

# Plugging the cracks in culture

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**Philippe Gigantès**

**Power & Greed**

Constable, £12.99

**Michael Hudson & Marc van de Mieroop (eds.)**

**Debt & Economic Renewal  
in the Ancient Near East**

Bethesda: CDL, \$35

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**Fred Harrison**

THE AUTHOR of *Power & Greed* is a cultured gentleman whose book is being promoted by appealing to vulgar tastes.

Philippe Gigantès was born in Greece. He fled the country to join his father's commando unit during the Second World War. His subsequent career included service in the Senate of Canada, Greek Minister of Culture in Washington DC, journalist and professor of history. His survey of history plays to the gallery by suggesting that the major turning points in the development of Western civilisation have more to do with personality than process. In this, he is in the tradition of popular TV versions of the past, which rely on the cult of the individual rather than the forensic investigation of social structures that allow perverse people to crawl through the cracks to inflict terrible damage on others before they are consigned to history.

According to Gigantès, the individuals who wreak havoc are behaving naturally. He writes:

Humans who are best at breaking or circumventing society's rules are the Grand Acquisitors. They can be compared to the dominant male in a pride of lions. The rest of the pride does all the work to get a kill; the dominant

male gets the best share of the meal, all the sex, and he does serious roaring. The dominant lion has all the power.

That quote appears in the publisher's publicity literature beneath photographs of Mugabe, Bin Laden, Saddam Hussein, Milosovic and Hitler. I don't know anything about the sexual appetites of any of these figures other than Hitler, whom we are told fell far short in his appetite for sex. But to hold these characters up as personalities capable of taking control of millions of people is to invest them with super-human power. We know that they are mortals who were not necessarily greedy in themselves. To present the major turning points in our past in terms of the pathology of such characters is to perform no service to the losers in our civilisation who need the benefit of rational thought and the invocation of justice.

AND YET, *Power & Greed* is worth reading. It does deliver information in a succinct form which happens to identify the structural flaws in Western civilisation. Unwittingly, Gigantès's review particularly of the great philosophers and spiritual leaders picks out nuggets of information which, when linked

together, identify a pattern that alerts us to the nature of the cultural cracks through which pathological individuals may crawl.

On Moses: "the land which was bought by the rich should periodically be redistributed to those who presumably had sold it to repay money they owed to the rich".

On Solon: "the other nobles of Athens, who owned all the good land, did enslave any man who did not repay the money they had lent him ... [Solon] abolished all debts".

On Plato: "even in an ideal state, he says, if the rulers acquire their own houses and land and money, they will oppress and exploit their fellow citizens".

On Isaiah: "the rich have taken all the vineyards, taken all the land for the houses ... the poor had their faces ground underfoot by the rich. The rich denied justice to the needy, preyed on widows and robbed the fatherless".

On Jesus: "he came to 'proclaim liberty to the captives'".

It's clear that we have here a structural process at work that has the effect of subordinating the dispossessed, rendering them vulnerable to characters who are perverse in outlook such as Hitler and Hussein. Surely there is more to be learnt by investigating those processes than the personalities of Grand Acquisitors?

Gigantès lumps together George Stephenson, inventor of the steam engine, with Adolf Hitler. He claims that these Grand Acquisitors "have given us the Industrial Revolution, railroads and mass-produced automobiles. They can be compared to the dominant male in a pride of lions..."

Gigantès fails to pick out the recurring theme from ancient history and relate the implications to his attempt at a review of the 21st century. And yet, each of his examples repeats the land problem: in Ireland (p.206), the Balkans (p.209), Latin America (p.211), Vietnam (p.212), Africa (p.215).

The author devotes most space to the current problem of the failure of Muslims to co-habit with Jewish people in the near East. Why the tension between these two communities? "Huge numbers of the world's poor are Muslims. They seem to think that the rich West does not care about them –

that the West took land from poor Muslims and gave it to the Jews" (p.222).

The problem, evidently, is with the way we structure our land tenure systems and the corresponding arrangements for public revenue (the two are inextricably entwined). The Grand Acquisitors are actually weak and shallow people who would not stand a chance of distinguishing themselves among people who led contented lives and were of average intelligence. These venal characters are able to push themselves to the front only when culture has been decomposed to the point where large numbers are not content.

WE NEED to re-think Western civilisation not by lionising perverse personalities but by going back to the beginning. To make sense of the unfolding processes, we need to dig into the sands of the near East and do our best to understand how the early farming communities invented the arts and crafts which we have yet to surpass.

There can be no better starting point than the volume edited by Hudson and van de Mieroop. This book ought to be read by every budding economist before launching into what passes for economics as a social science. It ought to be compulsory reading for psychologists and biologists who presume to popularise "human nature".

THE EARLIEST known civilisations, beginning with Sumeria 5,000 years ago, devised safety valves to ensure that disturbances to the social system would be corrected. The temples and palaces used "clean slates" to cancel debts and the loss of land which threatened to undermine the integrity of the community. The periodic debt cancellations were evidence of a social structure which had failed to elucidate automatic stabilisers of the kind that would obviate the need for socially disastrous levels of personal indebtedness. Even so, wisdom prevailed to ensure that ruptures would not destroy society.

The clean slates edicts were sanctioned by the Babylonian patron deities to ensure liberty from bondage and from being displaced from the subsistence farmland on

which most people depended. The edicts were carried over into the Mosaic law, where they are enshrined in Leviticus as the Year of the Jubilee. The spiritually sanctioned safety valves testify to the understanding that a sustainable society must find solutions to pathological situations that threatened the community from within.

Some modern critics have argued that the regularity of the need for clean slates testifies to the inability of the rulers to prevent the conditions that give rise to debt and the loss of land. This is a harsh verdict, for in most instances these personal tragedies arose as a result of droughts and other "acts of gods" which the priests and princes could not prevent. The clean slates revealed an institutional process by which the leaders came to the rescue of people in need of help. Their redemptive actions ensured the restoration of balance in the productive capacity of the economy and the integration of the community.

Except for the clean slate by Solon (630-560 BC) in classical Greece, Western civilisation has suffered from the loss of the capacity to enforce clean slate edicts. For 2,000 years, as the philosophy of the privatisation of land and its surplus product has been encultured into our collective consciousness, the condition of working people has been systematically eroded as they were alienated from what was originally held to be their birthright. For more than 2,000 years, ever since Plato (428-347 BC), Western civilisation has resorted to Utopian forms of escapism. Reaching through the Middle Ages to Thomas Moore, and into the 20th century and Huxley's *Brave New World*, the philosophers have failed to develop pragmatic solutions to the economic deprivation which they all trace back to the loss of land.

The clean slate edicts of the ancients would not work today. We now need a mechanism that would work with the grain of nature – which would automatically take into account the acts of god – and provide a stabilising mechanism that would prevent the onset of indebtedness and economic vulnerability. Hudson and Mierop's volume does not present us with a convenient

package that enables us to seal the cultural cracks but Dr. Hudson's contribution provides a critique of modern economics with the benefit of his insights derived from classical antiquity. His review ought to be required reading for first year students of economics, and his insights ought to be emblazoned on the minds of psychologists and biologists who presume to offer popular treatments of "human nature".

One of the elements in the Hudson critique which does receive much attention today is debt. We see mass demonstrations in the streets of the world's capitals in favour of cancelling debts of poor nations, but a reading of *Debt and Economic Renewal* leaves us in no doubt that indebtedness is inextricably linked with land tenure and public finance. Today's debt cancellers fail to offer a comprehensive prescription for dealing with modern poverty. If the historical record is a good guide, the IMF and World Bank ought to be required to cancel debts on condition that the indebted countries institute a land and tax reform so that – unlike the events in antiquity – there would be no need for recurring clean slate edicts.

Hudson writes

One of the most important changes in Babylonian times was appropriation of the debtor's land, which constituted his basic means of self-support and hence formed the basis for his economic liberty.

The indebtedness that was socially significant stemmed from actions by the temples and palaces (rather than in the realm of commerce). Therefore, the priests and princes found it easy to cancel the debts. Today the biggest debts are in the commercial sector, but that is because society transferred supreme authority over land away from the temple and palace to the aristocratic country homes in the Middle Ages and now to the finance houses of Wall Street and the City of London. Even so, in the age of democracy we can claim the right to reform the social process that cyclically drives society into the ruptures which are the stark testimonies to an unsustainable system.