problems. Even with these facts before us, however, changing our thinking and our behavior is burdened by what Harrison describes as "a culture of cheating that has had five centuries to manipulate our minds and shape our institutions."

A key observation is that even the earliest humans committed their mental and physical energy to production above what was required for biological subsistence, and this surplus production enabled early people to improve their quality of life, an outcome synergistically related to the continuous increase in "the size of the energy-hungry brain". At this stage of group organization -- whether by innate human instinct or by learned behavior -- people "were intensely egalitarian". Harrison asks readers to face the fact that the accumulated wisdom of thousands of years was consciously and systematically undermined as hierarchy supplanted cooperative societal norms. The only path to turning back the clock, Harrison argues, is "democratic consent". In this trilogy he will offer his insights into how such consent might be obtained.

To tell the true story of our physical, psychological and cultural evolution, Harrison draws upon the insights of an interdisciplinary

scientific community. Explained to us are the “techniques of accumulation” that separated us from the beasts, aided by very specific changes in the physical characteristics of our distant ancestors. The most important techniques are cooperation and the efficient use of the tools we produce. Working against these techniques were the “selfish interests” of some individuals resulting in “cheating” strategies and the redistribution of wealth from producers to the cheaters. Thus, strongly enforced moral rules were essential to ensure that rent was “shared for the common good” and not appropriated by a privileged few seeking a free ride.

I am confident that #WeAreRent will be acknowledged with few challenges by readers of *Land&Liberty* who acquire the books and read them. The content, if studied closely, will add to the intellectual ammunition of those committed to at least trying to educate a public that has managed to complete formal education without ever encountering anything written by Henry George or any of the authors and teachers who have written similarly over the last century and a half.

What George tried to do for political economy during the last quarter of the nineteenth century, Harrison is trying to take a step further by creating a reinvigorated foundation for a unique approach to the study of human behavior and organization. At the end of this first book in the trilogy, Harrison asks:

Have I offered a prima facie case against the power structure that underpins democratic societies? If so, this becomes one starting point for the conversation about the reforms that are needed to establish trust in governance and restore resilience to communities.

Although fully convinced that Harrison had already made the case in his earlier books and articles, Book 1 of the #WeAreRent trilogy is a notable accomplishment. Over the last three thousand years or so men and women with unusual insight into the human condition have shared their insights with us and in the process helped to change the course of history. Henry George's book, *Progress and Poverty*, seemed at the time to be one of these rare documents. Millions of copies were sold, read and discussed. As Harrison documents, the lessons continue to be taught to this day if not widely understood or embraced.

Times are very different today. Will Harrison's trilogy find its way onto the list of best-selling nonfiction books? Will the media call upon him to be interviewed on radio and television? The bottom line is that the public reaction to this trilogy must be both quantitatively and qualitatively different from any book bringing forward these insights since Henry George emerged to lead a too short-lived global campaign to end cheating. I am grateful to Fred Harrison for trying. 🗨️



HGF BRIEFING NOTES

FRIDAY MEETINGS AT MANDEVILLE PLACE

At the Henry George Foundation we steadily and reliably move forward - even as the global pandemic continues to take its toll, and we are again reminded that humans are permanently connected to the sometimes cruel forces of nature.

The Spring Term 2021 Study Programme continues on Fridays; though not at Mandeville Place but instead as online events. The Zoom video conference platform has been picked as the online service of choice for the time being.

The regular separation into both an Afternoon Study Group as well as an Evening Study Group also continues as was the case before the programme went online.

The Afternoon Study Group for the Spring Term looks as follows:

Friday Afternoon 2:30pm to 4:00pm

Reading: *Progress and Poverty*.

Study group led by Tommas Graves.

Access through this link and passcode.

Join Zoom Meeting via link:

<https://us02web.zoom.us/j/83880666680>

Meeting ID: 838 8066 6680

Passcode: 544247

The corresponding Evening Study Group looks as follows:

Friday Evenings 6:45pm to 8:15pm

Reading: *The Science of Political Economy*.

Study group led by David Triggs.

Access through this link and passcode.

Join Zoom Meeting via link:

<https://us02web.zoom.us/j/87944408537>

Meeting ID: 879 4440 8537

Passcode: 603155 🗨️