

***A DISCUSSION OF  
SACRED ECONOMICS: MONEY, GIFT & SOCIETY  
IN THE AGE OF TRANSITION  
BY CHARLES EISENSTEIN***

*J. Harmon Grahn*

*A Discussion of Sacred Economics:  
Money, Gift & Society in the Age of Transition  
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# 1 Money

From cover to cover, Charles Eisenstein's *Sacred Economics: Money, Gift & Society in the Age of Transition* sings to me, and has given me much food for thought about the transition between "what has been" and "what shall be," in which we Earth-residents seem now to be in the midst. Eisenstein has provided concepts that I have been groping toward for some time, but have never been able to find the exact words needed to describe them clearly; or in some instances, the component ideas required even to think about them. That such a book has been written at all is for me a straw in the wind, indicating how that transition might unfold gracefully, and gently, instead of chaotically, and catastrophically, perhaps as many (including myself) have feared. Eisenstein's book is balm for the troubled spirit, and richly practical, right here, right now.

Although I cannot claim to have read them all, the impression I get from what I have read of economists and financial analysts, even from opposing schools of economic theory, is a broad consensus among all of them to the effect that *economic growth* is the universally recognized indication of economic health and well being; and that when growth slows, halts, or (God help us) declines, measures are urgently sought, one way or another, to *stimulate growth*. And I would not disagree—if Earth, the Solar System, and the Universe were populated only by economists and financial analysts.

On Earth, however, the mix of beings seems still to be considerably more heterogeneous than that; and among *them*—or I should say, among *us*—limitless growth is highly anomalous, and not a "good thing" at all. The image springs to mind of a good-natured Uncle, who visits the family of his young Nephew at infrequent intervals, greeting the lad with something like, "My goodness, what a strapping young man you've become! You're growing like a weed!"

But what if the youth never stopped growing? Fast-forward twenty years or so, and replay the encounter—this time with the Uncle, squinting into the sky at the young Goliath into which his Nephew has meanwhile grown, and his thoughts, if not his words, might be more along the lines of. . .

Upon what meat doth this our Cæsar feed,  
That he is grown so great?  
Why, man, he doth bestride the narrow world,  
Like a Colossus; and we petty men  
Walk under his huge legs, and peep about  
To find ourselves dishonourable graves.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Cassius, in William Shakespeare's *Julius Cæsar*, I, ii, slightly revised.

In youth, growth is a fine thing to behold; but there comes a time in the natural order of things when growth in stature and sheer bulk must cease, and give place to other dimensions of development. Eisenstein argues that such a time has arrived for humans, and human economies, on planet Earth.

Some months earlier, I had occasion to seek a rigorous definition of the term, *money*; and so consulted my copy of *Black's Law Dictionary, Pocket Edition*—and was surprised to find in it *no entry* for the term. There are definitions for a number of terms in which *money* has a part, such as **money had and received**, **action for**, and **money-laundering** [see **laundering**], and **money market** [see **market**], and **money supply**, with references to **M1**, **M2**, and **M3**; but no entry defining exactly what *money* generically is.

*Black's Law Dictionary, Pocket Edition* is naturally an abridgment of the edition legal professionals actually consult; but if there is a legal definition of such a ubiquitous term as *money*, don't you think it would be included within such an abridgment? Anyway, I would think so.

Well, Eisenstein's book sheds considerable light upon this and related mysteries, and it may be due to no editorial oversight that an entry for *money* is excluded from my copy of *Black's Law Dictionary*. For *money* is in many ways one of the most mysterious, and in a sense “magical,” of human inventions.

From ancient times [Eisenstein writes] thinkers have marveled at the ability of a mere mark to confer this power upon a disk of metal or slip of paper. Unfortunately, looking at the world around us, it is hard to avoid concluding that the magic of money is an evil magic.<sup>2</sup>

My *Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary* is somewhat more forthcoming than *Black's Law Dictionary*, and defines **money** in part as “**1** : something generally accepted as a medium of exchange, a measure of value, or a means of payment: as **a** : officially coined or stamped metal currency **b** : money of account **c** : paper money **2** : wealth reckoned in terms of money **3** : a form or denomination of coin or paper money.”

The aspect of money as *a measure of value* seems at least to point a direction. What is *value*? According to *Black's Law Dictionary*: “**1**. The monetary worth or price of something. **2**. The amount of goods, services, or money that something will command in an exchange. **3**. The significance, desirability, or utility of something. **4**. Sufficient contractual consideration.”

O.K., so money, according to the dictionaries, is “a measure of value;” and value is “the monetary worth or price of something.” This is a bit circular, and rather abstract; and

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<sup>2</sup>Charles Eisenstein, *Sacred Economics: Money, Gift & Society in the Age of Transition*, Evolver Editions, Berkeley, California, 2011, p. xi.

reminds me of a remark Oscar Wilde once made about a cynic—as being someone who “knows the price of everything, and the value of nothing.” At least we seem to be hitting around the target of how money is perceived “authoritatively,” in contemporary human society. As we shall see, what we *believe* money is may be of greater importance than what it “really” is. In fact, what we believe money is may in the end be the entire “substance” of what it “really” is. One thing to keep in mind is that, whatever it is, money is a human invention, not a Cosmic “given;” and is therefore subject to human re-invention.

Eisenstein draws particular attention to the *abstract* quality of money, noting that the first use of money as a medium of exchange among humans coincides with the philosophical distinction between *substance* and *essence*.

It is no accident [Eisenstein writes] that ancient Greece, the place where symbolic money originated, also gave birth to the modern conception of the individual, to the notions of logic and reason, and to the philosophical underpinnings of the modern mind. In his scholarly masterpiece *Money and the Ancient Greek Mind*, classics professor Richard Seaford explores the impact of money on Greek society and thought, illuminating the characteristics that make money unique. Among them are that it is both concrete and abstract, that it is homogeneous, impersonal, a universal aim, and a universal means, and that it is unlimited. The entrance of this new, unique power into the world had profound consequences, many of which are now so deeply woven into our beliefs and culture, psyche and society, that we can barely perceive them, let alone question them.<sup>3</sup>

Among contemporary humans, there is a great deal of agreement that “something is radically wrong” with the human condition. However, there seems to be very little agreement as to what that “something” is, and even less about what might constructively be “done about it.” The subtle insight that what has “gone wrong” among humans has something to do with this philosophical split between substance and essence, perhaps opens a glimpse of a potential reality in which humans might regain our balance, and thrive in one another’s company; instead of, as many fear today, tipping over into a condition of chaotic mutual extinction.

In the introduction [Eisenstein writes] I mentioned the idea that we have created a god in the image of our money: an unseen force that moves all things, that animates the world, an “invisible hand” that orders human activity, non-material yet ubiquitous. Many of these attributes of God or spirit go back to

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<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 36-37.

the pre-Socratic Greek philosophers who developed their ideas at precisely the time that money took over their society. According to Seaford, they were the first to even distinguish between essence and appearance, between the concrete and the abstract—a distinction completely absent (even implicitly) from Homer. From Anaximander’s *apeiron* to Heraclitus’s *logos* to the Pythagorean doctrine “All is number,” the early Greeks emphasized the primacy of the abstract: an unseen principle that orders the world. This ideology has infiltrated the DNA of our civilization to the point where the size of the financial sector dwarfs the real economy; where the total value of financial derivatives is ten times the world’s gross domestic product; where the greatest rewards of our society go to the Wall Street wizards who do nothing but manipulate symbols. For the trader at his computer, it is indeed as Pythagoras said: “All is number.”<sup>4</sup>

Money is a human invention, and if its nature is disclosed to be contrary to human interests, it lies within the province of things that humans can modify to better suit human needs. Eisenstein’s book is unique in making such a disclosure clear; and in suggesting specific modifications to this human invention that could transform it into an instrument incalculably superior for serving human needs, than it has been at any time since its invention.

Eisenstein perceptively points out an easily and almost universally overlooked discrepancy between the abstraction of money, and all other components of the “natural world”—which renders money in its current and historical form clearly “unnatural.” This does not make money a “bad thing,” but illuminates a host of chronic human ills that have emerged and persisted in direct consequence of its peculiarly “unnatural” quality.

When the primary function of money is as a medium of exchange [Eisenstein writes], it is subject to the same limits as the goods for which it is exchanged, and our desire for it is limited by our satiety. It is when money takes on the additional function of store-of-value that our desire for it becomes unlimited. One idea I will therefore explore is the decoupling of money as medium-of-exchange from money as store-of-value. This idea has ancient roots going back to Aristotle, who distinguished between two kinds of wealth-getting: for the sake of accumulation, and for the sake of meeting other needs. The former kind of wealth-getting, he says, is “unnatural” and, moreover, bears no limit.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 38-39.

<sup>5</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 46.

Why is this so? Mainly, because all natural things, unlike money, are bound within physical limitations. There can be only so much, and no more, of any material substance in existence upon a finite planet.

Unlike physical goods [Eisenstein continues], the abstraction of money allows us, in principle, to possess unlimited quantities of it. Thus it is easy for economists to believe in the possibility of endless exponential growth, where a mere number represents the size of the economy. The sum total of all goods and services is a number, and what limit is there on the growth of a number? Lost in abstraction, we ignore the limits of nature and culture to accommodate our growth. Following Plato, we make the abstraction more real than the reality, fixing Wall Street while the real economy languishes. The monetary essence of things is called “value,” which, as an abstracted, uniform essence, reduces the plurality of the world. All things are reduced to what they are worth. This gives the illusion that the world is as limitless as numbers are.<sup>6</sup>

Abstract money, used as a limitless store of value, thereby acquires an abstract value for its own sake, in addition to its utility as a medium of exchange for physical goods; and is therefore sought in preference to physical goods. This encourages its use, not only as a neutral medium of exchange, but also as an artificial means of accumulating ever expanding wealth; such that “the rich get richer,” and the poor are further impoverished, automatically, without anybody so much as lifting a finger to bring this condition about. It is a property of the abstraction of money itself, which possesses a quality unlike anything occurring in nature.

The human invention of money need not possess this “unnatural” quality, because anything humans invent, we can also re-invent, to improve its service to human needs and desires, and eliminate flaws that are contrary to human interests. What Eisenstein is proposing is a fundamental re-invention of money.

It is a radical proposal; yet it does not require revolutionary, turbulent, or inherently disruptive means to be put into effect. Its “quiet charm” is that, like the metamorphosis of a caterpillar into a butterfly, it is *evolutionary*, not *revolutionary*—and not any less surprising or spectacular than the emergence of a butterfly from the chrysalis entered by a caterpillar.

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<sup>6</sup>Eisenstein, *loc. cit.*

## 2 Criticism

Eisenstein's main criticism of the present and historical human condition is that money, being a universal aim, and a universal means, due to its freakish limitlessness, is sought above all other things of value: because it has the power to purchase all things of value. This has the probably unintended effect of converting over time all things of value into money. As remarked by a complacent wealthy female in a novel I can no longer identify: "Of course money isn't everything, silly. It's what you buy everything with!"

All money economies, as currently constituted, perpetually expand: because unlike all things natural, money is defined as a limitless store of value, and those who have it are willing to part with it only to fund projects or enterprises that promise to return it "with interest"—which is to say, return more of it than was borrowed from its owner. Through endless iteration of this simple process, all things of value are progressively converted into the one thing supremely valued by humans above all others: money. In our time, this has become a vast global, accelerating homogenization of everything of value on our entire planet, into the single commodity of highest (perceived) value: money itself. And the supreme irony of the whole exercise is that money has no real value, other than that bestowed upon it by fiat of common belief!

What intrinsic value has paper currency, printed on a press, that exceeds the intrinsic value, say, of a similar quantity of toilet tissue? And most money in circulation today isn't even as substantial as that, consisting instead of immaterial digital bits in computers. Even gold, used as money, has little intrinsic value in itself, because of its limited usefulness to human manufacture. The source of its value, like the source of the value of all money, is simply that people believe it to be valuable: because they believe it can be exchanged for all other things valued by humans.<sup>7</sup>

And so it is, like the nightmare of a self-fulfilling prophesy. For the value given to money, as currently and historically used—by nothing more than the common belief that it is valuable—has the cumulative effect of transforming every thing valued by humans into nothing but money. It is the curse of King Midas, and it is in headlong operation right here, right now, everywhere on Earth.

Money is the real-life fulfillment of "gray goo," the imagined nightmare of nanotechnology, in which a self-replicating robot of microscopic size, with the ability only to convert the raw materials in naturally occurring things into reproductions of itself—which in turn repeat the process, endlessly—gets loose in the world, and devours the planet, covering and saturating it with nothing other than "gray goo."

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<sup>7</sup>See Eisenstein, 2011, Ch. 9 The Story of Value, pp. 159-171, for elaboration.

I am not making this up. If you haven't heard of it before, look up "gray goo" on the Net. And then add it, if you like, to your growing list of "things to worry about."

The metaphor of "gray goo" may even be applied directly to human money-makers. From Low Earth Orbit, individual humans are invisible, except under high magnification; and so may be considered to be a form of "nanotechnology," in relation to the scale of the planet. Yet the spread of human works are naked-eye visible from outer space. On the night-side of the planet, they are picked out in vast nets and streams of light, year by year invading the diminishing dark and empty regions. On the day-side, the progressive diminution and disappearance of forests, and the expansion of deserts, may be clearly observed. Up close, and in detail, it is a process with numerous dimensions.

Before the invention of money, all things on Earth that made life possible here, such as wind, water, plants, animals, forests, mountains, rivers, lakes, oceans, sunshine, and the overarching stars at night, could be considered only as miraculous "gifts from the gods." No one made them, or owned them, or could live for even a moment without them. They belonged to no one, and to everyone. As discussed at length by Eisenstein, all this began to change, either because of, or coincident with, the invention of money.

On p. 50, Eisenstein mentions Martín Prechtel, who wrote a series of breathtaking descriptions<sup>8</sup> of his personal experiences within an indigenous culture that had not lost their reverence and appreciation for the *gift of life* bestowed upon them by the gods. Prechtel's accounts are exceptionally valuable in this connection, because they may bring to life in the imaginations of we who have never experienced them, undreamed nuances of a living culture that practiced a *gift economy* to its very roots—until it was obliterated by the inexorable march of money. We will return to Prechtel's story later, in § 5 An Example.

As mentioned earlier, coincident with the invention of money, the philosophical distinction emerged, as Eisenstein put it, "between essence and appearance, between the concrete and the abstract;" and he speculates plausibly that this distinction may have been related to the distinction between the abstraction of symbolic money, and the concrete goods it symbolizes, and for which it may be exchanged. Because money is a uniform, artificially standardized commodity, of which every dollar, or pound, or euro, is exactly like every other dollar, or pound, or euro, it has the uncanny effect of reshaping the things that it buys increasingly into uniform, artificially standardized commodities as well.

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<sup>8</sup>*Secrets of the Talking Jaguar: a Mayan Shaman's Journey to the Heart of the Indigenous Soul*, Jeremy P. Tarcher/Putnam, a member of Penguin Putnam, Inc., New York, 1998; *Long Life, Honey in the Heart: A Story of Initiation and Eloquence From the Shores of a Mayan Lake*, Jeremy P. Tarcher/Putnam, 1999; *The Toe Bone and the Tooth: An Ancient Mayan Story Relived in Modern Times: Leaving Home to Come Home*, Thorsons, An Imprint of HarperCollinsPublishers, 2002.

In addition to its “unnatural” limitlessness, money’s artificial uniformity is also “unnatural:” because unlike dollars, or pounds, or euros, nothing in nature is exactly like anything else. No two snowflakes are exactly alike, and no two leaves on a tree, or trees in a forest, are exactly alike. But every dollar is exactly like every other dollar—which is to say with “unnatural” precision, each dollar has a “value” exactly equal to that of every other dollar.

A forest, in contrast, is an imponderably rich matrix of uniquely interrelated beings and things, humans sometimes among them, which like elements of a self-similar fractal form, are themselves unique, and are each composed of singularly interrelated constituents, such as organs, cells, and molecules. Examined closely enough, with sufficiently tuned sensitivity—and contrary to contemporary scientific assumptions—even individual atoms may be unique. What a forest—or anything natural—actually *is* cannot be fathomed, or quantified, but can only be appreciated as a miraculous *gift*. Or not.

So many acres of timber, however, may be bought or sold for so many dollars, and are commercially equivalent to so many board feet of lumber, or tons of paper pulp; which may be bought or sold in turn for more dollars, and converted into other commodities, such as rolls of paper, or modular sheets of plywood. And in exchange for even more dollars, these “value-added” commodities may be bought or sold in turn again, maybe for a print run of some hundreds of thousands of copies of an urban telephone directory; or for the construction of modular homes, all alike, laid out in rows along the new, modular streets of new, modular towns, cities, and suburbs, inhabited by modular humans, with modular lives, sustained by modular jobs, compensated by modular dollars, each one with the precise “value” of every other. It is uncanny how this impersonal, homogeneous, universal aim, and universal means—money—seems somehow able to reshape every thing and everyone it touches into something with qualities very like its own; and very unlike their original, *natural* qualities.

Meanwhile, the forest has been converted into a field of stumps—and has added its incomprehensible essence to an endlessly growing mountain of exactly quantifiable money. And the modular people who live in their modular mortgaged homes, in their modular cities, that look, and feel, like all the other modular cities on Earth; and exchange their time and creativity in their modular jobs, for the modular money to pay the interest on their modular mortgaged lives . . . begin to wonder . . . Is there anything left on Earth that anybody really considers to be . . . *valuable*?

*Valuable*—not in the sense of the cynical legal definition of value: “1. The monetary worth or price of something. 2. The amount of goods, services, or money that something will command in an exchange. . . .” But *valuable*, in the sense of enriching the lives of those to whom it was originally given, as a free “gift of the gods.” *Valuable*, in the sense of being sacred. *Is nothing sacred?!*

No. *Nothing* is sacred, that stands in the path of the relentless march of money, which like “gray goo” transforms everything it touches into clones of itself. This applies no less to the “money-makers,” “the Wall Street wizards who do nothing but manipulate symbols,” than to anybody, or anything else. All—*all*—are transformed into instruments for the proliferation of money; which is fed by, and progressively replaces, the *natural gifts* of wind, water, plants, animals, forests, mountains, rivers, lakes, oceans, sunshine, and even the overarching stars at night . . . until they are *all* swallowed up by the rising tide of the “gray goo,” that makes everything on Earth a clone of itself.

How often, by the way, do the people who spend their lives in cities, gaze in wonder upon the Milky Way on summer nights?

### **3 Are We Doomed?**

How can this be? And, can nothing be done about it? Are we *doomed*?

Eisenstein doesn’t think we’re doomed; and I don’t think so either. The reason is that, unlike the wind, water, plants, animals, forests, mountains, etc., money is not a “given.” It is entirely a human invention; and is therefore subject to human re-invention, if that emerges as the combined human will.

Fortunately, this is feasible; because money, unlike “gray goo,” can be re-invented, by “ordinary people”—and by “extraordinary people”—and put to alternative uses, in alternative ways, to those of its historical and contemporary antecedents. This is a process already in progress, and gaining momentum.

Additionally, the “traditional” definition and ways of using money since its invention are today hitting the wall, because being fundamentally unnatural and unbalanced, they cannot possibly do otherwise. So the transition Eisenstein envisions is already in motion.

This is really what *Sacred Economics* is all about. It is a trend that people may intentionally join; and Eisenstein emphasizes that much experimentation is to be expected, and is entirely in order. He doesn’t claim to have the complete formula all worked out. In Chapter 17, however, he does make seven specific recommendations of generic changes that he believes must be made in the existing system, in order to make a graceful transition from what we might call Profane, to Sacred Economics:

1. Negative-Interest Currency;
2. Elimination of Economic Rents, and Compensation for Depletion of the Commons;
3. Internalization of Social and Environmental Costs;

4. Economic and Monetary Localization;
5. The Social Dividend;
6. Economic Degrowth;
7. Gift Culture and [Peer-to-Peer] Economics.

Each of these he fleshes out in terms of *a*) Motivation, *b*) Transition and policy, and *c*) Effect on economic life.

As you can see [Eisenstein concludes], all of the seven elements I have described are tightly synergistic. Indeed, none can stand on its own. Negative-interest currency, for instance, won't work if other sources of economic rent are still available to invest in. Localization depends in large part on the removal of hidden subsidies that make global trade economic. Gift economies allow the quality of life to improve even as the economy shrinks.

Together, the various strands of sacred economy I have described in Part II of this book weave a tapestry, an organic matrix that we can see emerging today. The new economy will not come from a new beginning, a sweeping away of the old and a starting afresh; it is rather a phase transition, a metamorphosis.

Just as no piece of sacred economy can stand alone, so also does each piece naturally induce the others. But if there is a linchpin, it is the end of growth, the transition of the human species to a new relationship with Earth, a new Story of the People. Ultimately, it is our emerging desire to be Earth's partner, and our newfound spiritual realization of the uniqueness and connectedness of all beings, that underlies what I have called sacred economics.<sup>9</sup>

Although these specific recommendations may contribute significantly to a graceful transition from a "profane economy" that manifestly does not work, to a "sacred economy" that does, what Eisenstein really envisions is more a *shift in consciousness* than a purely mechanical repair of the "economic machine." The former is a precondition of the latter—just as the shift in consciousness thousands of years ago, distinguishing substance from essence, was manifested in the emergence of the "economic machine" that today puts in jeopardy all that is natural to our planet, including our very lives.

The transition to sacred economy [Eisenstein writes] is part of a larger shift in our ways of thinking, relating, and being. Economic logic alone is not enough

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<sup>9</sup>Eisenstein, 2011, Ch. 17, pp. 331-346.

to sustain it. Many economic visionaries have devised mathematically persuasive revolutions in money and property, but of the handful that ever came to fruition, none survived the test of time. The final third of this book, therefore, is devoted to the shift of consciousness and practice that goes along with the new money systems I have described. As we heal the spirit-matter rupture, we discover that economics and spirituality are inseparable. On the personal level, economics is about how to give our gifts and meet our needs. It is about who we are in relation to the world. By changing our everyday economic thinking and practices, we not only prepare ourselves for the great changes ahead; we also set the stage for their emergence. By living the concepts of sacred economics, we ease its acceptance by all and welcome it into the world.<sup>10</sup>

Applying the metaphor of a caterpillar morphing into a butterfly, we might say that humans until now have been in the “larval” stage of our evolutionary development. Or perhaps more charitably, we might say that humanity have been in our infancy, and childhood; and have now arrived at the threshold of becoming adults. Our relation to our planet has been like that of an infant to its mother—and we have spoken often of our “Mother Earth.” “Mother Earth” has provided selflessly for our every need, asking nothing in return; and we have partaken of her bountiful gifts hungrily, and without appreciation of the costs our Mother has sustained for our care. This may be regarded as natural, and not blameworthy: for it is a pattern endlessly repeated throughout nature. But it is a pattern that cannot possibly be sustained “forever.”

## 4 A New Relationship

The time has now arrived for the establishment of a new relationship with our planet: from a relationship between Child and Mother, to a relationship between Lovers.

The relationship between mature Lovers is not a “one-way-street.” Unlike the relation between a Child and its Mother, the relation between Lovers is not one of exclusive taking, on one side, and giving, on the other; which is not balanced, and can only be sustained for a limited time. The relation between Lovers is one of co-creation, sharing, and balanced exchange. In economic terms, it is entirely different from human practices on Earth, until now; which have emphasized *growth* as the decisive indicator of economic health and well-being.

As described earlier, perpetual economic growth involves the inexorable conversion of all things of value into the single, uniform, and limitless commodity, *money*. It is a one-way

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<sup>10</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 347.

street; and we are discovering today that it is also a dead-end street; and that when it comes to an end, it “hits the wall,” and stops. Isn’t it “interesting” that the focal point on Earth of the one-way, dead-end economy is named *Wall Street*? Who wrote the script for this, anyway?

This is the point at which Earth-humans find ourselves today; and we are confronted by the dilemma of what to do when limitless economic growth on a finite planet hits the wall, and grinds to a halt. Dealing with this is what Eisenstein calls “Humanity’s Coming-of-Age Ordeal.”

The story that is ending in our time [Eisenstein writes] . . . goes much deeper than the story of money. I call this story the Ascent of Humanity. It is a story of endless growth, and the money system we have today is an embodiment of that story, enabling and propelling the conversion of the natural realm into the human realm. It began millennia ago, when humans first tamed fire and made tools; it accelerated when we applied these tools to the domestication of animals and plants and began to conquer the wild, to make the world ours. It reached its glorious zenith in the age of the Machine, when we created a wholly artificial world, harnessing all the forces of nature and imagining ourselves to be its lords and possessors. And now, that story is drawing to a close as the inexorable realization dawns that the story is not true. Despite our pretenses, the world is not really ours; despite our illusions, we are not in control of it. As the unintended consequences of technology proliferate, as our communities, our health, and the ecological basis of civilization deteriorate, as we explore new depths of misery, violence, and alienation, we enter the story’s final stages: crisis, climax, and denouement. The rituals of our storytellers are to no avail. No story can persist beyond its ending.

Just as life does not end with adolescence, neither does civilization’s evolution stop with the end of growth. We are in the midst of a transition parallel to an adolescent’s transition into adulthood. Physical growth ceases, and vital resources turn inward to foster growth in other realms.<sup>11</sup>

## 5 An Example

As mentioned earlier, Martín Prechtel has written three autobiographical volumes detailing his extraordinary adventures in the embrace of, and miraculous escape from, the remote Mayan village of Santiago Atitlan, on the southern shore of Lake Atitlan in the highlands

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<sup>11</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 148-149.

of Guatemala. Prechtel has in this way brought to life a rich indigenous gift culture that survived until only a few years ago; and as related briefly here, provides a glimpse of how a so-called “primitive” culture that retained its ages-old reverence for “Mother Earth,” and a profound appreciation for her priceless gifts, negotiated the crucial transition of its adolescent youth into adult participants in village life.

Prechtel’s works are unique, in my experience, due to a highly unusual sequence of circumstances that drew him away from his native New Mexico, to a remote Guatemalan village where he was accepted, embraced, initiated, and eventually rose to a position of significant influence in the village—before it was brutally destroyed by the advance of an adolescent civilization. Prechtel managed to escape with his life, to tell many tales; which provide innumerable precious glimpses into the inner character of a functioning ancient gift culture in contemporary times.

The culture of the Canyon Village of Santiago Atitlan had systematically arranged the course of human life as a series of initiations from one stage to the next, cradle to grave; each with the overarching purpose of resuscitating with gratitude and ritual the miraculous gift of Life from year to year in the village. These sacred rituals involved the active participation and effort of every member of the village, handed down generation to generation, by word and example, from seniors to their juniors at every major juncture in the life of an individual. Initiations were part of the intricate and elaborate dance the succeeding generations of that particular village had evolved over the course of perhaps thousands of years, to keep a good thing going from one year, and one generation, to the next.

Prechtel describes how, when youths began courting, they thereby gave the signal that the time had arrived for their initiation—their “Coming-of-Age Ordeal,” to borrow Eisenstein’s term—out of childhood, out of their mothers’ exclusive care, and into the wider embrace of the village at large. This initiation was of crucial importance to the whole village, and occupied a full year. For the emerging adolescent participants, it was a life-or-death challenge, bearing no assurance of success, or even survival of the ordeal.

The initiation was administered by a hierarchy of elders, for whom it was in effect an initiation into the next stage of their continuously unfolding lives as well. In this way, at least two generations—and more generally, everyone in the village—were simultaneously initiated and renewed, through their participation in an annually repeated ritual process of what we might call “learning by doing” the vital steps necessary to sustain Life: for each individual, for the village, and for the world at large.

The young men and women who had passed through their initiation ordeal were forever changed, and had a quality about them that was totally lacking among those who, under the influence of foreign missionaries, who strove constantly to “save the heathen

from their sins,” had dismissed their traditional initiations as “primitive superstitions,” and evaded them.

Eisenstein observes that, willing or not, civilized humanity are experiencing today our long-deferred “Coming-of-Age Ordeal.”

Humanity is undergoing an analogous ordeal today [he writes]. The multiple crises converging upon us are an ordeal that challenges our very identity, an ordeal that we have no assurance of even surviving. It calls forth unrealized capacities and compels us to relate to the world in a new way. The despair that sensitive people feel in the face of the crisis is part of the ordeal.<sup>12</sup> Like a tribal initiate, when we as a species emerge from it, we too will join the community of all being as a full member of the “tribe” of life. Our unique capacities of technology and culture, we will turn to contribute to the good of all.<sup>13</sup>

During one particular year, Martín Prechtel was appointed head chief, the *Najbey Mam*, Foremost Grandchild, for the initiation of the year’s eligible young men over which he presided; during which he was himself initiated into the next phase of his life in the Canyon Village of Santiago Atitlan.<sup>14</sup>

Administration of village affairs was handled by what Prechtel describes as a “hierarchy” of Tzutujil Maya elders; in which women and men were co-equal partners in the full-time, year-round responsibility of keeping the Earth, the village, and its constituents alive throughout the ritual cycle of the seasons, and from one year to the next. Members of the village hierarchy took on their responsibilities in addition to whatever else they normally had to do to keep body and soul together from day to day, and year to year. They fulfilled their administrative responsibilities at their own expense, and this typically bankrupted them, and put them in debt to the entire village—and everyone in the village in reciprocal debt to them.

Prechtel describes how he was personally prosperous, being an artist whose works were in demand by an affluent sector of “civilized” society; so it took longer than usual for his duties as *Najbey Mam* to drive him into bankruptcy. When this finally happened, and he was at his wit’s end casting about for the wherewithal to conclude his responsibilities, the village exuberantly rallied round and carried the initiation year (and Prechtel with it) through to a victorious conclusion.

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<sup>12</sup>Actually, all is well: the crisis is exercising its evolutionary function. But don’t let that assuage your panic. All is well, but only because of our perception that all is horribly wrong. (Eisenstein’s footnote.)

<sup>13</sup>Eisenstein, 2011, pp. 151-152.

<sup>14</sup>Prechtel, 1999, p. 37.

Later, when Prechtel was financially back on his feet again, and tried to repay with money the villagers who had helped him through the pinch, they threw rocks at him, scolded him roundly, and chased him away from their doors! Someone had to explain to Martín that that was the idea of the thing: he was *supposed* to go broke—as the *Najbey Mam* always did every year—and become indebted to the village: because that is how their culture worked. Everybody in the village was indebted to everybody else, at all times; and so could be called upon for help in time of need, and cheerfully respond with their best. Such were welcome opportunities to compensate in part what could never be compensated in full: the necessary fabric of dynamic interdependence among all the villagers in Santiago Atitlan. Learning this was a vital part of Prechtel’s ongoing initiation.

Perhaps this tiny example of what life was like in a particular indigenous village furnishes a glimpse of one form a *gift economy* may take within a unique context, at a certain time and place on Earth. There are any number of alternative possibilities for the kind of human relationships Eisenstein is talking about, and Prechtel describes; yet they take shape only among people who have passed through and beyond the stage of “I-me-mine” adolescence, and have re-integrated themselves within the fabric of All That Is; of which each of us is a vital part, yet none of us is either the Whole, or the most important part of the Whole.

The essential difference between the people of Santiago Atitlan, and the civilized people whose story is now coming to a dead-end, is that the latter have believed a story of *separation*: of self from others; of substance from essence; of matter from spirit; of human from non-human; of heaven from hell. The people of Santiago Atitlan—as have many people like them—had a different story: of the integration, and connectedness of every thing, and everybody, with everything, and everybody “else.” Only, for them, there was no “else;” but only the Whole, of which every thing, and everybody, is a part. Their story came to an end, because their world was taken from them, and converted into money by the advance of the story of separation—which is now coming to an end in turn, because it is not true, and cannot last.

## 6 Birth

*Sacred Economics* is a discussion of ways in which the dead-end story of separation can metamorphose gracefully into stories of integration, and connectedness, which have the scope to carry humanity into the next phase of our evolution. It is an open-ended discussion, with no “final conclusion,” so long as humans are able to continue the dance of Life, Love, and Learning. So far, we have learned much—even from our errors, borne of immaturity and inexperience. If we continue our “Coming-of-Age Ordeal,” now in progress, it too shall

pass; and those who pass through it shall have gained the maturity and experience necessary to continue our evolution into a future unimaginably different from our past—in perhaps a similar way that the ensuing life of a newborn infant must be utterly beyond the nascent “imagination” of an unborn fetus, come to term.

The crisis of contemporary humanity appears to me as a crisis of birth; and emergence out of “what has been,” into “what shall be.” It is a critical time; yet the *gift* of “Life, the Universe, and Everything”<sup>15</sup> provides us some assurance that there is nothing we have ever experienced, or are experiencing now, or are likely to experience hereafter, that has not occurred already, many times, in many ways, and in many places. After we have passed our Initiation, and taken our place as adults in the Cosmic Community, perhaps we shall meet others who have passed through similar, or comparable experiences, in other times, and in other places.

Meanwhile, I would like to express my profound appreciation, and gratitude, to Charles Eisenstein for his insightful discussion of *Sacred Economics*; and also the hope that his book will be widely read, and that the discussion it opens will spread, and proliferate, as many discussions, and experiments, in the ongoing process of restoring the *sacred* to humanity, and to planet Earth.

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<sup>15</sup>Douglas Adams, *Life, the Universe and Everything*, 1982.