



laetus in praesens

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Liberating Provocations **use of negative and paradoxical strategies**

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Introduction

Considerable energy is invested in exhorting constructive, positive behaviour in response to social and other problems. This approach has been used for many past decades. It is the basis for many institutional strategies, whether at the level of the United Nations, governments, or local communities. It is fair to say that these strategies have been relatively modest in their success -- in comparison with the challenges. This is as true with respect to health, violence, environment as it is with respect to discrimination and other issues. Critics point to characteristically tired language and outworn formulae.

Without denying the merit of these positive strategies, there is at least a case for reflecting on another strategic approach -- especially in the light of the current disruption of the international framework of law and order and the increasing recognition that the forces undermining positive achievement are more powerful and widespread than was previously assumed. There are increasing appeals for more imaginative approaches and what follows is a modest contribution to this end.

Promoting "negative" strategies?

Let us suppose that instead of appealing for "positive" solutions in every domain, energy was devoted to encouraging people to engage deliberately and consciously in counter-productive, "negative" responses. Instead of exhorting people to conserve electricity or water, why not encourage them to waste it deliberately? Instead of investing in campaigns to inform people of the dangerous consequences of recreational drugs, why not deliberately encourage them to partake? And so on for: environmental damage, corporate fraud, pornography, domestic violence, discrimination, etc?

At first sight, this approach appears to be totally scandalous and irresponsible. It is. That is its purpose -- to "appear" to be irresponsible and scandalous.

Why then engage in such an initiative?

The argument here is that increasingly many people are weary of messages telling them what to do and how to behave. Those prepared to listen to such messages have already been converted to the more appropriate behaviour. Those who are resistant to such messages are increasingly resistant to them -- in a society that alienates its citizens and effectively encourages them to adopt dysfunctional modes of behavior to compensate for the inadequacies of modern life as they understand it. If the problems are not being reduced by current strategies, a "provocative" mode may address those who have had enough of being told how to behave.

In a world of contradictions, people may best be served by enabling them to recognize the extent to which their own identity is itself inherently an expression of contradictions.

How would this provocative mode work?

This is a two-pronged strategy. By advocating a "negative" approach, those resistant to being told how to behave would reactively consider a "positive" approach. Those scandalised by the "negative" approach, would invest their energy in "positive" campaigns -- where previously they would not have been engaged.

We are all familiar, from earliest childhood, with the response to exhortation from those occupying the moral high ground. We either ignore them or consider interesting ways of doing the opposite. If we are told not to do something, then we consider doing it. If we are encouraged to do something, we consider doing the opposite. The point is made by Zoe Williams (*Cannabis Comedown*, *The Guardian*, 29 March 2005):

Thus, if you tell them things are dangerous, they will do them, and if you shrug and say "actually, it doesn't seem to do too much harm", they will do something else. Whole swaths of aberrant behaviour could be addressed with this in mind. Obesity, smoking, drinking, fighting, snowboarding and joyriding would all become terribly passé if the government were to become their advocates, particularly if prominent members of the government were to lead by example and take up dangerous activities in a high-profile way.

This provocative approach is designed to communicate more effectively with those already acting inappropriately or those who are passive in the face of inappropriate action.

Examples?

It has taken long decades for the concerns relating to smoking to be taken seriously by legislative bodies. How many people have died as a consequence of such delays? Could it have been more effective to encourage people to smoke heavily?

The trick would have been to make it clear to people how much endangering their health, and risking early death, was welcomed by society. Informing a young person that his, or her, early death from lung cancer would be a generous contribution to the health of the planet or overburdened pension funds could be a marvelous stimulus for some to stop smoking -- to avoid providing society with that satisfaction. In this light perhaps [multinational tobacco companies](#), like Philip Morris and BAT, may be considered to have contributed more to constraining population growth than the family planning programmes of the United Nations and other bodies. Governments also may have failed to recognize the extent to which they have indirectly contributed to "stabilising population" through facilitating substance abuse as a source of fiscal revenue.

Similarly, encouraging automobile drivers to engage in more excessive drinking would stimulate much more vigorously the campaigning capacity of those exposed to the risks of dangerous driving.

Precedents?

There are at least two precedents -- which are however related.

A well-explored precedent, discussed below, is known as "paradoxical therapy" or "provocative therapy" and has been developed by family therapists. As advocated by Alfred Adler, essentially this involves "prescribing the symptom" as a basis for evoking a remedial reaction. This has also been used by hypnotherapists such as Milton Erickson. A person who is anorexic may be encouraged by the therapist to lose even more weight -- or the obese may be encouraged gain even more. It is widely reported that employees in chocolate factories are allowed to eat as much as they want, and lose interest. A related approach introduced by Viktor Frankl is termed "paradoxical intention". This calls upon the person to do the very thing they fear to do. If one is afraid to be in public, it is advised to attend a football game or take up acting. By not providing counterpressure the defenses are disarmed.

But there is a better known variant termed "tough love". It derives its name from a contradictory approach to delinquent children in which, as the term suggests, parents are encouraged to restrain obvious manifestations of their love for their child and engage in actions which appear to deny that love -- for the greater good of the child. This approach has long been used for problem children in the USA.

As a perversion in its own right, the useful term "tough love" is now widely employed as a politically correct disguise for simply acting tough -- whether or not there is any underlying love. In fact it then becomes a good disguise for the lack of such love or any concern with the well-being of the person to whom it is directed. The theme of "tough love for Africa" was used to label the policies of George Bush in 2003 [\[more\]](#), seemingly echoing themes of President Abdoulaye Wade of Senegal in 2002 [\[more\]](#), Colin Powell [\[more\]](#) and others. Strobe Talbott, President of the Brookings Institution, has written under that theme in relation to Russia in 2005 [\[more\]](#). Curiously the theme is favoured as a journalistic title but tends to reflect little in the way of alternative strategy -- other than being "tough" as a non-military variant of "thinking the unthinkable".

Theory?

Both precedents are options in strategic family therapy as a form of "reverse psychology". Under certain circumstances the most effective remedial intervention into an unbalanced or overbalanced situation may be to push the subject further in the dysfunctional direction. The therapist assists the person to engage in that inappropriate way more effectively. The subject's own strengths are then mobilised to resist this pressure, resulting in a move in the desired direction.

The focus is therefore on "prescribing the symptom" and often on designing a therapeutic double bind, a more complex version of prescribing the symptom that also includes prescribing the entire family system. These techniques work because they take advantage of so-called "resistance". They also are sensitive to the complex ambivalence within persons and families. Good strategic interventions then work because they address all sides of the "internal" issue. [\[more\]](#)

More generally this approach is basic to the work of Gestalt psychotherapist Frederick Perls. Arnold Beisser describes this as *The Paradoxical Theory of Change* (1970). He defines Perls theory in the following terms. Change occurs when one becomes what one is, not when one tries to become what one is not. Change does not take place through a coercion to change but by taking the time and effort

to be what one "is" -- to be fully invested in one's current positions. By rejecting the role of external change agent, meaningful and orderly change is made possible. Beisser argues that this approach is applicable to community organisation, community development and other change processes consistent with the democratic political framework. [more]

Beisser makes it clear that the Gestalt therapist rejects the role of "changer" which is so typical of modern institutional social change programmes. Rather, change can occur when the person abandons, at least for the moment, what he (or she) would like to become and attempts to be what he (or she) is.

A related approach of Frank Farrelly is called "[provocative therapy](#)". This involves humorously playing the devil's advocate with the client, siding with the negative half of their ambivalence towards themselves (and towards change), seeking to show how they bind themselves in the situation, and doing all this in a way that promotes the client's self-knowledge and capacity for change. The humorous provocations or contradictory challenges are used to provoke the person against their own self-defeating behaviour.

In questioning why this works, it also might be argued that in cybernetic terms a positive campaign has a proportion of positive effects, but engenders a negative backlash that may be counter-productive or inhibit the strategy after a time. Whereas a negative campaign has a proportion of negative effects but engenders a positive backlash, which may be of greater significance. This is based on the assumption that there are hidden feedback loops that maintain the dysfunctional state "X" -- restoring "X" after any remedial intervention. This is true in organisations and individuals -- and why not for countries or the world? Negative feedback, in the cybernetic sense, maintains the situation. Positive feedback, in the sense of "prescribing the symptom" and accelerating the tendency, can destroy the feedback loop, thus enabling the individual or organisation to escape a vicious circle or spiral. The approach also gives the person or the group a sense of control over the problem.

Basically the approach advocated here is a response to the paradox of denial: How can one accept oneself as one is, if the truth is too painful? Yet how does one effectively change without accepting oneself as one is, and working from that? Is humanity itself in a dangerous state of denial with respect to energy resources, endangered species, overpopulation, global warming, substance abuse, etc?

Playing games?

It might be thought that "liberating provocations" were merely a cynical form of game. But, from a game-playing perspective, the strategies envisaged here may also be understood as "counterintuitive strategies". These feature in higher levels of game-playing expertise, martial arts and those inspired by their principles (cf *Aikido Activism: changing the world one corporation at a time*, 2004) [more]. Corporate strategy is often counterintuitive -- "counterintuitive marketing" is a valued approach. As noted by Steve Brotman, few entrepreneurs can intuitively grasp and then communicate a counterintuitive strategy, especially if the strategy is based on rapidly flipping back and forth between different directions [more].

Such approaches call to mind the skills of confidence tricksters and the vigilance required to avoid their trap. In response to recent research (Graeme S. Halford, et al. *How Many Variables Can Humans Process?*, 2005), one blogger remarks:

Lincoln is quoted as saying that if the American people understood banking practices, there would be a revolution straightaway. The only conceptual reason I can imagine why this hasn't happened yet, is because there are more than 4 variables involved in the methods of attention-span-pickpocketing. Institutions can manipulate an arbitrary number of such variables for as long as they like, while individuals have to get by on a hunch [more].

As argued elsewhere (*Participative Democracy vs. Participative Drama -- lessons on social transformation for international organizations from Gorbachev*, 1991):

Would it be possible to learn from the sense of configuration and timing of a team of confidence tricksters in order to design transformative moments through which out-moded forms and factional thinking are by-passed -- as some Sufi teachings imply.

Neural networks are now being used to detect such unusual strategies, as discussed by David E. Moriarty and Risto Miikkulainen (*Discovering Complex Othello Strategies through Evolutionary Neural Networks*, 2000) who argue that their approach could also be used to find new strategies and heuristics in other domains including planning. Hendrik Moraal (*Counterintuitive behaviour in games based on spin models*, 2000) has shown that mixing of two losing strategies may lead to a winning one, but also that the mixing of two winning ones may lead to a loss. Mixing of a losing and a winning strategy may give unexpected results.

Even more relevant insights are provided by engaging in "infinite games" as explored by James P. Carse (*Finite and Infinite Games: a vision of life as play and possibility*, 1986) [review | review | review | review | review]. He argues, for example:

- A finite game is played for the purpose of winning, an infinite game for the purpose of continuing the play.
- Finite players play within boundaries; infinite players play with boundaries.
- To be prepared against surprise is to be trained. To be prepared for surprise is to be educated.

Curiously an effort has been made to apply the approach to "winning" higher order games in business ("meta-winning") by Charles Hampden-Turner and Fons Trompenaars (*Mastering the Infinite Game*, 1997) in contrast with framing education itself as an infinite game (Michael Umphrey. *A Sense of Time Education as the Infinite Game*, 1999).

In the light of Carse's framework it is worth asking the question whether the "war against terrorism" is being played as a finite game (cf James Carse. *Religious War in the Light of the Infinite Game*, 2005) -- when the "terrorists" may understand it as an "infinite game" in accordance with Carse's insight that:

The death of an infinite player is dramatic. It does not mean that the game comes to an end with death; on the contrary, infinite players offer their death as a way of continuing the play. For that reason they do not play for their own life; they live for their own play.

The possibility is reinforced by arguments of Mary Brace (*In the Death of an Infinite Player: the horizon has been defeated*, 2005) with regard to the American presidency. The same might be said of other strategic games "against hunger", "against disease", "against drugs" - and possibly all conventional social change processes. The future may see present democratic processes as solely concerned with finite games -- and winning them for a particular faction. From such a perspective, given Carse's background as a professor of religion, it might be usefully asked of him whether the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse are playing a finite game or an infinite game?

Or should the terrorists, rather than those acting against them, be understood as finite players in terms of Carse's other insight:

Because finite players are trained to prevent the future from altering the past, they must hide their future moves... Finite players must appear to be something other than what they are. Everything about their appearance must be concealing. To appear is not to appear. All the moves of a finite player must be deceptive, feints, distractions, falsifications, misdirections, mystifications.

The challenge, as framed by Flemming Funch, is:

Creating a new civilization is an infinite game. We can not set the rules for how to do it based on a study of the past. It is something new that we are discovering as we go along. It is not a game to win and then it is done. There are no losers. It is not something we **have** to do, but something we choose to do. We will not be stopped by whatever rules and boundaries we find, but we will include them in the game and play with them. [more]

Inspired by Carse's perspective, Marianne Bojer (*Changing the Game*, 2004), co-founder of [Pioneers of Change](#), asks the provocative self-reflexive question: "In what ways does the very same game that is causing our problems also play itself out at the World Social Forum? At Pioneers of Change gatherings? In our office? "

Liberating provocations could perhaps be understood as the strategic wormholes twisting between the different realms of infinite game space.

But is it already done?

Of course traditionally a form of "tough love" has been practiced through "austerity measures" by authorities, whether parental, communal, tribal, or national -- for the "long-term benefit" of the person or the group. The World Bank and IMF's "Structural Adjustment Programs" for developing countries were supposedly a form of "tough love" -- although it took UNICEF to establish the need for "structural adjustment *with a human face*". Christian churches and communities have practiced a more extreme form of "tough love" -- in the form of painful punishment, even burning at the stake -- to ensure that the person's soul was saved for the hereafter. Widespread modern use of torture could perhaps be seen in this light?

Many would say that certain forms of advertising are already an encouragement towards copycat dysfunctional behaviour: cigarettes, automobiles with excessive gas consumption, violence in movies, obscenity in movies, recreational drugs, binge drinking, lewdness, for example. Celebrities are promoted through exhibiting behaviour that some find shocking, thus attracting attention, and causing others to imitate them.

It might be argued that those with anti-social intentions make the most subtle and effective use of "negative" strategies -- which paradoxically they would then frame as "positive". Corporations, when seeking to conceal their problematic strategies, use techniques such as: denying the existence of a problem, emphasizing benefits and minimizing risks, stressing the importance of other issues, calling for more research to ensure delay, rationalizing a problem by emphasizing the necessary risk in life, suppressing relevant information, blaming the victim or the whistleblower, commissioning research to prove the contrary and undermining new initiatives [more].

Activists and lobbyists use aspects of these techniques to exaggerate the importance of problems in order to evoke appropriate solutions. But usually this does not involve recommending problematic solutions -- except perhaps in humouristic demonstrations (as with Greenpeace).

Another technique is to make a mockery of problematic democratic electoral processes -- notably by electing animals to public office. For example in the city of Hartlepool in the UK, a cartoon [monkey mascot](#) of the local football team was elected to mayor in 2002 -- increasing his majority ten-fold in 2005 (*Poll swing suits monkey man*, 2005). In France the dog "[Saucisse](#)" was placed on the ballot in opposition to President Jacques Chirac and chief rival Socialist Prime Minister Lionel Jospin -- but lost. A dog has been elected mayor of a town in the USA, for the third time running (*Duke the Great Pyrenees becomes mayor of Minnesota town again*, *SOTT*, 25 Aug 2016).

A rhinoceros was elected as a member of São Paulo's city council in the 1950s. Several constituencies are known to have consciously elected dead people to public office, whether as mayor of a town or as a senator (Ed Pilkington, *The town that voted for a corpse*, *The Guardian*, 14 April 2009). The cynical might of course suggest that this far from original -- given the number of "zombies" elected to high office anyway. The reporter helpfully adds:

In both cases, the men substantially gained in popularity, with voters flooding to their cause after their deaths. To which one must quickly add the following disclaimer: "To any politicians reading this article. Do not try this at home. It just isn't worth it."

In the UK the [Monster Raving Loony Party](#) has put up candidates for elections since 1983. Led by [Cornelius the First](#), a rhinoceros in the Montreal zoo, the [Rhinoceros Party](#) was a registered political party in Canada from 1963 to the 1990s -- matched from the 1980s to 1999 by the [McGillicuddy Serious Party](#), a satirical political party in New Zealand.

Paradox may also be evident in certain forms of deceptive strategic encounter, whether of a political or a military nature -- purportedly in the interests of society as a whole. It may be a characteristic of the "psychological operations" of [information warfare](#), and the use of so-called "false flag" covert operations. As in certain games, the emphasis is then placed on deception -- and is definitely not undertaken in the interest of the deceived party. For example, during the World War II, a radio station was established to "neutralize" Japanese propaganda. All it did was rebroadcast an exaggerated version of Japanese news programmes -- but pretending to be a Japanese station. By "exaggerating the symptom", the fake station would therefore develop any news story beyond the limits of credibility, thus countering the credibility not only of what it was broadcasting but also of what was broadcast by the genuine Japanese stations. Such precedents might be a fruitful basis for understanding the American strategic approach to the "war against terrorism" -- as suggested in a study ([Promoting a Singular Global Threat -- Terrorism: Strategy of choice for world governance](#), 2002).

With respect to counter-intuitive strategy, writing anonymously a US State Department source ([Welfare Reform, Dependence Theory and U.S.-E.U Relations](#), 2005) argues provocatively:

It seemed counter-intuitive to many people in the early 90's that by cutting off income support you could make people richer. And I suppose it seems similarly counter-intuitive that by stepping away from zones of responsibility the U.S. could increase its national security and standing in the world.

In the UK counter-intuitive plans are announced in 2005 to remove all traditional signals and barriers used to separate the carriageway and pavement, deliberately leaving the question of who has priority open -- in the light European research showing that traffic lights and road signs deter road-users from taking responsibility for their actions [\[more\]](#).

Scene and heard: Ugandan dancehall (as reported by John McDonnell. <i>Guardian Music Blog</i> , 5 January 2009)
A dancehall collective called Fire Base Crew, have set up a breakaway republic, the Ghetto Republic of Uganja, in one of the slums in Uganda's capital, Kampala.
The republic has a full cabinet of appointed members: Bobi Wine (who is the leader of the crew) is the president, the vice president is an artist called Buchaman, they also have a prime minister, a defence minister, a minister for disaster preparedness, a minister of agriculture (whose crop of choice, unsurprisingly, is cannabis) and many more.
The whole concept may appear trivial, but these musicians have much more influence on local people than politicians could ever wish for.

Possibilities?

Assumptions are readily made with respect to the desirability of leaders as exemplars of "positive" change. It is assumed, for example, that highly ethical leadership encourages emulation of such qualities by the population as a whole, and by those reporting to the leadership. However there is a strong case for ensuring that leaders of extremely dubious ethical quality are elected to the highest institutional positions in society on the grounds that "positive" qualities are evoked in the population to counter-balance such "negative" influences. From a systemic perspective, it is possible that unconsciously a population may evoke "negative" leaders in situations where the health of society can only be effectively ensured by the "positive" impact they have on the population as a whole.

This would be a reassuring perspective at a time when the leadership in most modern national and international institutions, even at the highest level, is characterised by extremely suspect ethical standards [\[more\]](#). It would certainly be a creative way of explaining the election of a former Nazi to the position of Secretary-General of the United Nations from 1972 to 1981 -- and subsequently to the presidency of Austria from 1986 to 1992. It would also be helpful to understanding the value of raising a person who advocates perverse legal policies on torture to head the US justice system in 2004 and appointment of the key architect of the Iraq war as president of what is supposed to be the world's largest development agency in 2005 [\[more\]](#).

In this light, given the admiration of George Bush for the Roman Empire, is there any possibility that he may follow the initiative of Emperor Gaius Caligula (37-41 A.D) in nominating his horse, Incitatus, as consul -- perhaps as ambassador to the United Nations, or even as Secretary-General? The Texan town of Lajitas, has repeatedly elected as mayor [Clay Henry III](#) -- a goat, thus adding to the pioneering efforts of Saucisse another precedent for animal leadership in human affairs.

With the subtle insights of the movie [Being There](#) (Peter Sellers, 1979) concerning the ambiguity of intelligence in those elected to public office, the [World Social Forum](#) could campaign for a gorilla or an owl as a more suitable candidate for high office in these times. Perhaps more should be understood from the statement of Pope [Benedict XII](#) on his unanimous election: "You have elected a jackass!" On the other hand, members of [Damanhur](#), an intentional community, now adopt the names of endangered species -- including gorillas -- to engage in their community conceived as an ecosystem [\[more\]](#). This echoes the practice of tribes in which individuals associate themselves with particular totemic animals.

Perhaps George Bush's favourite cat, Cowboy, now dead, could have made history in this regard, surpassing Bill Clinton's "First Cat" Socks, who had its own well-used White House email address [\[more | more\]](#). In the light of Caligula's relation to Incitatus, in seeking

office perhaps cowboy presidential candidates should have a horse as a vice-presidential running mate -- Zorro and Toronado, Roy Rogers and Trigger, Don Quixote and Rocinante -- given the proven public appeal of such a team. For the voting population of the future from whom "new thinking" will be required, the "Harry Potter" stories are a reminder of alternative sources of wisdom through characterisation of such "familiar" -- and owls such as [Hedwig](#). In this regard it is curious that although Incitatus was also nominated for the priesthood, the closest that animals in the west get to being treated as sacred is when they become endangered national symbols (as with the American [Bald Eagle](#)). Whereas Asian cultures, for example, not only treat some animals as sacred (eg the Hindu cow), but even accept blessings from them (eg from elephants as an incarnation of [Ganesh](#))

A form of "perverse strategy", articulated as Freudian twist by Josep-Anton Fernández (*Another Country: Sexuality and National Identity in Catalan Gay Fiction*, 2000) describes Terenci Moix's subjection of himself to the discipline of canon constitution in an attempt to subvert the Catalan institution from within. For those who question the insight of the professionally trained, there is a case for including in such training a period of experience as the object of such services. Physicians scheduled for responsibility for mental institutions could profitably be signed in (incognito) as "involuntary" patients. Members of the legal profession, and those responsible for penal institutions, could similarly benefit from temporary incarceration.

Through [Art in Defence of Humanism](#), the Danish sculptor [Jens Galschiot](#) specializes in donating large-scale, provocative "Pillar of Shame" statues to countries complicit in human rights abuses to provoke recognition of that complicity; also "Survival of the Fattest" statutes to highlight the imbalanced distribution of the world's resources. Several have been accepted and placed prominently in public places. War museums and memorials of atrocities also serve the purpose of "painful reminders", though their messages may be multiple and the paradoxical benefits diluted.

The [Cannibal Flesh Donor Program](#) has none of these ambiguities. When you become a flesh donor, you agree to donate your body, in the event of your death, for human consumption. This has direct benefits for sustainable agriculture and food availability for the 6.4 billion humans on this planet. "The real beauty of the Cannibal Flesh Donor Program is that it doesn't require the citizens of the industrialized first world nations to relinquish flesh from their diets". This follows the notorious suggestion of Jonathan Swift (*A Modest Proposal -- for preventing the children of poor people in Ireland from being a burden to their parents or country, and for making them beneficial to the public*, 1729).

Rather than tolerate the present levels of mass slaughter and genocide, why not encourage, through international competitions, the design of even more efficient forms of "gas chamber" to facilitate the next Holocaust? But, of course, this is already done (as with the [thermobaric weapons](#) currently used in Iraq), thanks to the military-industrial complex and its complicit community of scientists and technologists -- who mistakenly keep their achievements secret for fear of disapproval. Should they not be duly honoured for their contribution to human civilisation? A new category of Nobel Prize -- for "population reduction" to ensure the spread of democracy and survival of humanity -- consistent with the activities from which the Nobel prize funds originally derived?

Seriously?

Perhaps the most interesting way in which perverse strategies are implemented is through humour. Some family therapy strategies notably stress humour. Political humour and satire have notably been used to attempt to change society and its institutions [[more](#)]. Commenting on the humourless British elections of 2005, Ukrainian novelist Andrey Kurkov (*Is it time for a British revolution?* *Guardian*, 26 April 2005) argues:

The Germans never laughed at Hitler and neither did the Soviet people laugh at Stalin... More recently all Ukraine laughed at outgoing president Leonid Kuchma. It was precisely humour that won the day in the Ukrainian presidential elections last year. Political satire, hard-hitting, witty leaflets and computer animations which parodied Ukrainian political life played a role in the eventual outcome that has yet to be properly evaluated.

Is it possible that the regime change for the most disliked regimes could simply be achieved by such laughter -- "laughter revolutions"?

A former Deputy Director-General of UNESCO co-founded the Association for the Promotion of Humour in International Affairs (APHIA), which has presented an annual "Noble Prize". The Aachen's Carnival Celebration Club has awarded, since 1950, a [Medal for Combating Deadly Seriousness](#) (*Orden wider den tierischen Ernst*) officially designated as 'humour in office'. In practice this means the relaxed, jovial absence of ponderous gravity, a quality that is capable of even bringing out the human traits in the most inveterate bureaucrat. Most of the more than 40 award bearers are politicians, diplomats and lawyers.

A variety of provocative prizes and awards are given to challenge complacency. There are many "wooden spoon" awards for failure in competitions -- a "booby prize" dating back to failure in mathematics examinations [[more](#)], adapted by six national rugby unions into a [Wooden Spoon Society](#) to provide charitable support to children and young people who are physically, mentally or socially disadvantaged [[more](#)]. The annual [Ig Nobel Prize](#) is for scientific research "achievements that cannot or should not be reproduced". The [Stella Award](#), named after a woman who received \$2.9 million in damages for burning herself with a cup of McDonald's coffee, acknowledges any wild, outrageous, or ridiculous lawsuits. "Brickbat Awards" are conferred by various industries for incompetence -- for example, by the [Committee for the Prevention of Sequential Mediocrity](#) in comic design. The [Prix Démeritas](#) is awarded for sexist journalism. The [Darwin Awards](#) salute the improvement of the human genome by honouring those who accidentally kill themselves in really stupid ways -- of necessity, this honour is generally bestowed posthumously. Various other awards for stupidity have been proposed, including a [Stupidity Nobel Prize](#) to honour stupid politicians. The [Kevorkian Prize for Racial Suicide](#) is awarded to those working against the interests of ethnic and racial identity. The [NoBul Prize](#) has been proposed for exceptional contributions to truth in the deadly non-stop guerilla "War of Resistance" against lies and ignorance. On the occasion of the World Economic Forum in Davos, a [Public Eye on Davos Award](#) is now conferred annually by a group of NGOs on companies who have excelled in socially and environmentally irresponsible

behaviour [more]. In the USA, the Family Research Council awarded annually from 1997 a range of "Court Jester" awards for various forms of questionable judging in courts of justice [more].

A form of perverse humour may also be the basis of religious teaching stories -- as with the tragi-comic Sufi tales of the [Mullah Nasruddin](#). Paradox may be used in other spiritual teaching devices such as the Zen koan. This is a puzzling, often paradoxical statement or contrarian story, used in Zen Buddhism as an aid to meditation and a means of gaining spiritual awakening. The *vama-marga* ('left-path') tantric practice of overcoming conditioning by satiating the subject with the practice of what conditions him/her. "Crazy wisdom" and "spiritual foolishness" are promoted by Taoists as paradoxical "ways of knowing". There have been many times in the history of divine and human affairs when folly has been the cause of deliverance and salvation. A sudden paradoxical turn is frequently the Holy Spirit's preferred way of liberating God's people from spiritual and political impasses alike [more].

Humour may also be built into a form of "perverse advertising" as in the classic bush tourism advertisement in Australia: "We take you to such isolated places that if you break a leg we have to shoot you. Then we cover you with rocks and turn you into a sacred site."! The UK movie *Babe* (1995), starring a sympathetic piglet, was followed by a billboard from the meat industry: "You have seen the movie, now eat the star". Much better known -- and criticised -- are the startling, sometimes funny, advertising campaigns for clothes used internationally by [Benetton](#) for 17 years, focusing controversially on war, racism, AIDs and child labour [more | more]. The question is whether such techniques could in any way be used globally for social rather than commercial purposes? For example, to raise money for leukemia research, the middle-aged women of the Rylstone Women's Institute (UK) posed naked for an alternative calendar in 1999 which sold worldwide beyond all expectations -- a movie (*Calendar Girls*, 2003) was subsequently made of their initiative. Imitations have followed.

The EU as Entropa	
David Černý , the Czech artist was commissioned to produce an eight-tonne sculptural installation , representative of the EU, and showpiece of the Czech presidency, finally unveiled in the atrium of the European Council in Brussels in January 2009.	
Marina Hyde . <i>Thus spoke Entropa: the EU defined in an Airfix model</i> . <i>The Guardian</i> , 17 January 2009	
Entropa is state of the art insult-spewing technology... contriving to be hilarious at the same time as offending virtually everyone.... The point of all this is, if Entropa alludes to entropy, namely a measure of the disorder of any system, then Černý's piece of public art is an unalloyed triumph. Not only has it provoked mass debate, and added to the gaiety of nations, but it has become a sort of self-fulfilling prophecy.	
Sarah Lyall . <i>Art Hoax Unites Europe in Displeasure</i> . <i>The New York Times</i> , 14 January 2009	
Czech Presidency of the Council of the EU. <i>Entropa: Stereotypes are Barriers to be Demolished</i> . Press Release, 12 January 2009	

Surrealistically?

Critics have noted the extraordinary discrepancy between the benefits that accrue to those who develop "development strategies" in contrast with the actual benefits to those for whom they are supposedly conceived. It has become increasingly surreal that social change projects often fail disastrously -- but those in the institutions that design them never fail to benefit to a totally disproportionate degree. Perhaps surrealism should be deliberately designed into social change strategies?

For example, given the problematic track record of "development strategies" and "developers", perhaps there is a case for exploring the possibility of "velopment strategies" and "velopers" (cf *Veloping: the art of sustaining significance*, 1997). On the other hand, an early initiative by French visionary [Alfred Jarry](#) (1873-1907) resulted in the development of 'pataphysics, namely the "the science of imaginary solutions, which symbolically attributes the properties of objects, described by their virtuality, to their lineaments" -- or "the science of exceptions". This has a similar inspiration to the still-active *Journal of Irreproducible Results*, founded in 1955 by virologist Alexander Kohn and physicist Harry J. Lipkin.

An unusual emerging trend is [flash mobbing](#) (*Dadaist lunacy or the future of protest? An introduction to the world of flash-mobbing*, 2003). This is a process whereby a large group of people (usually completely unknown to each other) gather in a predetermined location and perform some brief action (as orchestrated anonymously through the internet), then quickly disperse. Although exponents emphasize the deliberately apolitical nature of the trend, some commentators see it as a potential new form of political or even anti-authoritarian statement. A related phenomenon is the [smart mob](#) as introduced by [Howard Rheingold](#) (*Smart Mobs: The Next Social Revolution*). This is a recently established form of social coordination and collective intelligence made possible by using modern technology, such as the internet and wireless devices. Contrary to the usual connotations of a mob, a smart mob behaves intelligently or efficiently because of its exponentially-increasing network links. As protesting groups, it is such mobs that have been of considerable concern to security services on the occasion of international events.

An original form of "action humour" has been developed by an international pie-throwing network (the "International Patisserie Brigade") in opposition to pomposity in all its forms. Centred on social-philosopher / guerilla-artist [Noël Godin](#) ("Georges le Gloupiér", "entarteur", "encaker"), those who have been successfully "encaked" by the network include Bernard-Henri Levy and [Bill Gates](#) and other multinational CEOs. Godin is one of the activists honoured in the [Raptorial Hall of Fame](#) [more]. He notes: "There are a thousand forms of subversion; all of them are interesting, but few, in my opinion, equal the convenience and immediacy of the cream pie". He aims to "assassinate through ridicule all world celebrities who take themselves spectacularly seriously". A branch movement, the [Biotic Baking Brigade](#) (also known as People Insurgent Everywhere, or P.I.E) targeted the head of the World Trade Organisation in 1998 [more].

Inspired by such examples, the [World Carfree Network](#) suggests that the best strategies "are those which are full of colour and laughter". Since with the post 9/11 legislative restrictions all such actions are presumably now framed by the security services as linked to al-Qaida, the humourless phantasm, that [Gollum-like](#) must be hoarding all the laughter in a Bora Bora cave.

[Cicciolina](#), the Italian hardcore pornstar who starred in her last porn film in 1989, was elected to the Italian parliament in 1987 as a leading candidate of the Radical Party. In 1991, in the early phase of the Gulf War, she offered the "experience of a lifetime" to Saddam Hussein -- in the form of her personal services -- if he withdrew his troops from Kuwait. Her offer was repeated in 2002. Surely a candidate for the [Right Livelihood Award](#)? In the spirit of "make love not war", could she have changed the course of history by surrendering her weapons of mass distraction to George Bush or Tony Blair instead? Cicciolina's role may be a modern trace of that of temple prostitutes in Greek and Roman times, echoed in the [pornocracy](#) period (904-963) of the papacy under the influence of "harlots". It raises the question of the functional importance of prostitutes to delegates on the occasion of UN conferences and sessions of the European Parliament. Given the classical role of Athens in defining democracy in practice, perhaps more attention should be paid to the complementary role that temple prostitutes played at that time -- in the light of current attempts to ensure participative democracy. Consideration could be given to integrating appropriate "consultative facilities" into conference complexes to avoid risk to health for "embedded politicians".

A world wide network is now inspired by "[extreme ironing](#)" which has received considerable media attention and its own entry in Wikipedia [\[more\]](#). It is an [extreme sport](#) which involves the combination of enjoyment of outdoor activities and the act of ironing -- such as while skiing, diving, tightrope walking, skydiving, mountain climbing or any other number of extreme settings. This is to be compared with "[extreme accounting](#)" -- pushing accountants to their limits, and beyond -- founded by a major in the "1st Airborne Insolvency Division".

Is it necessary to "disprove" the reality of extraterrestrials when so many people are fruitfully inspired by reported experiences of UFOs, "crop circles", "abductions" and other exo-phenomena -- and collaborate so enthusiastically through [SETI](#) and other efforts to communicate with non-human intelligences? The perspective of an "[Interplanetary Security Council](#)" regarding Earth has been used to recognize the logical consequences of the United Nations resolution of 2003 justifying intervention in Iraq.

Despite the vast amounts of secret "classified" documentation, and precautionary "shredding" of recent history, are all conspiracy theories documented on the web to be considered false? Is it possible that we live in a global "Potemkin society" of facades? [\[more\]](#) In which case, should people not be further encouraged in the development of their own strategic facades rather than become victims of cynicism? Is there not a case for recognizing the inspiration evoked by [Don Justo Gallego Martínez](#) who at 72, after 40 years of solitary effort, continues every day to construct a full scale cathedral in Spain from recycled building materials?

Does the strategy of the organised networks in Europe and America to "liberate" garden gnomes back to the forest not constitute a valuable challenge to the imagination? [\[more | more\]](#). Does the culture of Ireland not benefit immensely from belief in the fairy people and their habitats or the Caribbean from voodoo entities? Do extraordinary belief systems not constitute a liberating context for those who cultivate them -- and for those who are provoked by them? Would society not be impoverished without the existence of an [International Flat Earth Research Society](#)? Or without the struggles of the Carlisle local authority in the UK to respond to public pressure to destroy a recent sculpture bearing a lengthy ancient curse -- reportedly bringing much bad luck to the city? [\[more\]](#)

Given popular enthusiasm for entertainment involving the supernatural (angels, vampires, miracles, possession, sorcery, etc), and the continuing institutionalisation of beatification and exorcism, should it not be recognised that such processes constitute a liberating provocation to lives that may otherwise be extremely banal? Believing that one is from Sirius, or a time traveller -- just visiting -- may be a healthy strategy (cf [Reinventing Your Metaphoric Habitat](#), 1992). Perhaps "insecurity services" are as necessary to the viability of a community as the "security services" to which resources are now so extensively allocated?

In an increasingly insane society -- in which genocide and torture are widely tolerated by those of the highest intellectual and moral standing -- how sane is it sane to be?

Provocative dramatisation and *médiatisation*?

There is widespread recognition of the challenge of political apathy in relation to the so-called "democratic deficit". There is similar recognition of the role now played by the media in political life at all levels of society and of the popular appeal and educational values of "soaps", reality TV and "mock" and "real-life" dramas enacted before live audiences. In such a context there is a good case for reframing politics as primarily a dramatic exercise -- whether the dramatisation is serious or a comedy.

Trends in this direction are already well established. A Hollywood actor was elected to the presidency of the world's superpower; another has been elected to the presidency of its largest state. More and more in political debates and press conferences, the event is directed, questions are rehearsed, politicians read their lines or get cued. Script writers prepare speeches -- the same writer may even be commissioned to prepare them for both sides of a debate. There is a considerable focus on photo opportunities. Hollywood dramatists are frequently consulted by government for imaginative scenarios for disaster planning. Movies have successfully anticipated many of the scenarios since played out in reality. Is the *X-files* actually a foresighted initiative to prepare the public for the fact of alien contact?

Politics of course continues to involve people through dramatic events, scripted by dramatists, such as parades and celebrations. This follows the trend set by the "[triumphs](#)" of the Roman Empire, royal coronations and Hitler's [Nuremberg rallies](#). It is not yet clear the extent to which dramatic plots are developed to sustain a story line and interest in the principal actors -- as was done, after the event, for the movie about Jessica Lynch, for the media coverage of the capture of Saddam Hussein, and perhaps also for videos of Osama bin Laden. For some, the al-Qaida saga is just such a plot developed by specialists in "psychological operations" [\[more\]](#).

It is the case that the numerous conspiracy theories currently in circulation, and their "faith-based" equivalents, often offer much more

fascinating story lines than those publicised as "reality-based". In a reverse twist, the cardinal assigned by the Vatican to exorcise the success of the novel *The Da Vinci Code* regretted that "There is a very real risk that many people who read it will believe that the fables it contains are true". A former Vatican reporter explained it this way: "The church is founded on a story that some people believe and some people don't, so the Vatican tends to get very threatened by other versions of that story, especially racier ones".

Such psycho-social engineering can be usefully compared with the themes traditionally played out in popular carnivals around the world. For example, should countries and international bodies, like the UN and its Specialised Agencies, not explore the possibility of being governed for a period by someone from the extremely disadvantaged majority ("King for the year") -- rather than by someone from the privileged minority who can only claim to represent their interests? In the light of Cicciolina's initiatives, should the overt promiscuity permitted in carnivals somehow become a facet of the governance and development strategies which so vainly endeavour to manage the consequences of fecundity for overpopulation? Could the symbolic seriousness of such roles, highlighted in pagan rituals and associated with voluntary sacrifice, be given fruitful form through dramatisation of death -- as with the widespread celebration of *La Santa Muerte* in Central America?

The transformation that has not yet been fully achieved is the shift from political events as happenings reported by journalists and documentary film-makers, however dramatically, to dramas creatively developed by dramatists and played out by actors. This step would require that journalists become directors and improvise story lines on-the-fly. This is a shift beyond *post facto* dramatic interpretations to dramatisation in the moment as in street theatre -- writing reality into the script. There are many indications that the "political-media complex" is already exploring these possibilities through the shift away from any long-term strategic considerations (except to the extent that they serve the longer-term dramatic development of the fantastic dimensions of the plot).

The challenge in developing this provocative approach is to ensure that the strategic story lines are more interesting than the movies with which they compete for public attention. Beyond evoking such interest, how do people then engage effectively and collectively in dramas about issues such as "climate change" and "unemployment", if the possibility of their engaging in concrete action to resolve those issues is abandoned?

Commercialisation?

The influence of commercial interests in strategic action is evident in many forms. A curious example is the commodification of numerous ancient deities and the vestimentary use of their symbols -- for example: *Poseidon* (baseball cap), *Erebus* (down jacket), *Nyx* (sunglasses), *Agalaia* (garments), *Thalia* (pants), *Aphrodite* (clothing), *Nike* (shoes), etc. But at the same time the use of equivalent modern symbols (eg the *hijab* scarf) is criminalised. *Hermes* (scarves) was of course the Greek god of commerce. It would be instructive to explore what other deities could be coopted and cultivated as a focus for belief in corporate products.

The business and political interests of politicians have ever increasing overlap. Corporate funding of political parties remains a matter of great concern. The influence on elected officials through bribery and "commissions" continues to be debated. The challenge of conflicts of interests faced by politicians, and their susceptibility to "cash for questions" in parliament, continues to attract attention. Is the way forward not simply to abandon any assumption of meaningful representation of the electorate and to explore to the full the possibilities of politics for hire -- "rent-a-politician"? Should not individual politicians simply publicize their rates at which they will intervene in parliament -- perhaps with a discount for party members and campaign supporters? After all the precedent has long been set by priesthoods in intervening with their deities on behalf of supplicants and through the *sale of indulgences*.

Trends favouring this seemingly provocative strategy include the increasing privatisation of national assets and the preferential treatment accorded to particular corporations bidding for major contracts. Indeed in the style of "court favours", some contracts are given without bidding. The relations of Haliburton, construction and service companies and oil companies to the US government have attracted considerable comment in this connection with Iraq. In past centuries high positions in institutions were openly for sale, notably through "purchasing commissions" in the army. Political parties in the USA are open about offering ambassadorships to those providing significant financial support to their campaigns. Privatisation of government services continues.

Why not go further? Top civil service jobs could be tendered. The operation of government agencies could be offered to the highest commercial bidder. This would merely be an extension of the pattern of privatisation of transportation corporations, health agencies, prisons and the like. Consideration is already being given to extending the contracts for security services to include military services. The pattern could be extended to the operation of intergovernmental agencies such as UNESCO and WHO.

Even more interesting is that any parliament itself could be operated under contract, especially given the considerations regarding dramatisation. This might finally offer a viable model for a "world parliament". To the extent that parliament is already perceived to be "theatre", its theatrical potential could be more appropriately developed to interest a wider audience. Imagine a form of participatory democracy formatted through Oprah-type fora. This would combine both the dramatic requirements with the commercial requirements. Actors could be hired to play the role of presidents.

Reservations -- when to avoid paradox?

Psychotherapists, such as Howard Rosenthal (*Paradox: Treatment with a Twist*, 2003), have identified useful precautions when considering paradoxical strategies. They include avoiding their prescription or use:

- with the suicidal or homicidal
- when they could harm those advised or those with whom they are in contact
- if inexperienced in their implementation, unless appropriate advice is sought
- if they violate ethical prescriptions
- unless those affected are appropriately informed, if that is required by ethical guidelines

Traditional strategies may then be preferable before resorting to paradox. Particular care should of course be taken with those individuals and groups who, by definition within their own frame of reference, are inherently blameless in any problematic situation. These are people who are innocent in every circumstance -- typically when believing themselves to be fulfilling a manifest destiny (e.g. "chosen people"), or performing a mission under orders (e.g. soldiers who kill). Paradoxical strategies are totally inappropriate in such cases because their behaviour is not recognised as dysfunctional. Recourse to paradox for remedial intervention is also counter-productive when dealing with sociopaths and schizophrenics, whether individual or collective. In effect they already embody the paradox of denial.

The challenge of appropriately using paradoxical strategies has been delightfully explored in the influential, but controversial, fictional account of a psychotherapist who used chance to determine the remedial strategy to be employed -- especially in self-therapy ([Luke Rhinehart](#). *The Dice Man*, 1971) [excerpts: 1, 2, 3]. The daring twist explored in the cult novel was to specify a full spectrum of options, from trivial to extremely challenging, and then commit to their implementation according to the throw of a dice. One of the sequels (*The Book of the Die*, 2000), is considered the "bible of dice-living" -- a collection of essays, proverbs, parables, cartoons, poems, and options intended to help free people from patterns which block their lives.

The question here is at what point does the acceptability of "collateral damage" (now characteristic of "humanitarian intervention") justify the potential of paradoxical strategies -- even though the risk may be great? Various scandals have highlighted the challenge of understanding the nature of "abuse" by self-acclaimed practitioners of "crazy wisdom" in spiritual communities -- paralleling the more widespread scandals in conventional religious institutions and the tolerance of them at the highest level [[more](#)]. Given the cost in billions of dollars of settling claims of abuse, would formalizing the role of catamites in ancient temples have offered a cheaper solution? Perhaps, in the end, it is a form of righteous morality to protect the vulnerable from indiscriminate harm that will ensure that paradoxical strategies would never be openly employed for social change; though this would itself be somewhat of a paradox, given our patchy record of protecting the vulnerable from harm.

Justice?

The extent of corruption at the highest levels of western society is well-known and frequently proven in particular cases. In 2005, the OECD noted the UK government's tolerance of bribery by its corporations of foreign governments (the UK is not alone in this) [[more](#)]. How hypocritical is it that the British Government, through its international [Commission for Africa](#), which incidentally binds compliant States to abide by the deadly strictures of the WTO, the IMF and the World Bank, such as the privatising of water to UK companies, should see the key to remedial strategies in Africa as based on attacking corruption amongst the leadership there?

However, rather than vainly regretting the extent to which corruption undermines aid programmes, should the focus not be placed on ensuring that such funds are channelled into the hands of the "mafia" as effectively as possible -- given their ability to initiate local projects? Since aid monies anyway tend to be diverted in this way -- as indicated by the involvement of civil servants in the UN [oil-for-food scandal](#) -- is there not a case for acknowledging this and organizing it more openly?

Western justice is based on the assumption of innocence until guilt is proven. How many miscarriages of justice result from assuming innocence, in absence of proof of guilt, as opposed to assuming guilt in absence of proof of innocence?

There is now increasing interest in the development of the principle of "preemptive justice" in response to terrorism. But is the key to a fresh approach to the fundamental challenges of society now to assume the guilt of those in power -- until their innocence is proven -- whether or not 100,000 Iraqis are killed as a result? Would this not be particularly appropriate given that the powerful have the resources to manipulate the system of justice to inhibit any efforts to indict them and to intimidate the relatively impoverished who would seek to do so?

Pursuit of this possibility might encourage tarnished leaders to "come out of the closet", acknowledging their guilt -- as a prerequisite for mature leadership in these times. This would provide a healthy contrast to efforts to portray leaders as "squeaky clean". It would be consistent with the *realpolitik* advocated by influential American [neoconservatives](#) such as [Michael Ledeen](#) (*Machiavelli on Modern Leadership: Why Machiavelli's Iron Rules Are as Timely and Important Today as Five Centuries Ago*, 1999).

Contemporary justice is given a remarkable focus in relation to the process of dying. The self-acclaimed protectors of civilised values invest heavily and without compunction in the means of killing others in their name -- in "just wars". This is sanctioned by religious groups who, through military chaplains, extend their blessing to detention centres in which torture and deprivation are conducted to the point of death. However those same groups campaign intensively and righteously to inhibit any legal effort to permit, or assist, a dignified death by those suffering through months and years of agonizing terminal illness -- to the financial advantage of overextended health services. Both constitute a paradoxical investment in ensuring the maximum pain of others (Polly Toynbee *The Myth of Dying*, 2005).

Given such principles, should the terminally ill be empowered to follow the lead of suicide bombers? [[more](#)] Or should they appear to brandish a weapon in the presence of security forces -- in order to benefit from their trigger-happy professional abilities to target legitimate suspects with prejudice? Will the future see wheel-chair-bound suicidal attacks on military establishments -- to enable the terminally ill to achieve the only death that civilisation can legally accord them at the hands of professionally trained killers? Alternatively, given the ease with which illegal drugs can be obtained via the mafia, is "terminating the terminally ill with dignity" a new service that could be sought from the mafia -- or perhaps an economic opportunity for some "developing" countries without the scruples of "civilisation"?

Most countries officially deplore the use of [torture](#), but many governments -- notably those on the UN Security Council -- make extensive use of it if covertly [[more](#)]. Is there not then a strong case for making much wider and more open use of torture in response to the increasing challenges of law and order? Maybe there is indeed a value to the public punishment advocated by Islamic law. Up until the 19th century public humiliation was a major part of punishment using [stocks and pillories](#) in the West. These would always be sited in the most public place available, such as the market square. Those being punished would often be well known to everyone else, thereby

increasing their shame. Audience participation was a key element -- possibly ensuring more humane treatment than in modern prisons where sexual abuse may be common.

Conclusion -- Doing the Unthinkable?

In a perverse world, is there not a strong case for developing perverse strategies -- especially if that is what we are already in effect doing? The strategy of suicide bombers might be seen as a strangely distorted, provocative effort to achieve justice. Perhaps modern society, like those of the past, requires "preparatory" human sacrifice as a rationale for remedial initiatives? As a trivial example, why do we not know how many such "sacrifices" were required before seat-belt legislation was imposed for automobile drivers?

It is clear that conventional strategies are far from successful in stemming the growth of problems of every kind. Curiously such strategies continue to be proudly driven by collective, formal "resolutions" at the highest level. Given the often disastrous failure of such strategies to achieve their objectives, is there not a case for matching any "resolution" on behalf of the peoples of the world with processes through which "absolution" is publicly and formally sought following any accumulation of failures of governance? Do the procedures of the Christian religion, through which "absolution" is formally requested and readily offered, provide a model in a period of increasingly faith-based governance? Is it appropriate to the dignity of their office that those responsible for policies that fail should simply be voted out of that office?

The height of civilised perversion may however be in the highly politicised media coverage of the agonies of the terminally ill (cf cases of [Terri Schiavo](#) in the USA in 2005 and [Diane Pretty](#) in the UK in 2002). These are probably to be understood by the future as exemplifying the public practice of prolonged human sacrifice in Christian civilization. Perhaps the AIDS epidemic in Africa should be understood in this light? How many more sacrifices will be necessary before euthanasia is legitimised? More troubling, in the light of [Terror Management Theory](#), is the consciously orchestrated political need for such dramatic reminders of personal mortality ("mortality salience") in sustaining support for neoconservative and theoconservative agendas (Oliver James. *A Vote for Immortality*, 2005; Pat Nason, *Feature: Death and Voting*, 2004). Research indicates that constant reminders of terrorists and death causes people to automatically vote for heroic-sounding political candidates ([Cohen](#), 2004; [Landau](#), 2004). Perhaps, like the Aztecs and the public executions favoured by Islam, many more such sacrifices are indeed required to ensure the sustainability of a civilisation based on Christian values?

In the Aztec culture blood-letting was sacred. Human sacrifice was the most dramatic means of appeasing the gods. More common was voluntary blood-letting at every religious function -- the higher the social or priestly rank, the more blood one had to sacrifice. Is there a case for personal financial "blood-letting" by the elites in powerful institutions who recommend austerity measures for impoverished societies? The modern perception by the impoverished of "blood-sucking elites" might be seen as a curious reversal of that earlier insight -- perhaps unconsciously evoking the widespread interest in vampires now cultivated by the media.

So many of the foreseeable crises of the world derive from an uncontrollable growth in population. It is of course possible that the environmental system will "correct" this trend through timely epidemics or other major disasters, whether natural or deliberately man-made. But, given the social security challenges, and a rapidly aging population, is there not a case for providing proportionate rewards to those who formally contract to sacrifice themselves at an earlier age? This would follow the ancient precedent of glorifying those called to such sacrifice for the sake of their community. The terminal phase of the contract, after benefitting from the advance reward, could be ensured through forms of mediatised warfare with a very high probability of fatality. Their heroics could be promoted to the full to encourage others to undertake such contracts. The process is similar to the scenarios of modern military recruitment propaganda -- except the rewards are greater and appreciated to the full before the final apotheosis (rather than *post mortem*).

The general approach advocated here places the stress on conscientizing people through making them responsible for their acts. Provocative strategies clarify the questions to be asked and trigger insights into more strategically fruitful questions of a higher order -- the key to liberation.

Le Chatelier's Principle as Applied to Social Systems

"Reformers, critics of institutions, consultants in innovation, people in short who 'want to get something done', often fail to see this point. They cannot understand why their strictures, advice or demands do not result in effective change. They expect either to achieve a measure of success in their own terms or to be flung off the premises. But an ultra-stable system (like a social institution)... has no need to react in either of these ways. It specializes in equilibrational readjustment, which is to the observer a secret form of change requiring no actual alteration in the macro-systemic characteristics that he is trying to do something about."

[Stafford Beer](#). *The Cybernetic Cytoblast - management itself*.
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