

Deconstructing Libertarianism

A critique

prompted

by

the film

“Thrive”



Prepared by
Praxis Peace Institute

Deconstructing Libertarianism

A Critique Prompted by the film *Thrive*

A Project of the Praxis Think Tank

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Why is Praxis Peace Institute Publishing this Pamphlet?

The initial impetus for compiling these articles by Praxis Peace Institute was the widespread but private showings of the documentary film, *Thrive*. Through discussions of the content in the film and the written material on the *Thrive* website, we realized that many people viewing the film would not readily perceive the libertarian political agenda behind the film.

Because many people are confused about libertarianism and its impact on the current political landscape, we felt it important to plumb this political philosophy, particularly during an election year. The articles written in this booklet cover a range of topics that deconstruct libertarianism and place it in the context of our current political environment.

The Purpose

Our purpose in compiling this pamphlet is to stimulate discussion, clarify ideas, and provide information for others who want thoughtful and well formulated responses to libertarian ideas.

In our fast-paced world, it is tempting to embrace simple solutions rather than delve into agendas behind some of these simple solutions. For example, if Ron Paul opposes the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and supports the legalization of marijuana, a naïve voter might overlook the fact that Paul also opposes Social Security, Medicare, taxes, public education, choice for women, and many other social programs that most Americans want.

The emotional considerations in election choices have been well documented by cognitive scientists, George Lakoff and Drew Westen. I highly recommend their work, especially the books cited in the reference sections of this pamphlet.

We are grateful to the authors, who have donated both their time in researching and writing these articles and in meetings to discuss the overall themes and construction of the booklet. Praxis Peace Institute is fortunate to have knowledgeable members who were ready to take on this project with exuberance and gusto. The biographies of the writers are on page 53.

This pamphlet is a project of the Praxis Think Tank, an arm of Praxis Peace Institute.

Georgia Kelly, *Director*
Praxis Peace Institute

Deconstructing the Political Agenda Behind *Thrive*

By Georgia Kelly

Background

There have been many screenings in the Bay Area of the privately produced film *Thrive*. It is a long documentary, created in a New-Agey, pseudoscientific mode, which would be entertaining and fairly innocuous if it were not masking a reactionary, libertarian political agenda that stands in stark contrast to the soothing tone of the presentation.

Foster Gamble, the producer, director and narrator of the film, is heir to the Procter & Gamble empire. One advantage of being wealthy is that you can make a film promoting your ideas. One of the disadvantages might be working with a team that is unlikely to challenge those ideas.

Certainly, progressives can find common ground with some of the problems Gamble identifies in the film. We do not want GMOs (genetically modified organisms) in our food supply. We want to stop bank bailouts. We oppose wiretapping and the indefinite detention of American citizens. However, our solutions are very different from the ones posed by libertarians and promoted in *Thrive*.

For example, government regulation could have prevented the runaway libertarian agenda that was pushed by Alan Greenspan and his Ayn Randian cohorts. Such regulations could have prevented bundled foreclosure loans and derivatives that gambled away people's pensions and savings. They could have prevented the housing bubble and subsequent foreclosure debacle. At one time, we had such regulations. That was before the right-wing attack on all things government.

Although Gamble thinks he is creating a political center where the right and left can join together --- in part because he interviews progressives throughout the film --- most of the actual solutions he proposes are strictly libertarian. These "solutions" are expanded on the *Thrive* website, to which he directs the viewer.

The website's "Liberty" page (in the "Solutions" section) is a real shocker. Peppered with quotes from Ayn Rand, Ron Paul and Stefan Molyneux, the page even includes an attack on democracy. Gamble lumps democracy in with bigotry, imperialism, socialism, and fascism, and claims all of these -- including democracy! -- violate the "intrinsic freedom of others."

The political center to which Gamble refers is a myth. George Lakoff, author of *The Political Mind*,¹ explains why there is no such thing as an established “moderate” or “centrist” worldview --- i.e., no single set of ideas characterizes a center or moderate political position. Consequently, different people will describe “the center” in different ways, depending on their particular beliefs about what defines a political center. Moreover, the “center” will also be defined by the prevailing political narrative. If libertarians, conservatives, and ultra right wing factions are debating liberal Democrats, the center will always be on the right. However, if socialists and communists were added to the debate, the center would move toward the left. So, identifying who is allowed into the discussion is a determining factor in defining the “center.”

Lakoff identifies the people who profess some liberal views and some conservative views as “bi-conceptuals,” not centrists. Their voting choices will depend on which frames are activated at a particular time and by which groups have their allegiance at that time.

Lakoff’s discovery is an important contribution to understanding how and why people vote the way they do. It explains the role of emotions, metaphors, and psychological history, all of which determine which buttons we push in the voting booth as well as which buttons have been pushed by the manipulators who know how to influence our behavior.

This is why it is so important to understand the seductive quality that libertarianism has on many voters. When the public’s distaste for unnecessary wars is a major factor in winning votes, Ron Paul might look attractive to people who do not examine his complete ideology. In order to break the spell of one-issue dominance, we must be able to articulate the remainder of the ideology and identify reasons why it is so dangerous.

The Individual and Civil Society

Oliver Wendell Holmes reportedly said, “Taxes are what we pay for civilized society.” Foster Gamble, like other libertarians, considers taxes to be theft and does not realize that an informed citizenry might create a government by, of, and for the people who pay the taxes. Yet, this would require a mature citizenry, not one stuck in the adolescent phase of development that focuses doggedly on individual rights with little regard for the individual’s responsibility to civil society.

Empathy has been associated with progressive politics but, as Lakoff points out, “caring is not just feeling empathy; it is taking responsibility, acting powerfully and courageously.” Taxes used for the general welfare of all are one way society takes care of its citizens and levels the playing field in an economic system that requires a certain percentage of its citizens to be unemployed.

¹ George Lakoff, *The Political Mind*, New York, Tenguin Group, 2008, 69-74.

Here are some examples of the libertarian solutions Gamble puts forth:

1) Limit government

- a. Limit government control (Result: no regulations to reign in corporations or check greed; nothing to protect against global warming, toxic substances, untested drugs, and more.).
- b. Eliminate government subsidies and roll back entitlement programs.
- c. Severely limit or eliminate taxes.

(Points b and c mean there would be no funding for Social Security, Medicare or public education.)

2) Voluntary Systems

- a. Voluntary justice departments. Voluntary education -- there would be no government requirements for education, and public education would be phased out. Gamble's idea is "to keep government out of education and allow people to choose the education they desire."
- b. Create a private highway system.
- c. Dismantle the Justice Department and create private justice systems.
- d. Allow private armies (imagine roving gangs of angry, armed white men serving local warlords or corporations ---and, subject to no civil control).

3) Establish a Truly "Free" Market. This is perhaps the most astonishing error in *Thrive*. After experiencing the extreme free market strategies and near-elimination of regulations by libertarian Alan Greenspan and his ilk, Gamble still maintains that we need not just fewer regulations, but no regulations at all! He proposes instead the "utopian" free market as envisioned by Ayn Rand.

To quote this section on the *Thrive* website:

*"We have never experienced a truly free market without government intervention. There would be tremendous innovation, diversity and growth to create thriving economic systems."*²

Unexplained Leaps

There are many such unexplained leaps in *Thrive*. It is a mystery of millennial proportions why innovation and growth would suddenly spring forth fully formed like Athena from the head of Zeus, simply because we have no government intervention. There is no prior example of such a success story, now or in the past, that would substantiate such a deluded

² <http://www.thrivemovement.com/economics-solutions-strategies>

theory. However, if we are seeking states without a central government -- a presumed libertarian paradise from which to learn -- we might point to Somalia.³

Other leaps beg other questions:

- 1) How does eliminating taxes suddenly create jobs and achieve wealth for all people?
- 2) How does eliminating government regulations lead to reigned-in corporations? (Without government intervention, corporations would be completely free to wreak havoc on the populace. The non-violation idea might be lovely in theory, but history shows us that some people will always violate others when they are free to do so.)
- 3) How do we get from voluntary education to a society that can read, write, understand the lessons of history, and be politically vigilant?

The *Thrive* film and website give rise to endless questions like these. They repeatedly tout “liberty” while responsibility and civil society are never mentioned. They also fail to address greed, the need to limit growth, or the individual’s responsibility to society.

Another red flag in the film is Gamble’s admission to being “profoundly influenced by Ludwig von Mises,” a founding member of the libertarian Austrian School of Economics often promoted by libertarians Ron Paul and Michele Bachmann.

It is critical to point out what fallout would ensue from a further deregulated “free” market. An example of the *laissez faire* adage, “let the market decide,” can be seen in the way employees at Wal-Mart are treated. Among other things, the anti-union behemoth pays low wages to its employees in the U.S. and supports near-slave conditions in Bangladesh garment factories.⁴ Without regulation of any kind in this country, who or what would stop slave labor from thriving here?

What is to Be Done?

There are many examples of civil society created for the benefit of all -- none of which seems to have caught *Thrive*’s attention. Here at Praxis Peace Institute, perhaps our favorite would be the Mondragón Cooperatives in the Basque region of Spain. Unlike libertarians, Mondragon’s members have tested their vision in real life and made it practical, beginning 57 years ago with one business and five worker-owners. Today Mondragón includes 120 worker-owned businesses ranging from small retail shops to major industries, and nearly 100,000 worker-owners. The workplace is democratically managed, with hierarchy limited

³ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7QDv4sYwj00>

⁴ Spencer Woodman, *The Nation*, January 23, 2012, <http://www.thenation.com/article/165437/labor-takes-aim-walmart-again>

to management functions and the placement of people with specific skills. One of their core principles is “wage solidarity,” with CEOs’ salaries capped at 6 to 8 times the workers’ lowest pay. In the three seminars that Praxis has organized at the Mondragón Cooperatives, we learned that Mondragón puts “people before profit.” This is in keeping with another of their core principles, *the instrumental and subordinated nature of capital*.

Does this mean that Mondragón lags behind businesses and corporations that support a “free” market ideology? Quite the contrary. Mondragón has its own bank, Caja Laboral, with over 380 branches located throughout Spain, a bank which is still lending in spite of the economic woes in Spain today. Mondragón supports its own social services, pensions and healthcare, and boasts the largest research and development center in Europe with 13 separate entities. There is zero unemployment in the Mondragón businesses, while Spain’s overall unemployment hovers around 20 percent.

The American myth says we can “have it all.” But compared with Mondragón’s view, that seems provincially (or arrogantly) naïve. Why should we even want “it all”? The countries and communities that value social connection, social services, and the eradication of poverty consistently appear at the top of the happiness index and in fact are generally quite prosperous. The Basque region has the highest standard of living and the lowest unemployment rate in Spain and it also has the largest number of people involved in worker-owned businesses.

Mondragón is one example of a proven model that works along cooperative and social lines. It does not place the individual über alles, but rather within a social context that honors and respects both the individual and the community. The Mondragón Cooperatives, like many other successful worker-owned organizations worldwide, have been built from a holistic vision grounded in a practical sensibility.

Summary

The reactionary program sold as a “vision” on the *Thrive* website is nothing short of a dark fantasy that would catapult us back to the 19th century with “voluntary” types of social regulation; i.e., no taxes, no labor laws, no child labor laws, no environmental regulations, no Social Security, no Medicare, no public education, no civil rights, and no government programs for the people. We see how well that worked in the 19th century.

It is our responsibility to educate family and friends about the reactionary philosophy behind *Thrive* in particular and libertarianism in general. This is a great opportunity for discussion and debate, and we are grateful to Foster Gamble for providing an incentive for us to deconstruct his film and libertarianism.

Note: Portions of this article were published on the *Huffington Post* as *Thrive Deconstructing the film*.

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Some Reflections on *Thrive*

By Dan Drasin

Thrive is an outside-the box documentary film that proposes to facilitate an ecologically sustainable, peaceful and prosperous world. It identifies many of the political and financial barriers to realizing that dream, dicusses urgently-needed developments in the energy field and elsewhere, and offers its own kind of utopian blueprint.

Many of us agree with the more sensible and achievable goals presented in the film, and also with the stated nonaggression principle, which has been found in most religions and ethical systems since time immemorial.

But some of us profoundly question the broader libertarian arguments put forth in the film and on its website. For example, on the film's astonishingly doctrinaire SOLUTIONS-LIBERTY webpage, we find the word "liberty" appearing no less than 15 times, but neither "responsibility" nor "community" appears even once. ***Unbelievably, democracy itself is demonized here as the equivalent of slavery, bigotry, imperialism, genocide, religious persecution, theft, corruption, conspiracy, fascism, communism and more!*** ⁵

So we and many others (including some interviewed in this film) are wondering out loud, ***What the bleep is actually going on?*** While parts of *Thrive* seem to thoroughly repudiate this bizarre philosophy, other parts decidedly do not. So could *Thrive* be a new-age Trojan horse? Could the benign solutions presented in its proposed "Stage One" be baiting the hook for unspoken, regressive agendas? We certainly hope not, but many details found in the film and on its website compel us to take a closer look. Here are some of our most urgent concerns.

- Many of *Thrive's* proposed Stage 1 reforms make sense as far as they go, and we agree that strong, publicly accountable government policies would be needed to implement them. But details of Stages Two and Three are often presented via simplistic generalizations and convoluted logic. The psychology, mechanics and politics of the transitions involved seem shrouded in mystery, magical thinking, and denial or ignorance of the complexities of life as actually lived.
- Many proposals put forth in the film have not been tested in the real world, even on a small scale. They are merely stated in terms of "could" and "would." Some are apparently expected to appear full-blown and miraculously debugged.
- Key arguments put forth on the SOLUTIONS-LIBERTY webpage appear incoherent, self-

⁵ See www.thrivemovement.com/solutions-liberty

contradictory and/or demonstrably counterfactual. The philosophy presented here purports to be a bulwark against the "murderous tyranny" of "all governments" --- strangely, even those highly accountable to their people. Yet it provides no remedy for the inevitable tyranny of an unrestrained private sector armed with unlimited financial resources and lacking any public accountability. Is the latter form of tyranny acceptable to the libertarian, while the former is not?

- Nowhere is it specified whether state and local governments are included among the "murderous." Do libertarians and those allied with them understand their own principles?
- Libertarian-style deregulation tends disproportionately to free the wealthy and influential from constraint, while the deck remains stacked against the rest of us. ***Replacing state court systems with a privatized insurance scheme, as the makers of THRIVE actually propose for Stage Three***, seems especially alarming, since this "justice" system would apparently be based on purely financial considerations. As far as we can tell, it would eliminate all public accountability and therefore any protection from the bribery, corruption and wild-west behaviors that inevitably follow deregulation. How the less-fortunate could afford to buy into this insurance is nowhere explained. Courts replaced by private insurance? Yes. You read it correctly.
- The 12 SECTORS-HEALTH webpage makes many valid observations about the state of contemporary healthcare and medicine in the US; and the HEALTH-SOLUTIONS page acknowledges cryptically that the UK and other countries "have come up with a way to change this dynamic." But curiously, no details of these socialized systems are provided, and the description stops there. Then we read in Stage Three that private health-insurance companies will have all sorts of reasons to behave themselves on the basis of financial incentives alone. But absent any public accountability and effective regulation, what is to prevent this laissez-faire arrangement from devolving into collusion, price-fixing and other anticompetitive practices? Are we to believe that no government engagement is needed to prevent such mischief? And again, what about the financially unfortunate who can't afford to insure themselves?
- The ECONOMIC SOLUTIONS STRATEGIES webpage proposes some positive alternatives to our corrupt and sinking financial system, such as permitting the federal government to print its own money and encouraging the development of local economic and monetary systems. But stunningly, ***its program for universal prosperity and economic equality appears to consist solely of lowering taxes!*** Miraculously, those at the low end who pay little or no taxes to begin with will have saved so much money as

to render Medicare, Social Security or Welfare unnecessary, with enough left over to "help support each other." We await the day when the computations that justify such a plan are revealed.

- Inexplicably, the film and website ignore specific, long-standing, successful experiments in local democracy, intentional communities and worker-owned enterprises. For example, Spain's Mondragon cooperatives, which successfully own and manage everything from retail stores to heavy industries and are entirely worker-owned, have been tested and refined over time, but have eluded the makers of *Thrive*.
- In its obsessive focus on "the individual" as an abstraction, the film's libertarian philosophy ignores the fact that "individual" simply means "undivided within itself." The term itself says nothing about whether an individual's relationships to groups are, or should be, voluntary or compelled.
- The film implies that the individual is the fundamental building block from which free societies emerge when people are not coerced. But individual humans are not building blocks; they are complex beings, and the whole of a human society is far greater than the sum of its parts. No individual "makes it on his or her own."
- The libertarian philosophy describes "the group" or "the collective" as if all communities or societies were inimical to individual freedom or fulfillment and should somehow disappear. But society is as much a part of objective reality as any individual. Without access to its commerce, industry, labor, public services and all the rest, human individuals are powerless to exercise whatever political freedom they may possess. Isolated from society, a flesh-and-blood individual is emotionally bereft. Conversely, the character of an individual is profoundly shaped by its society and the specific opportunities it may or may not provide.
- Like other idealistic philosophies, *Thrive's* libertarian view presupposes the advent of a mature, perfected humanity that would be magically self-governing once set free from all social constraints. Sadly, it prescribes no process whereby such an extraordinary inner development might be realized.

These considerations barely scratch the surface of the complex issues raised by *Thrive* and its mixed philosophical bag. We hope these comments and questions will give rise to constructive dialogue.

When libertarians deride the idea of social fairness as just one more nuisance, they unleash greed. The kind of unconstrained greed that is now loose in America is leading not to real liberty but to corporate criminality and deceit; not to democracy but to politics dominated by special interests; and not to prosperity but to income stagnation for much of the population and untold riches at the very top."

~ Jeffrey Sachs

...the whole so-called Libertarian ideology ... may sound nice on the surface but if you think it through, it's just a call for corporate tyranny. It takes away any barrier to corporate tyranny.

~ Noam Chomsky

Rats and roaches live by competition under the laws of supply and demand. It is the privilege of human beings to live under the laws of justice and mercy

~ Wendell Berry

Challenging the Hidden Ideological Underbelly of *Thrive*

By Ben Boyce

Notices for showings of the documentary *Thrive* are being posted all over the North Bay, so it is clear that there is a well-funded campaign to get this film into wide circulation. Given the stakes in the upcoming 2012 elections, and the emergence of a powerful worldwide Occupy Movement to take back public space and reclaim our democracy, the time of political reckoning is at hand; we can no longer afford to waste our time with distractions, sideshows and ideological dead-ends.

My concern about the political ideology underlying the film has been heightened by the number of New Age adherents who are drawn to it, attracted by the tone and the style, as well as the delicious implication that they are being let in on a civilization-changing secret. Progressive movement activists that I work with are appalled that when the New Age cohort (and, sadly, a significant element within the Occupy Movement) finally get politically engaged, it is under the auspices of the highly questionable and historically discredited libertarian political philosophy at the core of *Thrive*.

I now realize that it is my civic duty to raise a red flag to signal awareness of the neo-libertarian values that are at the heart of the film. When the topic of *Thrive* is raised, controversy should arise alongside it. Make no mistake, the actual policy solutions in the documentary constituted the norm in the first Gilded Age of 'laissez faire' capitalism, that is, the McKinley Era at the end of the 19th century, for which the libertarian/conservative movements seem to still pine. That was a time when there were minimal taxes on corporations, no worker's rights, no pesky EPA environmental regulations, no minimum wage, no social safety net to prevent families from tumbling precipitously from marginal employment and insecure housing to abject penury and homelessness.

Everywhere in the world where the libertarian ideology has been put in practice, this condition of mass immiseration and concentration of wealth in the hands of the 1% has been a consistent historical fact. This ideology has been tried and failed. We are still recovering from the latest crisis consequent to a thirty-year spree of unregulated capitalism of the kind touted in libertarian economic doctrine. One would think the recent global economic collapse would have finally buried the quaint notion that markets are self-regulating. Even the high priest of free market fundamentalist economic orthodoxy, former Fed Chair Alan Greenspan, a devoted Ayn Rand libertarian, recanted publicly on this point, testifying before Congress in 2008 as the ashes were still falling from the ceiling in the aftermath of the bonfire of the wealth of an entire generation: "Our model could not comprehend this outcome..." This religion should be dead. Only money keeps it alive.

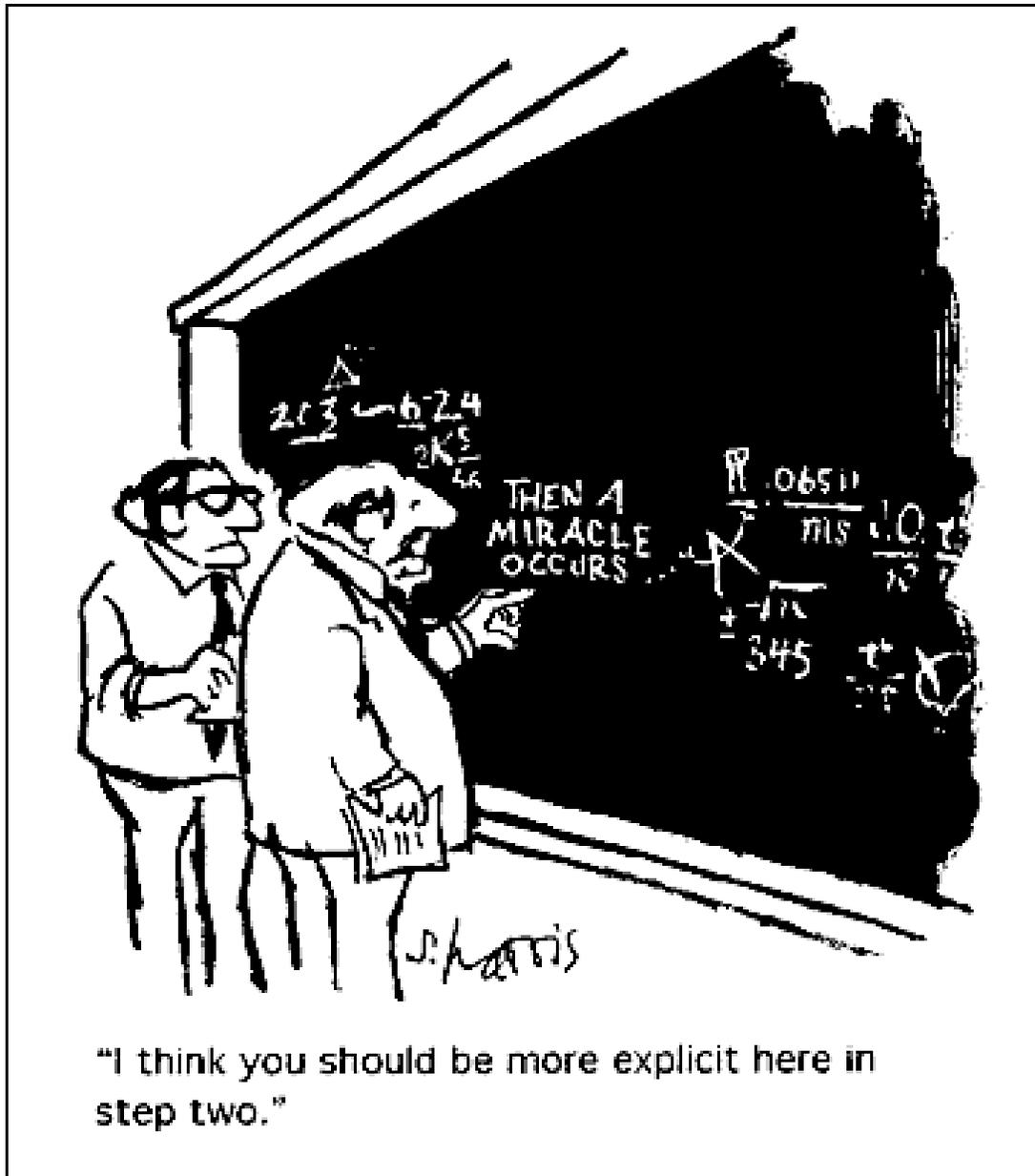
We need to extract from the neo-libertarian ideology the useful seed teaching on the importance of the value of individual liberty, but we should make it clear that the policy prescriptions in the "Solutions" segment of *Thrive* are reactionary and inadequate to the great task of the 21st century, which is to work, individually and collectively, to build up our environmental and social capital through re-structuring an integrated network of energy resources, transportation and workforce housing in alignment with the goal of reducing regional Green House gases and drawing down energy intensity. We need a full-employment economy that sets millions of young people on the path to stable family life and gives hope and purpose to economically marginal citizens. There is a desperate need to develop the social and political will to put the people to work doing the essential tasks of environmental remediation, public works infrastructure projects, childcare and teaching, nursing and caretaking. This will take money and political commitment, in the form of public and private organizations, funded through taxes and voluntary donations.

This will not happen solely on the basis of the private market system. The instrument of government will be required in order to accomplish this task. It is incoherent and ahistorical to believe we can defend and enhance the common good without collective action. This is the root of my profound differences with the underlying political philosophy of *Thrive* and why I am compelled to take on the campaign of exposing its dark ideological underbelly.

The *Thrive* message must be forcefully and publicly repudiated, because it could otherwise perform essentially the same function that the 'New Age' movement did in the 1970's, which was to dissipate the revolutionary energies coming from the Awakening of the 1960's and remove an entire generation from the field of political struggle. Directing them to place their energies in personal fulfillment and private concerns, the progressive movement for social and ecological justice was abandoned.

With the field cleared, the well-organized and well-funded forces of the nascent right-wing conservative movement moved in to fill the vacuum, while the well-meaning spiritual seekers attended to their 'personal development' or their 'spiritual path.' Meanwhile, the material conditions that permitted them the luxury of disengaging from political life were being steadily undermined by the corporate imperative to concentrate wealth in the hands of the 1% ownership class. Now many of these New Age folks are finding that their sources of income as 'cultural creatives' have dried up, as our corporate overlords have finally deemed them to be superfluous. The boot heel is now on *their* neck. Their abdication of historical responsibility led directly to the dire condition in which we now find ourselves. Let's not let the forces behind *Thrive* derail the next generation of potential leaders of the worldwide progressive movement.

My goal will be realized when Gamble takes the film back into the shop for an edit, cuts the "Solutions" section, and returns to the opening promise of the film; namely, the search for new sources of energy and the shared goal of re-tooling industrial civilization for a steady-state sustainable future that delivers personal freedom and the resources with which to enjoy them. We may share the goal, but we do differ deeply on the method.



The Ethical Incoherence at the Heart of *Thrive*

By Gus diZerega

The movie *Thrive* seeks to unify the libertarian principle of nonaggression with the widespread concerns by many of us for “right livelihood” in an ecologically sustainable world of peaceful and prosperous human beings. It accurately identifies many of the big political barriers to realizing any such dream, barriers erected by government and corporate bureaucracies alike, and by those who control them. But many of us otherwise sympathetic are profoundly disturbed by the solutions advocated. The discussion that follows addresses arguments made in the web site’s discussion of solutions. (1)⁶

Many of us agree with the libertarian nonaggression principle that underlies the movie’s proposed solutions. Aggression against peaceful people is never justified. So the first parts of the movie have considerable value: many of the problems we face are well described and the emphasis on finding solutions is one many of us share. So why do we think it goes off the rails?

The core problem

Problems arise because libertarians and those allied with them *do not understand their own principles*. While we all approve of nonaggression, libertarians’ interpretation of what this means leaves out many forms of the worst aggression, and even renders it invisible, because their idea of an individual is faulty. This error leads to a misunderstanding of what property is, yet ‘property’ is a core principle in their suggested solutions. Growing out of this misunderstanding is another basic one, which renders libertarians unable to comprehend the value of democracy. These are serious shortcomings indeed because they shape in destructive ways the kinds of solutions that we might want to pursue while blinding libertarians even to possibilities in keeping with their principles.

We will understand these criticisms after we examine two foundational principles on which *Thrive’s* political program rests.

- 1) At the human level, the fundamental wholeness, the quantum, the basic torus energy field, is the individual person – not a group.
- 2) No one gets to violate anyone else – his or her person, property or privacy – except in true self-defense.

After examining their weaknesses, I will look at the hopeful possibilities they obscure.

⁶ <http://www.thrivemovement.com/views/solutions-liberty>

1.

Let's begin with the first of these statements, because within its apparent simplicity lie many confusions.

“At the human level, the fundamental wholeness, the quantum, the basic torus energy field, is the individual person – not a group.”

Individuals

One of the terms used here identifies a key misunderstanding hidden in what would in many ways seem to be the same ethical position I, and many others share. That term is “quantum.” The individual is described as a “quantum.” But then the term “individual” is used as if it were an atom. The individual is the fundamental building block from which free societies emerge when people are not coerced. This image of the individual as a self-contained unit with clear boundaries is a staple of traditional market economic theories, including, the Austrian School typified by Ludwig von Mises, so praised in *Thrive*.

Since *Thrive* likes to use quantum terminology, let us begin with a genuinely quantum phenomena, the photon. In quantum mechanics, a photon is a single quantum, and it is far more paradoxical than any atom. Thinking about quanta helps us think more clearly about individuals than does using the idea of an atom.

Ask certain experimental questions about the nature of light, and photons act as if they are particles (individuals). Ask other questions, and they act as if they are waves (certainly not individuals). *A photon is at least both*, even though the human mind cannot conceive clearly how this can be. The math works and exceedingly exact predictions can be made, but a clear mental image of a photon eludes us.

I think we can assume individuals are at least as complex as photons. We do not have to inquire very far to see that this is so.

Individuals only resemble atoms (particles) in some contexts and when some questions are asked of them. Ask an individual one set of questions and you get answers in keeping with libertarian beliefs, where individuals resemble irreducible units of social and moral reality. But if you ask individuals *other* questions you get very different results, for individuals are also social beings. As such, their responses reflect the time and place they were born and their experiences with others, especially as children, even down to the most basic levels of who they are.

To understand what an individual really is we need *at least* three insights that *cannot* be reduced to one or the other.

- 1) *Society is created by the actions of individuals.* This is the libertarian view, of individuals as basic units, a kind of social atom. It is true as far as it goes, which is not nearly as far as libertarians think it does.
- 2) *Individuals are social creations.* We reflect our place and time, and even think with concepts we inherit and only slightly modify. Albert Einstein could never have arisen on the Lakota Reservation, nor Black Elk have become the man he was, had he lived in late 19th century Central Europe. Even very basic individual behavior such as suicide varies in frequency from society to society.
- 3) *Society is an objective reality.* When we are born knowing nothing or next to nothing, we take as unquestionably true both things we learn about the material world – rocks are hard, stoves are hot – and things we learn about the social world – marriage is between a man and a woman, marriage is between one man and many women. Over time, we can free ourselves from some of these taken-for-granted ideas, but we do so only while taking other concepts as unquestionably true. We rely on what we regard as objectively true to orient ourselves in life, and we cannot abandon it all at once. For example, the English language teaches us that individuals are different from what they do, in that the subject is different from the verb, even though individuals are always doing something and what they do is in fact a part of who they are.

The famous sociologist Peter Berger argued, and I think correctly, that we cannot understand individuals-in-society until we attend to all three of these insights.

In a word, individuals are the gestalt of interacting relationships, and every relationship involves at least two parties. Every such gestalt is conscious --- the only real center of moral action --- and in our sense, is unique. If at the age of 12, I had been adopted by a Japanese family and left American culture, I would be a completely different person today. *Relationships are as basic as individuality.* The two CANNOT be separated. No relationships, no individuals.

For those wanting to understand these points more, I discuss them in three fairly short blog posts along with following discussions with readers on the *Studies in Emergent Order* website.⁷ I also made many of the same points in a shorter recent and shorter Patheos post.⁸

⁷ <http://studiesinemergentorder.org/2011/02/17/emergent-systems-and-methodological-individualism-part-i-a-false-dichotomy/>

<http://studiesinemergentorder.org/2011/02/24/emergent-systems-and-methodological-individualism-part-11-the-issue-of-moral-standing/>

2.

Groups

If individuals are more complex than simple atoms, then groups are more complex than simple threats to individual freedom or simple collections of individuals. Relationships always occur in groups. Since there cannot be individuals without relationships, so there cannot be individuals without groups

An initial libertarian reply might be “But the issue is whether the groups are voluntary or not.” This is not true.

From the very beginning we are born into and live within groups that are not voluntary, starting with our families. Our parents do better or worse jobs at loving and raising us, and in the process powerfully influence our beliefs, emotional security, self image, tendency towards anger or love, and on and on. If our families are wealthy some opportunities open up far more widely to us than if we are poor.

The society we are born into is another group we do not choose. It also powerfully influences our life possibilities. Many a banker or venture capitalist would live a far different life in a different society. Some would die young if they were born into a poor agricultural society. Yet they neither chose nor did anything to earn their place in the society in which they were born, which makes their affluence possible.

Even after they attained adulthood and set off on their own, successful people achieved success in most cases not simply through their unique abilities, real as they may be. First they benefited from a social inheritance going back hundreds and even thousands of years, an inheritance they were lucky enough to acquire. Second, they lived in an environment where they had the good fortune to meet the right people at the right time, people who recognized their qualities and were in a position to reward them.

Of course, hard work is also important for those not born to wealth, but many poor Mexican laborers work harder than the wealthy. Creative work might also play a role in success, but creativity, even that honored long after the creator’s death, is often not rewarded. Consider Vincent Van Gogh, who earned millions for people who collected his work though he lived and died in poverty. Finally, while many people who rise from poverty to wealth work hard, many people who work hard do not rise from poverty to wealth.

<http://studiesinemergentorder.org/2011/02/27/part-iii-the-costs-of-methodological-individualism-in-policy-analysis/>

⁸ <http://www.patheos.com/Resources/Additional-Resources/Pagan-and-American-Individualism-Gus-diZerega-12-16-2011.html>

Along with individual ability and the environment into which they are born, luck is a vital part of success, especially big successes. First, there is the luck of being born in the right society. Then, there is the luck involved in meeting the right people. The wisest free market thinkers, such as Nobel Laureate F. A. Hayek, were very clear that luck and undeserved good fortune counted for a lot of material success in a market society, and that the market did NOT simply reward hard work and creativity. Those who invoke his name would do well to actually read him.

What of “collectivism,” the perpetual libertarian bogeyman? Collectivism is a modern form of tribalism, writ large. The idea behind collectivism is that one group is so important and so decisive in determining who we are, that both our individuality and everything else fades into relative unimportance. Some on the left said this was true for class. Some on the right claim it is true for race. Some in both make a similar claim for the nation or “the people.” Great crimes have been committed in its name. But collectivism has less to do with individuals being immersed in society than in helping constitute who they are.

In practice we belong to many different groups: cultural, family, national, economic, racial, sexual, generational, and on and on. We belong to some groups by choice, some by fate, and in our individuality we create a unique self that stands in both support and tension with all these various groups because we cannot be reduced to any one of them. There is no single, most-basic group. But that hardly means groups are secondary to individuals. Groups are as constitutive of our individuality as individuals are constitutive of groups.

Because individuals can never be separated from groups and many are attached to us by fate not choice, the real issue is not keeping groups “voluntary,” but rather *what are the most appropriate relations* between an individual and a group? Often, these relations can simply be voluntary, as in joining a club or a church. But in other contexts, the issue arises of what kinds of influence you should have in the group once you are a member. And, what kinds of influence should you have on the group. And what kinds of influence should the group have on you?

Until libertarians can take this insight seriously, sadly, they will have little to offer the modern world beyond confusion, by presenting us with a simple dichotomy where no such dichotomy exists, simple or otherwise.

3.

(The quotes in bold are from the Liberty pages under Solutions on the Thrive movement website.)

“No one gets to violate anyone else – his or her person, property or privacy – except in true self-defense.”

At one level violating a person is pretty clear, if the violation is a physical threat or attack. Other kinds of violations are more complicated. I will briefly discuss them below, but want to focus here on *property*. Where did *property* come from? At best it came from agreement and at worst from simple seizure. Ultimately agreement is still essential because if there is no agreement about property rights there can be no market. At most there can be barter, as between two thieves. But how do we reach agreement?

As with individuals, we become confused if we think of “property” as simply a thing.

For example, consider my car, which seems to be as close to being a thing as any example. But can I shine my headlights in your window deliberately to keep you up at night? Or, honk my horn when I drive by your bedroom early in the morning? What if I do not want a muffler, and consider any requirement that I have one as an infringement on my “property rights”?

Most of us would say that in these examples I cross your boundaries. Most cities have noise ordinances, but these ordinances vary significantly. Some places likely have light ordinances. Neighborhood co-ops and landlords also have similar rules. The reason is that things bleed out into the world and there is no purely objective demarcation between the thing and its environment. We need to come to agreement about how much of this bleeding is acceptable and how much is unacceptable. I cannot honk my horn repeatedly in a neighborhood at 3:00 am, but I can talk with a friend while on the sidewalk. Both create noise that might disturb someone. Where between these extremes do we draw the line?

The important libertarian thinker Murray Rothbard once argued no one should be able to pollute another without his or her consent. From this perspective no one was “greener” than Rothbard.

Then someone pointed out to him that if that were the case no one could run an internal combustion engine without the consent of all who could breathe its fumes, which is ultimately everyone. Rothbard then went from too stringent a rule to none at all.

He argued that the polluter had to be identified so he or she could be held personally responsible. That is often impossible as a practical matter. Think of Beijing and smog. Your car’s contribution cannot be traced unless markers were added to its gas, and in any case they would constitute an insignificant part of the whole. Within a Rothbardian society, people could drop dead from poisoned air without legal recourse. Now, no one could be browner than Rothbard.

Confusion arises from advocating two ridiculous extremes, because treating property as a thing with objective boundaries ignores that property always exists in and through

relationships. Some are legitimate relationships and some are illegitimate, and the line between them must be drawn on one of many possible points.

There is *no* clear line between acceptable and unacceptable pollution yet we need one if we are to have a system where contractual agreement works for the ultimate benefit of all and where no one is attacked. Or even if all we want is engines and breathable air. An atomistic world-view cannot solve this problem or even address it clearly.

To put the point a bit differently, “Property” is really a bundle of rights that can be subdivided (as a landlord does, so the tenant has some and the landlord others). These rights define possible *relationships* I may choose to enter into with others. So before property in a contractual sense can exist, we need to have an idea of what are appropriate relationships, and if people disagree, as they always have, we need a way of deciding between competing points of view. I cannot contract with you if we have significantly different ideas of property rights.

The only way to accomplish this necessary task so that the inevitable losers will recognize the outcome as legitimate is if it is fair. Furthermore, the only way it can be considered fair is if everyone affected by the decision gets some opportunity for input, and at some crucial point, equal input, into what that decision will be. If you have more input than me at every point, and I lose, I will reasonably regard the outcome as unfair.

In the absence of fairness, those who disagree are simply coerced. So, to assume property and then worry about coercion is in the most basic sense, incoherent.

The idea of property given in *Thrive* obscures the fact that property cannot be derived without a *prior* collective means for making decisions, and that boundaries are never hermetically sealed off from one another, so different people can sincerely disagree on where those boundaries should be drawn. I wrote on this issue with respect to problems libertarians were having recently in New Hampshire.⁹

The community *Thrive* addresses (our community speaking broadly), is concerned with “right relationships.” Many of us, myself included, buy organic food primarily because it is more likely to have been produced in the right relationship to the earth. That it usually tastes better and is healthier is secondary to many of us. Many of us also think human interactions should be based on right relationships of mutual respect, at a minimum.

Any system of thought, such as *atomistic* libertarianism, which cannot address the questions of what constitutes right relationships from both an individual and a systemic

⁹ <http://studiesinemergentorder.org/2011/09/27/new-hampshire-problems-illustrate-importance-of-public-values/>

level, will have a hard time comprehending our concerns, let alone addressing them effectively. In fact, it will delay our ability to improve them, as we see in a conclusion drawn from the flawed libertarian interpretation of the nonaggression principle.

4.

“If it is against life itself to violate another against their will, then our very Democracy-which is born of and sustains itself by taking people’s hard-earned money, whether they like it or not, and calling it ‘taxation,’ - is, in and of itself, a violation.”

And,

“There are many who try to justify violating the intrinsic freedom of others. Look at slavery, bigotry, imperialism, ‘nation building,’ ‘divine right to rule,’ ‘manifest destiny,’ eminent domain, royal decree, genocide, white supremacy, male domination, religious persecution, theft, corruption, conspiracy, fascism, communism, socialism, democracy - all excuses for some to put on a uniform, adopt a title, assume power over others...and violate them.”

At the level of practical politics, here is by far the biggest libertarian error. Our hard earned money is made possible by a complex system of economic exchange rooted in defined property rights, determined by some means so as to apply to a society as a whole. The fairest means to make these decisions is by democracy. *There is no other alternative where those who disagree with the decision will be able to sincerely say it was made fairly.* Property is not immaculately conceived.

That the authors of the papers on the *Thrive* website compare democracy with genocide and fascism, indicates that they do not understand this fact. There is another concept they do not understand, democracy itself. Democracy is the reduction of social coercion, given that decisions must be made where people disagree. It is the principle of fairness in this context.

Many libertarians do not understand what our Founders wanted to do; perhaps because they take James Madison’s statement “we are a republic, not a democracy,” entirely out of context. When Madison wrote “democracy,” he meant small city-state democracy, such as Athens. “Republic” was a popular but ill-defined word. There was no word for what the Founders were proposing, and so Madison called it a “republic.” He *defined* a republic as a government where citizens elected representatives. Period. That was it.

But don’t take my word for it. Check what James Madison wrote on the issue by reading his *Federalist 10*. It is not long, although the sentences are, and then compare it with Ron Paul’s

ignorant and false definition of a republic in the *Thrive* paper “Solutions: What Can I Do”? You will see that in the most literal sense, Paul does **not** know what he is talking about.¹⁰

This huge error combines with what I call the assumption of the “immaculate conception of property” to completely reverse reality. It eliminates any sense of what I call “public values,” values that need to be expressed more or less society-wide to count, and which ignores that democratic politics is the means by which Americans or anyone else can come together to establish those public values. The rules defining property rights are public values. Environmental pollution regulations, national parks and social security are other public values, and there are many more.

In all these cases the critical question to ask is what is fair to all, so that the inevitable minority will have had a fair chance to get their case heard and will regard the result as legitimate even when they lose. Of course, people who decide in advance that anything they do not explicitly agree on is illegitimate will not agree, but these people are poorly cut out for life with other human beings since they almost certainly cannot even agree on what constitutes property and in its absence from a libertarian perspective there can be little freedom. Ironically they benefit from a cultural inheritance that, given the opportunity, they would destroy.

The *Thrive* paper makes a big point of how violent states are to their own populations. But it never notes that levels of violence in democracies are far lower towards their own citizens. This is true because democracies are founded on principles diametrically opposed to collectivism.

Rudy Rummel has done yeoman’s work in exploring the implications of this fact, along with the equally important fact that there has never been a war between two democracies. I know that various “counter examples” are sometimes brought up, so I recommend reading Rummel’s, *Power Kills: Democracy as a Method of Nonviolence*.

Democracies are sufficiently different from undemocratic states so that melding the two together is misleading. Sweden has a big government; Pinochet’s Chile had a smaller one. Pinochet murdered thousands and Sweden murders none. A way of thinking that cannot appreciate the difference between them is of no value today.

American democracy is under serious assault today, not only by big government and big military but also by big business and big finance. They cannot be separated in practice. Ever. Property rights and politics *always* go together. The answer is not to eliminate any method by which we decide public values, but rather to improve on how we do this and so bring them all under control.

¹⁰ <http://www.constitution.org/fed/federa10.htm>

Sadly, the *Thrive* paper offers us nothing at all along that line.

Blindness to Possibilities

When, due to abstract reasoning and sloppy thinking, people have blinded themselves to concrete problems, they also blind themselves to finding solutions to those problems, even solutions that may be in better harmony with their abstract reasoning than their own preferred ideas.

Consider for example the Mondragon Cooperatives in Spain. They are worker-owned, market based, contractual, voluntary, and without the hierarchical and often abusive relationships that forced workers to organize unions in self-defense in the United States and elsewhere. They are also quite profitable and have *thrived* for over 50 years. Here is one account with photographs by an American who recently visited this region. ¹¹

The Mondragon co-operatives have solved or substantially improved many of the kinds of problems libertarians as blind to seeing. Furthermore, the Mondragon Cooperatives do so within a framework that does not violate libertarian principles! Yet, *NO* libertarians to my knowledge have given them any informed attention. This glaring absence illustrates a breathtaking lack of awareness of the possibilities that can be achieved within the context of voluntary contract and freedom, values in which libertarians believe.

The causes of this blindness are the same as the causes for libertarians' blindness towards what individuals and property are and how the latter implies the prior existence of some means of enforcing decisions on others who disagree. *Libertarians' defective understanding of their own principles has led them to miss some of the most exciting examples of wonderful and sustainable innovations growing from those same principles.*

Conclusion

I hope it is clear that my problem with *Thrive* is the movie's failure to adequately understand the principles it itself advocates in order for us to create a more humane and sustainable society. It presents one dimension of a problem that is multi-dimensional. The core insight lacking in libertarian thinking is the failure to grasp the centrality of relationships as constitutive of individuals, and to recognize that relationships are the key to understanding property rights and just politics.

Ironically, many of the people towards whom the movie is aimed are very sensitive to these unaddressed dimensions. What are right relationships within all the incredible

¹¹ http://www.huffingtonpost.com/georgia-kelly/an-alternative-to-cutthro_b_759546.html

http://www.huffingtonpost.com/georgia-kelly/return-to-mondragon_b_1002750.html

complexities of human life? What are the right relationships between us and the economy and government? What are the right relationships between us and the earth and the more-than-human world?

We agree with libertarians that the United States' corrupt collusion of government and wealth, of the military and the defense industry, is bad and should end. But does that mean the government's tasks should not be performed at all? Tasks such as civil rights protection, including protection against sexual harassment or bad employment conditions, which are important means for ending or reducing coercion in relationships brought about by systemically unequal power. There are many such examples with respect to both people and the environment. We need more than slogans and vague promises about the "magic of the market" when the entire past history of the market in real societies suggests our worries are very well founded.

In fact, we reverse the libertarians' concerns about coercion and argue that it is they who do not understand what an individual is. It is they who do not understand truly terrible forms of coercion and can only perceive it when a gun is pointed at them. And apparently they do not understand at all what it is to be a human being of moderate to low income and subordinate to another, anywhere in the United States, now or in the past.

When libertarians choose to broaden their understanding of what an individual really is they will be in a position to contribute importantly to a better world. Until then, libertarianism in theory praises what is voluntary while in practice it defends authoritarian relations in business, praises enormous inequalities between people seeking to enter into equal relationships, demonstrates blindness to ecological questions not easily reduced to property rights and money profit, and brings still more blindness to abuses of the powerless by the powerful through their greater ability to tweak society's rules and practices in their favor.

As strong as this critique has been, my intent is not simply to dismiss *Thrive* but to say, "You come here with a message of hope and promise. We think that message will be more hopeful and hold greater promise if you fully grasp the principles you say you believe in, so that you may learn from us as we might learn from you."

The subjects of every state ought to contribute toward the support of the government, as nearly as possible, in proportion to their respective abilities; that is, in proportion to the revenue which they respectively enjoy under the protection of the state.

~ Adam Smith

In every single case, worldwide, without exception, the economic strength and maturity of a nation came about as a result not of governments 'standing aside' or 'getting out of the way' but, instead, of direct government participation in and protection of the 'infant' industries and economy.

~ Thom Hartmann

Critique of the Movie, *Thrive*

Benjamin N. Colby

Introduction

The movie, *Thrive*, with Foster Gamble as creator and host along with his wife, Kimberly as producer, and an extensive list of interviewees and production people, has been receiving much attention since its debut on the Internet. The movie is a visually attractive four-part narrative, the first three parts describing the sociopolitical predicament we appear to be in. These three set the scene for the solution offered in the last part. The names of the four parts are suggestive: Uncovering the Code, Following the Money, Uncovering the Global Domination Agenda and Creative Solutions.

In the last part, Creative Solutions, Gamble's idea is to undertake a three-stage process combining "the best of both liberal (the first stage) and conservative (second stage) perspectives" with a reconciling of both at a new level in the third and final stage. He gives a key role in this process to a torus model, first described in the introductory part of the film as a donut-shaped phenomenon on which magnetic fields and other phenomena are mapped as "vector equilibria." The torus "provides a template" for both the individual and a society based on integrity and wholeness. It conserves what's working with a built-in feedback so it can self-correct and innovate to maintain balance. That makes it sound almost like a sentient being. But I take it only as a metaphor. In any case, no details are given about how such a template maps onto the real world. Nor does it coincide with any current neurophysiological account of human thought or behavior¹²

Each of the four parts in the film is likely to appeal to a different kind of viewer, which would seem to fit *Thrive's* stated aim to arrive at a political solution that would appeal to everyone and be entirely different from the current binary system of Democrats and Republicans in the US.

The First Three Parts of *Thrive*

The audience addressed in the first part, "Uncovering the Code," is clearly the new age crowd. A main object is to show how an esoteric object, the torus, was depicted in designs on archeological artifacts suggesting that the torus was known in ancient cultures through

¹² The closest thing I can think of in the real world would be what the neuroscientist, Rodolfo R. Llinas describes in his research papers and book, *I of the vortex*, where our use of the term, "I" represents an intangible mental state which we regard as ours if it is something that we can innervate through the vestibular nucleus in our brains. The self thus exists as a "calculated entity," involving predictive properties of the computational states the brain produces in order to interact successfully with the external world.

Llinas, Rodolfo R.

2001 *I of the Vortex from Neurons to Self*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press.

interactions with higher, more sophisticated visitors from outer space. This whole section is reminiscent of von Daniken's film and book, *Chariot of the Gods*, whose similar themes were popular in the late 1960s. Also included in this part of *Thrive* are crop circle messages presumably from outer space, followed by the idea of free energy invented by Nikola Tesla and its suppression (presumably by special interests at high levels in the dominance hierarchy *Thrive* describes later). This suppression is also linked to the suppression of UFO phenomena by the same powers that occupy the dominance hierarchy described in Parts II and III and depicted graphically on *Thrive's* web site.

The lowest level in the dominance hierarchy is the government, which is controlled by the next level up, consisting of powerful corporations. These in turn are controlled the next level up by banks, which are ranked in four levels of power. Culminating at the peak of the pyramid is a small but powerful elite—an apparent cabal of family dynastic elites represented symbolically by an eye. The three family dynasties most often mentioned as part of the eye are the Rothschilds, Rockefellers and Morgans. *Thrive* often employs a conspiratorial tone in describing the effects of elite domination of banks. This is a “conspiracy theory” that may have some substance to it. Ellen Hodgson Brown's *Web of Debt* quotes Nathan Rothschild as saying sometime after 1820, “I care not what puppet is placed upon the throne of England to rule the Empire on which the sun never sets. The man who controls Britain's money supply controls the British Empire, and I control the British money supply.”¹³

Other elite controllers are mentioned later in *Thrive*. Foster Gamble sees this hierarchy of government, corporations, banks and dynastic elite as key to the flow of power from elite at the top down to government at the bottom. But he hints at a yet higher source of control, an extraterrestrial element. He does not go into detail except indirectly through an interview with David Icke, author of *The Greatest Secret*. In that book, Icke suggests that the world is manipulated by an interstellar brotherhood seeking to control human life.

The end goal of the banking elites, as Gamble suggests, is a totalitarian world dictatorship attained through a strategy of divide and conquer. Their objective is to create fear to drive people toward accepting an authoritarian or totalitarian statist solution. False flags --- disasters created by the elite --- are to further this financial conquest. One wonders how Gamble knows this. As a member of the Gamble family (of Proctor and Gamble) is he privy to discussions among the higher echelons of those who constitute the elite in his dominance pyramid?

¹³ As quoted by Ellen Hodgson Brown,
Brown, Ellen Hodgson

2010 *The web of debt; The shocking truth about our money system and how we can break free.*
Baton Rouge, Louisiana: Third Millenium Press.

The pyramidal agenda does fit with events since the (private) Federal Reserve System was created and particularly over the last two administrations. As Ellen Hodgson Brown has detailed, we and our money system are caught in a privatized and deceptive web of banking institutions that have drained public money to line the pockets of the elite (Brown 2010). This process has been accompanied by the erosion of individual rights at home and abroad. *Thrive* goes on to list various nefarious activities that are attributed to unnamed higher-ups in the power dominance pyramid: for example, covert sterilization practiced on different world populations through vaccination programs and other means.

However, there is a tendency in *Thrive* to take some particle or thread of information and weave it into something larger but unsubstantiated. Yet as we are coming to see, not all that is labeled a conspiracy theory is unfounded. The pretext for the Bush war on Iraq (weapons of mass destruction) is now widely acknowledged as false. Rather than dwell upon the improbable conjectures, extra-terrestrial contact and other such ideas, this review will attend more to the solutions, and the assumptions on which those solutions are predicated, together with the likely political consequences of the *Thrive* agenda.

***Thrive's* Solution**

In part four, the movie projects continued growth and opportunities for everyone to be happy and *thrive*. This sanguine view of the future is based on the future availability of a non-combusting source of energy. Beyond harnessing wind and sun, however, *Thrive* offers no practical working example of free energy except for a machine produced by Tesla before his death. Even so, according to the Internet, there are specific research projects underway that are aimed at producing “free energy.” Engineer Andrea Rossi and Professor Sergio Focardi of the University of Bologna are reported to have developed a cold fusion system referred to as low energy nuclear reactions where a D-cell-battery-sized reactor core produces 10 kilowatts of heat. Other possibilities are listed as under development as well. But unless these new technologies develop into large-scale practical uses it would be premature to base a speculative political system on what are still inchoate attempts to develop “free” energy.

Given that *Thrive* is so future-oriented, it is surprising that peak oil, increasing populations, food, water and other scarcities hardly figure in the movie, contrary to what Richard Heinberg and many others familiar with world conditions are telling us (Heinberg 2007; Heinberg 2011). Even if free energy should soon replace the use of fossil fuel, which seems unlikely, we have problems of food scarcities, burgeoning population, and an imploding economic system. Indeed as Rob Hopkins points out in a review of *Thrive*, if such a thing as free energy were to become available,

“Free energy would mean we would drain the aquifers faster, degrade the soils faster, work our way through the earth’s other depleting resources at an accelerated rate. Nowhere in the film is the idea of limits even mentioned, apart from occasional mentions that believing in ‘scarcity’ is one of our problems.”
(Hopkins 2012)

In spite of dim prospects for a new non-polluting cheap energy (leaving out sun and wind), Gamble is convinced we will have it. However, his main agenda for future prosperity for all would be to shrink the government in the three stages to virtually nothing, so that in the final stage, there would be no taxes levied at all.¹⁴

Gamble says such a result would be “based on honoring the rights and freedom of everyone on this planet.” But the devil is in the details. In spite of Gamble’s aim to be inclusive of left, right and center politics by ascending to a new plane combining the best of all political positions, it turns out that *Thrive* advocates an ideology that is emphatically incapable of embracing the range of political opinion Gamble says he wants to include. This is a complex area to be clarified in a later section. For now, the general tone of *Thrive’s* desired goal of little or no government most likely represents what might currently be called mainstream American libertarianism as represented by Ron Paul, a contender for the Republican presidential nomination.

So now, for the first time in years, advocacy for ending US military involvement in Afghanistan and elsewhere has reached the threshold of wide public attention. For this we have Ron Paul to thank. As a participant in the debates with other hopefuls, Paul and his libertarian approach have been given a soapbox in the mainstream media not usually available to other political figures. Interestingly, a similar position in favor of US non-intervention in foreign affairs has long been advocated by a number of other US politicians, notably Congressman Dennis Kucinich (D) and Senator Bernie Sanders (I), both noted for their progressive politics.

Paul, Kucinich and Sanders also converge in their support for eliminating the death penalty. Paul, because so many mistakes have been made with the execution of innocent people, and Kucinich and Sanders for similar reasons reaching through to broad moral grounds. Further, there is a degree of overlap among the three in their advocacy for civil liberties, which have been fast eroding under the present and previous administrations.

As we know all too well, President Obama reversed significant parts of his campaign promises and, most egregiously, hammered the final nail into the civil liberties coffin by signing a bill allowing the indefinite imprisonment of US citizens without trial. This move

¹⁴ The no-tax possibility actually might be feasible without shrinking the government if it were to take over the banking functions—See Ellen Hodgson Brown’s *Web of Debt*, *ibid*.

toward the imposition of a security state at home and the continuation of wars of empire abroad has long been feared, particularly after the early 1950s with the publication of George Orwell's novel, *1984*, where citizens are spied upon, taken into custody and tortured for harboring subversive thoughts. In Orwell's novel, public opinion was manipulated through deceptive labeling of government programs.

We have been moving toward that Orwellian scenario ever since but particularly since the middle 1970s and more particularly during the last two presidential administrations. Now with the tapping of domestic phone calls by the National Security Agency, the Orwellian process continues apace.

Unfortunately, the curtailment of civil liberties has strong backing by powerful elements in the corporate sector. It is an agenda of the putative "Shadow Government" where a national emergency would trigger a broad suspension of human rights (Helms 2003). These secret emergency arrangements were in place even before 9/11. By now, however, they have been seeping into open public policy.

Ron Paul and libertarian politics, it seems, would disapprove of a *1984* totalitarian state and thus, if he became president, Paul might arrest or even roll back some of the incursions in our civil liberties. So, given all that, what is there not to like about the possibility of Ron Paul becoming the next US president with a set of libertarian policies such as those advocated in the film, *Thrive*?

First, let's dispense with the cynical answer, namely that Paul as president would be unable to stop wars, remove military bases, or restore civil liberties because a powerful covert network, cabal or putative Shadow Government, such as is referred to in *Thrive* (and its dominance pyramid) would block Paul from doing so. One might consider the possibility that the secret executions of intransigent foreign presidents, e.g., via plane crashes (Perkins 2004) and the use of drones flying over Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iran may be harbingers of what could happen over the US itself in the future --- regardless of who is president and where opposition leaders or entire groups might be covertly targeted. However, this view has little publicly available data to support it. So let's get to the main issues, the ones raised by the film *Thrive*.

What's not to like about libertarianism is in domestic politics where a libertarian agenda would bring changes that would be harmful to the general public while giving enormous leverage to the elite and others in favored positions. The changes would make our present condition even worse, touching American lives in many adverse ways. How, for example, would corporations fare with a Ron Paul president favoring a laissez faire unregulated business environment? What would be the financial situation in the US as a result? We already have a partial answer to those two questions in the market implosion of 2008, with

an aftermath that is still with us. The subprime imbroglio involved financial corporations that shorted the very financial instruments they were selling to their customers, and other unconscionable and often indictable and impeachable activities. This was all facilitated by massive corruption of both corporate executives and public servants operating beyond what is left of financial and corporate regulation.

Ellen Brown describes how Ponzi financing was a key contributor to the crash (Brown 2010). But even though the stock of these large financial companies plunged the salaries of the top executives did not. Most banks continued to operate after receiving large bailouts through the Federal Reserve (not a government body in spite of the word “federal”). How did ordinary people, the 99%, do? Wages were not up, had not been up for the last 30 years, and many lost their jobs altogether. Unions have been weakened and the corporate world has become gigantic in its political influence due most recently to the Supreme Court ruling allowing corporate floodgates to open up in support for their minions in Congress.

Thrive's agenda of removing whatever vestiges of corporate regulation still exist, would only make the present situation worse. Is there an alternative? Indeed there appears to be. Ellen Brown recommends just the opposite of the *Thrive* libertarian agenda. Instead of government reduction (and with it, reduced regulations over corporate behavior), Brown argues that a nation's money and credit should be handled through government ownership; thus, “vested in the people themselves, as it was in the early American colonies.” She suggests nationalizing the Federal Reserve, forming state-owned banks (like the currently existing Bank of North Dakota), and permanently nationalizing bankrupt banks considered “too big to fail,” making them public services like libraries and courts (Brown 2010).

Much of the process argued for in *Thrive* is easily parsed given the facts. Any child, who has played the board game, *Monopoly*, can understand how some individuals and their companies could gain financial control over others. The object of the game is to do just that by gaining enough monopolies to bankrupt the other players. In the real world, governments ideally prevent monopolies through the regulation of corporations and other business entities. Also ideally, governments should protect society from dishonest corporate claims and from practices that threaten the health and safety of both employees and customers. More broadly, the pollution of rivers and skies and many other dangers of unregulated businesses, are affecting the entire planet. Thus, what is needed is not less but more oversight and regulation of corporations and other business entities. Otherwise, they would continue to be open to predatory or irresponsible behavior. Thus more government, rather than less is needed, but with one key addition: measures to reduce the corruption of government officials, including enforcement of present laws and new legislation to prevent the current unbridled corruption in government. Rather than do away with government, it needs to be larger but just as strongly regulated as is needed for the corporations.

So what's the difference? Do we call out "a pox on both your houses"? No. There is a powerful difference between corporate sectors and governments, and that is motivation. Business is motivated by profit. Government is motivated by its constituents. Once business is out of the picture in the Senate, the Congress and the Administration, the motivating constituents will no longer be money but the electorate. When that happens, government goals will be public health, safety, education and well-being, which are the reasons for government to begin with.

Divergence

Here is where libertarian politics diverge from the more community-oriented politics of people like Senator Sanders and Congressman Kucinich. To reduce or eliminate taxes without moving functions of the Federal Reserve to government (as Ellen Brown suggests) would mean the loss of many indispensable government functions that support the public good. Without a government capacity to fund the well-being of society, we are in trouble. Even with modern technology, we depend on institutions and infrastructure that would no longer exist except on a micro-local scale. In the absence of government, corporations would seek to fill the vacuum and take over more functions relinquished by a disappearing government. Predatory behavior by self-seeking corporations would be unleashed. Since corporations are not elected, they would involve demarcated hierarchies but without the social responsibility of an honestly elected, corruption-free government.

It gets worse. The consequences of reducing the size and power of government and government-mandated benefits for the public good ---the commons --- could endanger our species over a longer time frame. No policies would be in place to reverse global warming. No entities could seriously ameliorate the effects of natural disasters.

Actually there are two ideologies that seek to reduce the size of government: anarchism and libertarianism. They overlap in some respects. Noam Chomsky, the most respected figure who describes himself as an anarchist, says "no one owns the term 'anarchism'" because it covers a widely varying range of ideas and plans of action. Even Chomsky hesitates to predict details because so little is known about how it all might work. It would have to be an experiment, possibly something that could be developed gradually by turning from the current direction --- away from an egalitarian democracy, a trend that is greatly increasing inequality --- back around *toward* a more democratic and freer society. We know from Chomsky's long-standing support of peace, his concern for the fate of people and nations all over the world, that his anarchism would be a compassionate one in deed and not just in name. However there is another kind of anarchism Chomsky describes as "anarcho-capitalism," which may appear closer to American libertarianism. It is not well received by Chomsky:

“Anarcho-capitalism, in my opinion, is a doctrinal system which, if ever implemented, would lead to forms of tyranny and oppression that have few counterparts in human history. There isn't the slightest possibility that its (in my view, horrendous) ideas would be implemented, because they would quickly destroy any society that made this colossal error.” (Chomsky and Lane, 1996)

I believe the same would happen with a libertarian government if one should ever win an election. Here, during the current jockeying for Republican presidential nomination, Ron Paul has spread the word about his version of libertarianism.

Recently Chomsky was asked his opinion of Ron Paul. His answer suggests what a large difference there is between his anarchistic views and Ron Paul's libertarianism:

“Ron Paul's a nice guy. If I had to have dinner with one of the Republican candidates, I'd prefer to have it with him - but, his policies are off the wall. I mean, sometimes I agree with him. I think we have to end the war in Afghanistan. But, if you look at the other policies, I mean, it's kind of shocking and the principles that lie behind them (shakes head).... I don't know what to say about them.

In the Republican debates, at one point --- and this kind of brought out who he is --- he is against Federal involvement in health, in anything. He was asked something like, "Well, what if some guy's in a coma, and ... uh ... he's going to die and he never took out insurance. What should happen?" Well, his first answer was something like, "It's a tribute to our liberty." So, if he dies, that's a tribute to how free we are? He kinda backed off from that, actually. There was a huge applause for when he said that. But later, reactions were elsewhere. He backed up and said, "Well, the church will take care of him ... or charities or something or other.... so, it's not a problem." I mean, this is just savagery. And it goes across the board. In fact, it goes through the whole so-called Libertarian ideology.

It may sound nice on the surface but if you think it through, it's just a call for corporate tyranny. It takes away any barrier to corporate tyranny. But, it's all academic. The business world would never permit it to happen because it would destroy the economy. They can't live without a powerful state, and they know it.

<http://readersupportednews.org/opinion2/277-75/9502-focus-noam-chomsky-on-ron-paul>

The distinction between Chomsky's anarchism and anarcho-capitalism appears to be a sense of responsibility to people and a concern for well-being and the avoidance of the great inequalities currently existing in the US now.

In the film, *Thrive*, the reduction of government would appear to lack that responsibility and would worsen the present level of inequality in the US. The result that Chomsky attributes to anarcho-capitalism would be draconian. The producers of *Thrive* say all these needed functions of government can be carried out by "volunteers," a code word meaning that few, if anyone, would step forward to fill those functions as a volunteer unless by volunteer is meant volunteer to go into a business to fill the gap left by the disappearance of government. While Foster Gamble and Ron Paul might be willing to engage in some business to take over a government function they would not be among the "volunteers" who would be providing social services for people since their guidance comes from the writings of Ayn Rand, as displayed on their web sites or writings. In a nutshell, Ayn Rand regarded altruists as suckers and argued that virtually all behavior should be self-serving so that the strong will emerge as rightful winners. This harkens back to the social Darwinism that was dispelled by the early anthropologists under Franz Boas, only to emerge in slightly altered versions as economic "theory" in the Austrian and Chicago schools which Naomi Klein has described as "disaster capitalism." (Klein 2007) Even much of mainstream academic economics still goes by the mantra of a free market of self-serving individuals (one name for it is "rational actor theory). But those ideas do not even amount to a serious theory because they have already failed numerous tests and fall short of scientific standards. Steve Keen (Keen 2011) and Michael Hudson (<http://michaelhudson.com/articles/>) are among the economists who give serious evidence of this failing in their work.

These are all matters that still generate heated debate, where facts are less of an issue than emotional dispositions and a hardened view of events outside one's own immediate orbit. These debates overlook serious realities of life today. Look where we are now. Companies are laying off people in their late forties and fifties for an "early retirement," often with precious little in the way of regular pension payments. Companies that hire cheap labor overseas lack jobs for young people at home as they come out of school. The ranks of the homeless are swelling. Yet few recognize this general malaise as anything more than a temporary low in the business cycle. It is indeed strange that with so many people in dire economic straits, so few are moved to corrective action. Few, that is, with the exception of the Occupy movement.

If any group of people is likely to understand the implications of the *Thrive* agenda for what it really is rather than the picture painted by its rhetoric, its beautiful scenery of the natural world, or of a peaceful green valley with cottages and farm houses, it will be the Occupiers, because they are forging a new kind of community and are having to deal with all the

problems that such a community involves. They are becoming sophisticated in problems of local governance and conflict. I don't think they will allow the scenery of villages, fields and groves, or the background music and the frequent appeals to choose good over bad to hide the underlying reality of a return to unfettered capitalism with no government protecting its citizens.

Here is the interesting thing about the Occupiers. As Chomsky said, he would be reluctant to see a political system such as he envisions suddenly imposed on a society. Such an unknown and untried system should evolve experimentally. Well, that is exactly what the Occupiers are doing all over the US. They are creating non-violent, compassionate communities, and they are doing it under duress.

The danger that *Thrive* poses is not for the Occupiers who have changed the political narrative in no small manner, but the non-occupiers who continue their lives as before. They do not see any sudden changes in their own lives, not even when President Obama hammered in that last coffin nail for civil liberties with a stroke of his pen. Regardless of whether the current downturn is temporary and improving, or long term and worsening, those of the population who are still job-holders have little free time to gain perspective on the changing situation. Without full knowledge they may fall prey to the siren beauty and appeal of *Thrive*. Since they see little change in their own lives there is no compulsion to political action. They still get up in the morning, have breakfast and leave for work or school, all part of normal everyday behavior. Television continues as before. The cinema appears just as creative and productive, the prices of food and gas only slightly higher perhaps, but not so much as to radically change what people buy in the supermarkets (omitting the jobless or those who fear a future layoff).

Thus much of society continues to sleepwalk. I have often wondered about this. It is a defensive closing off of the self from wider events that may eventually impact everyone. It may be a hardening, a cultural exoskeleton that has thickened the skin after so many decades of untoward events in the world. Think back to what that world has been like.

For generations since the end of World War II people have lived under the threat of nuclear annihilation, have lived through almost continual warfare abroad, have fears that have been exacerbated and played upon by the US response to 9/11. Considering all that US society has gone through, it is only natural that individual defense mechanisms are used increasingly and have infused the major cultural systems of society. Airport searches have become a normal part of traveling. Surveillance of citizens has greatly increased. With all this history up through today, one can get a sense of how people try to get on with their lives. Building a hard outer shell may protect them from stress, but not necessarily from the actual events, the growing mayhem.

To get beyond debates or political positions that are not based on evidence we need to go beyond individual observations and anecdotes to a scientific approach in which different positions can be assessed as culturally healthy or pathological. With a scientific approach, we can get to the nub of the problem that *Thrive* presents to us.

So what is that nub? What is the pathway? It turns out that social inequality, believe it or not, links to virtually every major index that measures cultural health. Inequality of income and social status indicates an unhealthy sociocultural system. *Thrive* says little if anything about inequality or social trust, but those are key to a successful society. We know this from a study of the 39 richest nations compared to each other on the basis of their respective negative social indicators. In that study the US is at the very bottom of the list.¹⁵ Unlike the higher level of sociocultural health the US enjoyed in the late 1950s through the early 1970s, it is now the most dysfunctional among those 39 richest nations. In contrast, Japan and the Scandinavian countries and some European nations are at the top or upper middle of the list, where their social indicators point to healthier societies (Wilkinson and Pickett, 2010). What are those indicators? Here are a few: The UNICEF index of child well-being in rich countries (22 countries), the degree of trust held by people towards each other, the indices of mental health, of infant mortality, of teen-age pregnancies, and of life expectancies.

That's not all. How about adding anxiety to the picture? Wilkinson and Pickett cite a study by psychologist Jean Twenge, who tracked anxiety levels among college students from 1952 to 1993, and gathered information on anxiety levels from other studies over this period as well. She found that by the late 1980s, American children on average were more anxious than child psychiatric patients in the 1950s.¹⁶ A similar rise in anxiety was found in other countries. In the last quarter of the century, however, social inequality also began to rise, adding further to the US decline in social indicators and sending the US considerably below the 38 other rich countries.

How could the decline in US sociocultural health have happened so precipitously? Here is what Wilkinson and Pickett have to say:

"As greater inequality increases status competition and social evaluative threat, egos have to be propped up by self-promoting and self-enhancing strategies. Modesty easily becomes a casualty of inequality: we become

¹⁵ Based on regression analyses from a sample of 40 nations used by Wilkinson and Pickett, but leaving out Singapore, a city state, for its small size Wilkinson, Richard G., and Kate Pickett 2010 *The spirit level : why greater equality makes societies stronger*. New York: Bloomsbury Press.

¹⁶ Twenge, J.M.

2007, *The age of anxiety? Birth cohort change in anxiety and neuroticism, 1952-1993*, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 79(6):1007-21.

outwardly tougher and harder in the face of greater exposure to social evaluation anxieties, but inwardly— as the literature on narcissism suggests— probably more vulnerable, less able to take criticism, less good a personal relationships and less able to recognize our own faults

(Wilkinson and Pickett 2010).

What seems to be at work here is a positive feedback loop, where the adaptive potential of the US and other populations were negatively impacted to an increasing extent.

While inequality is one cause of anxiety, there are clearly many other causes as well. Consider the history of the last half of the 20th Century with the perceived threat of communism. From 1950 to 1954, we endured Joseph McCarthy's false accusations of communist sympathizers and spies among liberal Americans. That was followed by the wars putatively fought to stop the spread of communism, with mandatory conscription up until 1973. Next, came the Nixon Watergate scandal in the 1970s, resulting in a serious loss of trust in government. One might see how the zeitgeist of the times could contribute to an increase in anxiety.

During that time, computers brought a dramatic increase in productivity for businesses around the world. It also increased profits. But here's the thing. Those profits were not shared with the workers. Instead they went into the pockets of corporate higher-ups and shareholders (Wolff, et al. 2009).

There were other reasons for not sharing in the productivity gains the corporations achieved, notably the exporting of jobs to other countries, which meant lower wages for workers in the US.

A Grid Model of Social Modalities and Ideologies

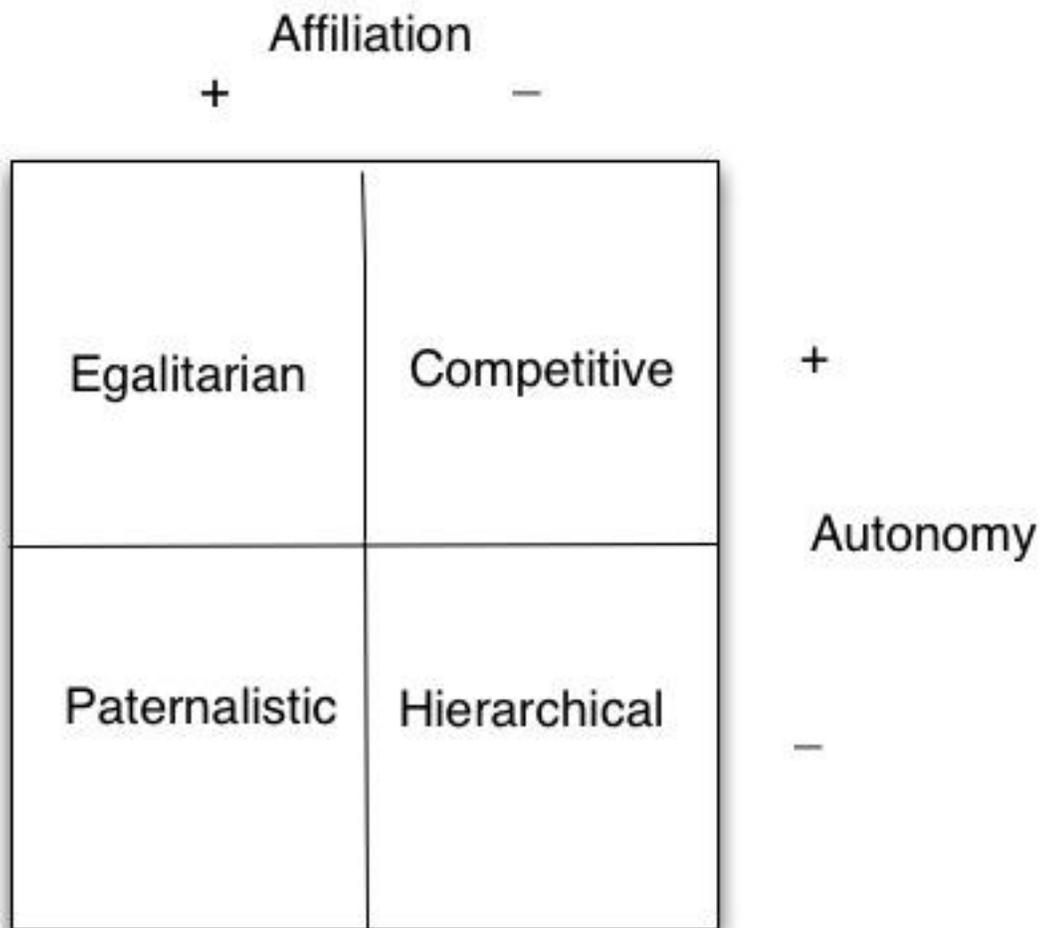
The social inequality correlations are robust. But there is more. We can go further with a different measure of sociocultural health, one based not on indicators but on interviews and questionnaires. This is an approach of adaptive potential within individuals and societies. High adaptive potential indicates high well-being for both individuals and the societies in which they live (Colby 1987; Colby 2003; Colby, et al., 2003). One of the realms measured in adaptive potential theory is the social realm where social relations are characterized by two basic conditions of well-being: affiliation and pro-social autonomy. We can divide each of the two conditions into high (positive) and low (negative) levels. This allows the creation of a four-fold table with each quadrant representing a combined value of both conditions, which I describe as distinct modalities of social relations.

If a person or an entire society scores as double plus (high affiliation and high pro-social autonomy), it signifies a condition of high sociocultural well-being. This condition can be

characterized as an egalitarian situation. This coincides with the measures of equality used by Wilkinson and Pickett, where equality was associated with so many beneficial social indicators.

The quadrant with high autonomy but low affiliation (i.e. an emphasis on individualism for all in a society but without social assistance for those in need, without a focus on community and with little concern for altruistic behavior), in theory would have to score lower in adaptive potential because it has only a single plus, for autonomy. Affiliation is low so it receives a minus. That position represents a competitive position. Moving to the lower left-hand quadrant we have the diametric opposite of a libertarian mode, low in prosocial autonomy but high in affiliation. I would describe it as a paternalistic system where the focus is on social assistance (high affiliation), but through governance over individual members who lack autonomy and are unable to input their own concerns in decisions by government. This condition of social relations characterizes a parent-child relationship and relations between ethnic groups where one group has a lower status than the one that is dominant. Affection is shown towards the different groups but with governance rarely open to the lower-status groups. It also would represent a Liberalism gives less of a chance for individuals to make known their own concerns and plight.

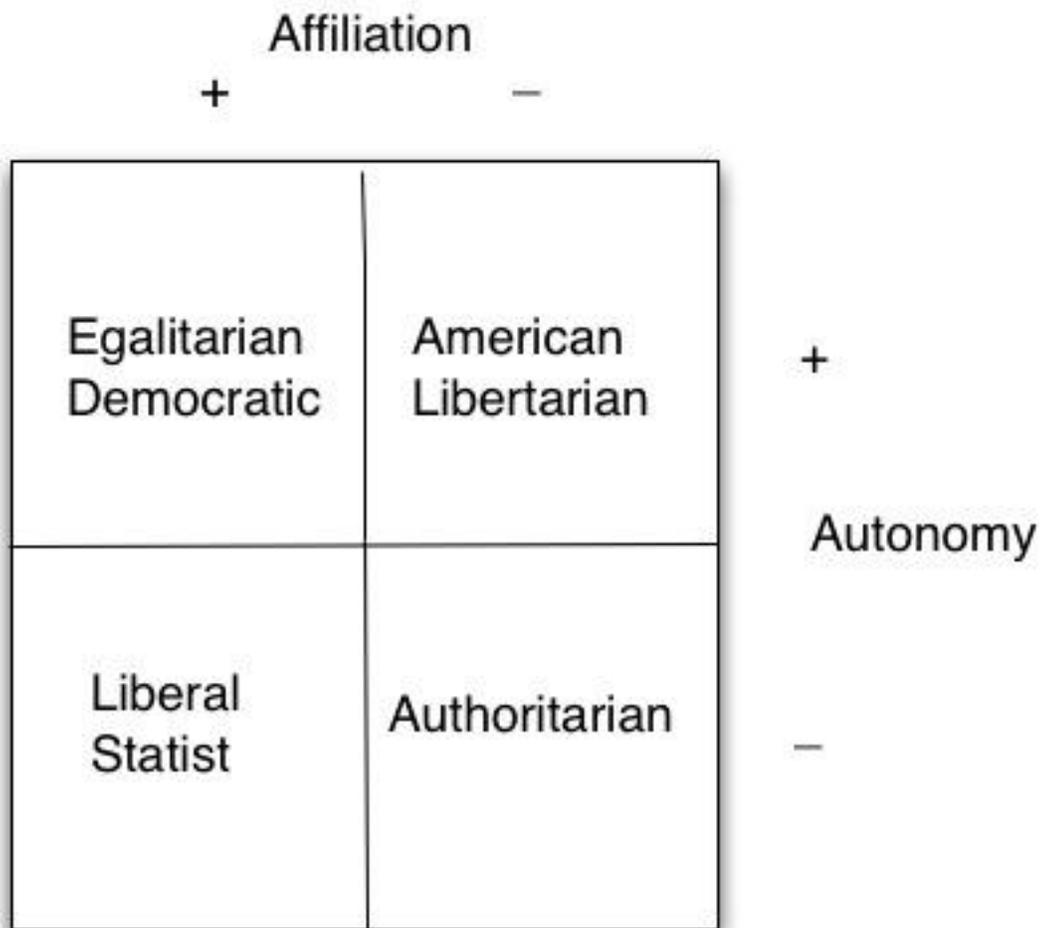
Finally, in the lower right quadrant is the hierarchical modality, which emphasizes inequalities and status differences with a lack (minus value) of both autonomy and affiliation. As a double negative this modality inhibits well-being, though it may have advantages in wartime when people have to submit to a more hierarchical governing system.



Grid 1: The Modalities of Interpersonal Relations

Grid 1 (above) is simply a classification of four basic modalities of interpersonal interaction, defined by the two conditions of beneficial social relations: affiliation (friendship, love, comradeship, community responsibilities, etc.), and pro-social autonomy (not just autonomy for the individual, but autonomy for everyone, hence the term pro-social). The caveat is that in the competitive quadrant, though autonomy is high, it is not necessarily extended to autonomy for others and is a less socially oriented condition.

Grid 2 classifies some of the different kinds of ideologies that can fit into the grid according to whether the ideology emphasizes affiliation and autonomy or their opposites.



Grid 2: Mapping Political Ideologies on the Interpersonal Modalities Grid

In America, people who hold to a libertarian philosophy or ideology emphasize their autonomy as individuals but minimize community affiliations and obligations. This makes for more competitive relations and attitudes. Authoritarian ideologues emphasize hierarchy. They tend to be more aggressive towards people who are different (different ethnicity, different social class, different skin color, different religion). In both ideologies, the result is a focus on how people in the world differ from oneself rather than how they are similar. The other two modalities of social relations, being more affiliative tend to minimize social differences. But only one, the egalitarian modality, combines both high community affiliation with high autonomy for everyone, regardless of economic differences among people, as would characterize a true democracy.

As these differences grow there is an increasing malaise in society that can instigate new social movements as with the Arab Spring, the Wisconsin turn around, and the Occupy movement. Libertarian and authoritarian modalities denigrate community obligations and

lower sociocultural well-being generally across the board. So those ideologies have an overall negative affect for society. Authoritarianism with its a double negative both for autonomy and affiliation is the most dangerous one, at least for long term sociocultural well-being. Paternalistic modes of interaction are less likely to be divisive but without pro-social autonomy and the ability to offer input to political decision-making, there is a gulf between government and society, even while the (non-governing) society is more likely to be homogenous in terms of status. I characterize this quadrant as Liberal Statist, where there is little feedback from the population or society to its leaders but the leaders commit to improving the welfare of the society. The problem there is lack of knowledge about what really would be the best for society because there is a lack of grassroots information. It is the sort of situation described by James C. Scott in his description of how “certain schemes to improve the human condition have failed.” (Scott, 1998).

The difference between a paternalistic mode of interaction and an authoritarian one is in the high amount of aggression associated with authoritarianism (Altemeyer 1988) and the importance of hierarchical social relations, while paternalistic relations are more friendly or affiliative, though without recognizing the full autonomy of others. During the heyday of Japanese business there was a fair amount of paternalistic behavior on the part of corporate leaders and their workers. Lifetime employment, pensions and other social benefits were common. There was an obligation among corporate leaders to understand and anticipate the needs of their workforce. In Japanese grammar schools children are cared for as parents care for them. They have a toothbrush at school to brush after their lunch. And, from my observations, Japanese school lunches are considerably healthier and more nutritious than school lunches in the US.¹⁷ Paternalism in Japanese businesses now appears to be less frequent, however. Which way in the grid is the direction in Japan? I suspect there is more movement toward an egalitarian modality, meaning toward a modality with a double positive valence --- high in both affiliative relations and in recognizing the autonomy of others. However, the Fukushima meltdown is putting a lot of stress on Japanese society and one doesn't know whether that is sufficient to move things toward the authoritarian side.

So now with this guide to major ideological dimensions and the modality of social relations involved, it is clear that *Thrive's* putative agenda of accommodating progressive, conservative and libertarians alike in a new kind of society as expressed is impossible. No person can occupy more than one place in the grid. A person can move around from one place to another as her political philosophy changes (if it does) but occupying all those positions simultaneously is impossible.

¹⁷ Though in northern California and probably other areas of the country there is a new effort to provide school children with better nutrition, including organically grown foods from local farms.

A Serious Disjunction

In *Thrive*, there is a disjunction between the general characterization of our current predicament in terms of the power dominance flow in parts 2 and 3, and the solution in part 4, which is focused on reducing the very bottom of the pyramid --- government --- rather than on the power of corporations at the next level up, and on to the top. This is a serious flaw that gets papered over by various rhetorical devices, visual, sound and verbal. I would attribute this disjunction to an anachronism between the long term libertarian and conservative agenda of reducing the size of government and the current view recognized by the pyramid (and, increasingly the educated general public, including especially the Occupy movement) --- namely, that it is the corporations not government that have the most power and are corrupting government. This trend is highlighted by the Supreme Court's Citizens United decision and its enormous benefits to corporations through lobbying, revolving doors, and other forms of corruption. Thus the corporations have gained control over government at many levels, as is accurately portrayed in *Thrive's* pyramid with government at the bottom. Through corporate influence, there has been a parasitizing of government through corruption, subsidy, and tax breaks all the way up the pyramid from the oil industry, big pharma, and other corporations on to the big banks depicted in the pyramid as controlling the other corporations and banks.

But here is the disjunction: to show our predicament as stemming from the financial elites at the top of the pyramid but focus on correcting the situation by reducing the bottom of the pyramid --- government --- is to miss the whole point of understanding the pyramid, which shows the flow of power from the narrow top down to the broad base of government (presumably city, state and national) at the bottom. To eliminate or eviscerate government, when in fact the problem is the elite at the top and their banks, is to set up and follow a distracting red herring. This disjunction suggests that libertarian ideologies have so long been against government that when they see government as merely pawns with the major figures being higher up, they experience a degree of cognitive dissonance. However, one can see ideologies as a cover for underlying less socially approved motives (i.e., being against government because libertarians seek to be free from government regulation that protects consumers and workers, and from all the other social benefits for society that cramp the style of corporations in their pursuit of profits).

Any anthropologist or sociologist who knows anything about culture and society will point out that since the advent of settled living and agriculture some ten thousand years ago (and I would push that back to at least thirty thousand years earlier), no human group has lived without leaders and institutions (such as, shamanism, kinship organizations, adjudicative bodies) as rudimentary forms of government. Further, our involvement in wars is not solely caused by government. Rather, it reveals the power of the military-industrial complex, the oil industry and many other vested interests that spend enormous sums on lobbying to subvert government to their bidding. Thus, bad government has acted as the

cat's paw for corporate power, but the true source of maladaptive behavior in today's world is primarily the corporate structure and the higher levels of financial structure. However, there are two exceptions:

The American Revolution was strongly influenced by ideology --- Jefferson and all the other framers of the constitution and also people like Thomas Paine who articulated the ideology so well. The second instance where ideology seems to have a strong influence on government wars has been the neoconservative and neoliberal forces pushing us in the Middle East, though again getting Oil was a corporate-driven influence. In the latter case, however, government had already been so infiltrated by corporate power that we could call it a dysfunctional government. Instead of arguing against government, we should argue against *dysfunctional* government. Ideally government represents all of society not just the moneyed interests.

Thrive argues that if there were no government there would be no serious loss in infrastructure or health because that could be taken care of by private industry (i.e., corporations). He has it backwards. He is not very convincing when he says,

"With endless local Private security firms in a free society, there would still be well-armed and effective protection forces that could band together, like white blood cells protecting against a virus." (What Can I Do by Foster Gamble)

Current experience says something different. Increasingly, the military outsources more jobs to groups like the original Blackwater Corporation, which had to change its name to avoid bad public relations. Or, witness the private prison industry, which now has built up a vested interest in keeping its jails full --- a force for harsher punishments and for more arrests and false accusations.

The US military has a tradition including the three academies, a respect for the Constitution and a degree of oversight, which appears to be more responsible than the Blackwater Corporation or its current designation, Academi (previously Xe Services LLC, Blackwater USA and Blackwater Worldwide) which currently has a \$250 million contract with the CIA and the State Department. However, the company has been involved in numerous litigations, implicated in weapons smuggling, money laundering, illegal drug use, and child prostitution. If this is what we can expect from private industry filling the gaps for an eviscerated or non-existent government, it is not the pretty picture painted in *Thrive*.

When Gamble makes statements like "private owners of forest land are not known to clear cut," all one needs is a single case to falsify such a statement. Indeed, Champion International, owner of 45 percent of Maine's forest land, plans to greatly increase its clear-cutting, and herbicide use, as do other timber companies. Private companies and forest

landowners are *more* likely to increase clear cutting trees if they seek a profit rather than the long-term sustainability of the planet. A socially and biologically responsive, democracy-promoting, corruption-free government, however, is more likely to be more conserving and to promote well-being. Rather than eliminate government, we need to eliminate corruption. We need to change the campaign finance laws, and be less subject to false media representations. But Gamble goes on,

“Private owners of highways would be naturally incited to have as many people as possible use them, and to keep them in good shape to maintain their reputation and insurance. Perhaps some roads will be left in some sort of commons beyond Stage 2 of the transition we are recommending, but my guess is that by then we will see how private ownership serves the public far better than taxpayer funded state control.”

The above statements are entirely unsupported. It is when private ownership gains enormous power that formerly democratic governments are corrupted and are unable to fulfill their proper function of serving the public as they would in a true democracy.

Since Gamble often makes reference to Stefan Molyneux, it is interesting to look at the quote from Molyneux that Gamble selects to support his opinion:

“It’s important to compare a stateless society not to some perfect utopia, but rather to existing statist societies. Both access to, quality of and choice regarding educational opportunities would far surpass the current situation for poor people in any state-funded society.”

– Stefan Molyneux

To begin with, a statist society is usually a society with a strong centrist, hierarchical and authoritarian government, where status and economic inequalities are high. That is, it is not a true democratic society in which all parties are heard. Furthermore, what Molyneux and Gamble offer is mere conjecture. It is belied by the research I have cited, both my own research and the many studies concerning the relationship of inequality to indicators, both positive and negative, of sociocultural health so aptly brought together by Wilkinson and Pickett.

Thrive suggests a lack of social responsibility when it cite the kind of economics common in the Austrian School under von Mises in the first half of the previous century. It is far from a scientific economics and has been thoroughly dismissed by leading evidence-based economics (Keen 2011). Since *Thrive* would do away with taxes and government social responsibilities, it could be merely a continuation of what has been happening during the

last two administrations when public properties and agencies have been sold off to private interests (who then support the politicians who sold them the properties).

Who will pay for meeting those needs, including infrastructure, health care, retirement income, safety and overall well-being? Private companies taking over government functions are likely to seek monopoly status unregulated by a non-existent government. As we see, when profit dictates what insurance companies do, they place all their efforts into avoiding payments; and the big pharma corporations lobby doctors to prescribe their products rather than cheaper generic products. They also lobby government agencies like the USDA.

Given the dim prospects of the current US economy, people will not be able to afford spending time doing volunteer work. The term “volunteer” is simply an Orwellian device to disarm the reader or listener. In spite of all the pronouncements of a utopian future, there is clearly a lack of community spirit in the specific three-stage plan offered as a solution in *Thrive*. What is it but simply a three stage movement to reduce government, getting rid of the more progressive aspects first, then getting rid of even the conservative aspects to get to a world without governance, giving the corporate sector untrammelled freedom to do as they please. Recognizing the audience’s need for a socially responsible system of governance, however, the script uses rhetorical devices like interviewing progressive thinkers as though the politics argued for in the film would provide the social responsibility called for by those thinkers.

Gamble’s stated purpose is to attract people from different political persuasions --- Democrats, Republicans, and Independents and arrive at a system that includes them all. That is simply empty rhetoric, since ideologies involve commitments to particular areas on the grid, which I have shown, and no one can occupy more than one quadrant at the same time.

In his reply to Georgia Kelly’s review of *Thrive* in the [Huffington Post](#), Gamble misrepresented an interchange between Michael Moore, Naomi Klein and Occupier Patrick Bruner (at a public function under the auspices of *The Nation* magazine). As Foster Gamble cast the discussion, Michael Moore and Naomi Klein were in favor of massive state intervention, implying further that Klein and Moore lined up with one side of the “political binary” when in fact Klein talked of the need for large scale support for specific projects, public transportation in particular. Moore’s response concerned the need for universal health care. Gamble said that Patrick Bruner disagreed with Naomi Klein and Michael Moore, when in fact they were all on the same page. Then Gamble says, “Had Georgia Kelly been there, he would have disagreed with her, too.” This, of course, is a pure fabrication, an improbable hypothetical based on a misinterpretation of the positions of the members of the panel (the full discussion is available on YouTube). It also suggests that Gamble was

trying to hijack the Occupy movement to his own position and insert his argument as a wedge between the Occupy movement and Klein and Moore, suggesting that his position is aligned with the Occupy movement, which, as we have seen, is belied in the “solutions” part of his video. While Gamble denies he is a libertarian, his end plan would place him in the competitive quadrant in which libertarian agendas would usually be placed. Since the *Thrive* web page gives a prominent place to Ayn Rand’s picture, another term for the position might be social Darwinism or neoliberalism. All three focus on the self with little if any financial regulation and without a concern for the well-being of society as a whole. For a system that by definition avoids altruism, “voluntary” help for the needy is code for no government funded-social net or even regulation of the healthcare or insurance industry. In a politics that espouses Ayn Rand’s view one does not help the needy.

Gamble makes much of the need for paradigm change, as though his critics are against paradigm change and are in favor of the status quo or what he calls Collectivism, a straw man which he then proceeds to define as characterizing both Democrats and Republicans in terms of five points, none of which comes close to reality except the last one, “providing benefits is the proper role of government” --- which all governments do in one form or another if they are to survive as a governing body. This charge of collectivism levied against both Democrats and Republicans blows the cover of his earlier intention of having a system that both Democrats and Republicans can accept. How can that be when he harbors the opinion he does about Democrats and Republicans?

If we are to avoid a future of everybody against everybody, of guns, of private profit for the corporate elite while socializing their risk (which means selling off public assets to private insiders with no regulating body that would keep them honest), we need to examine with great circumspection the programs or political agendas that claim to represent a middle position while seeking to convince people at opposite ends of the spectrum that a libertarian view can bring the US to a higher level of well-being. On the contrary. The agenda behind the film suggests that the recommended agenda, if implemented, will fail to lift the US out of its current low rank of cultural health. To the contrary, the US will only sink yet further in the ranks of the rich nations of the world. Indeed, with what can be gleaned from a careful study of websites associated with *Thrive*, we see that Austrian economics (which is similar to Milton Friedman’s Chicago School of economics) and the explicitly anti-altruism views of Ayn Rand are a serious failure of community. The economics behind their ideology do not consider so-called “externalities.” Economics remains a truncated discipline if one does not consider the full cultural, social and environmental context as did the anthropological economist Karl Polanyi, who was lauded for just that by economist Joseph Stiglitz (Polanyi 1944).

The failure to see any positive functions of governmental organizations just when we need government the most --- to deal with global warming and energy loss on the huge scale

required --- is to miss what the Occupy movement is all about. Alan Greenspan of the Federal Reserve was an active disciple of Ayn Rand, and his policies facilitated the greatest decrease in social equality that the US has experienced since slavery. So the film *Thrive*, while ostensibly offering change, industrial growth, and a better life in the future falls far short of that. Essentially society would continue to worsen. Since there is little appetite for dealing with climate change and other threats to a future of happiness and well-being, how can we trust the statements made in the film? In spite of all the happy cardboard cutouts and blue skies, the film is actually a recipe for disaster. We can ill afford further economic implosion at this stage of overpopulation, authoritarianism and increasing scarcities of food, water and fuel.

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Benjamin N. Colby received a BA with high honors from Princeton University, served for two years as an engineering officer in the Navy, and received a PhD in Anthropology through the School of Social Relations at Harvard University. He taught in the Department of Social Relations at Harvard and in the Department of Anthropology at the University of California, Irvine. He has published in Science, The American Anthropologist, and other journals. Later as Emeritus Professor, he helped form the Social Dynamics and Complexity group at the Institute for Mathematical Behavioral Science at UC Irvine. Currently, he is working in agricultural anthropology at Swallow Valley Farm at Valley Ford, California. <http://www.swallowvalleyfarm.com>. His most recent publication is "Narrative, Mind and Culture" in A Companion to Cognitive Anthropology (2011, Oxford: Blackwell and John Wiley & Sons).

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~ Larry Robinson, former mayor of Sebastopol, CA

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