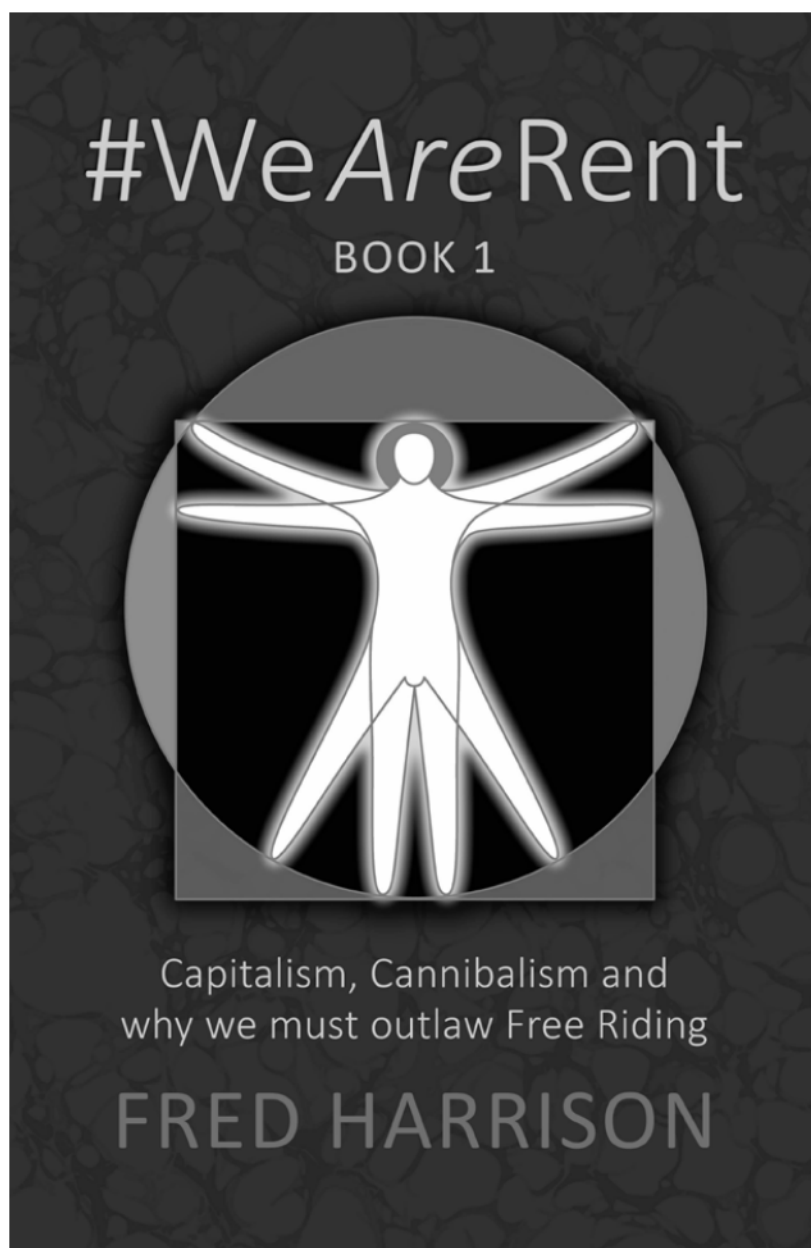


The Irresponsible Society by Fred Harrison, author



We occupy a society that is systemically irresponsible. By identifying the source of that organised irresponsibility, we can apply remedial measures to convert the doctrine of human rights into one that links rights with responsibilities.

Before the onset of urban civilisation, people lived in small groups. They were able to personally intervene to censure what is now called “free riding”. Individuals who wanted to sit back and let others go foraging for food – and then share in the spoils – were deterred by various devices such as shaming. This established a balanced relationship between individual freedom and social wellbeing.

In complex civilisations, personal interventions had to be replaced with rules enforced by authority figures (the priests and princes in the civilisations of antiquity). The new authority structure was necessary to administer spatially distributed populations. One of its responsibilities was to collect the net income which people produced, which we now call economic rent. Rent was applied to serve the common good. But, sooner or later, it was the possession of those resources that tempted people in power to abuse their responsibilities.

When I say that ours is an irresponsible society, I am not singling out individuals like those who might try to cheat on the football field. I am referring to the way in which irresponsibility has been embedded within the social system by people who appropriate their society’s net income.

Today, most of us have been co-opted into irresponsible behaviour through our society’s laws and institutions. Thus, when we buy a home, we acquire an asset which becomes the tool for soaking up part of the net income that is created by everyone in the community. We celebrate our capital gains without thinking about how it came to us. But if we investigate the evolution of modern societies, the root of the problem is exposed. Working backwards, we see that the distribution of income was shaped by the way government applied its tax policies (the public’s pricing system); which, in turn, was shaped by the nobility of Europe who appropriated the commons as their private property and charged the peasants rent for working on the land.

Landlords originated irresponsibility as a way of life. In displacing people from the commons and pocketing the rents, they were responsible for the ensuing anguish in its many forms. They degraded humanity, and they are responsible for transmitting that culture of rights without responsibilities through the generations. The

outcomes are logged in the finest detail, in the form of poverty, inequality, homelessness, unaffordable housing, the abuse of the natural environment, and much more – without attributing responsibility.

Governments try to address these problems with palliatives that are funded out of the taxes that add further burdens on low-income families. This deepens the suffering while accommodating the cause, a vicious circle that exposes an irresponsible form of politics. People’s lives are shredded by what we call democracy, whose authority rests on our votes.

Systemic irresponsibility was legitimised as it was gradually embedded into European culture to protect and enrich the people who originally grabbed other people’s land. If we are to erase this outrage that blights the lives of everyone in the 21st century, we have to amend the doctrine of human rights. The UN and European conventions, for example, have to be repurposed to link rights with their corresponding responsibilities. The outcome would be a transformation of behaviour to accord with the evolutionary blueprint which guided humans out of nature. By this means, we would restore health to our communities, and empower people to work for, and enjoy, full lives.

<https://wearerent.com/>

Listen to Fred Harrison on the *Renegade Economists* podcast: <https://www.prosper.org.au/4ul>

A key quote from the must read book:

“The mutation of rent seeking into a culture that could dominate the world would not have been possible if the collective consciousness that guides people through life was not first ruptured. By compromising the capacity to realistically appraise the nature of their environments, people were rendered vulnerable.”