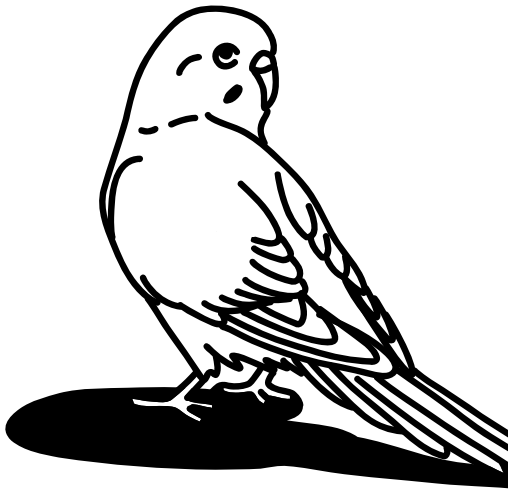


Contributism

Rebuilds
the Village



Morning
Dew has given
Fresh opportunity
Plucked from the vine before it is
Past ripe

Dear Reader,

This pamphlet contains an *idea*. It is one that you have almost certainly never heard before, and yet I believe it will strike you as both new and faintly familiar, like the ringing of a very old and weather-worn bell. In any case, I believe it will have *significant, practical importance* for your life and the life of your community. At least, it did for me, when I discovered it two years ago.

The idea is called *contributism*, and it is, at its root, the recognition that as human beings we find fulfillment and belonging through participatory contribution — through the act of giving. Contributists believe that this simple truth contains the core of what is necessary to repair what is broken in our society, while restoring joy and dignity to our own lives as individuals.

This is just one of a series of pamphlets that my friends and I have written on the subject, with the goal of supplying you with practical tools of personal and social restoration. If you find this pamphlet's ideas compelling, I hope you find another, or find us; there is so much more that we have to say.

Yours,
Pablo Parabola

The Parable

Consider the case of Bill Thomas, who took over directing a nursing home in upstate New York in the early 1990s. On paper, the home had been functioning smoothly, but in reality, it was suffused with suffering and despair. Thomas recognized that although the home was successfully preserving life for its residents, it was doing little to help its residents feel that life was worth living. His solution was as simple as it was elegant: bring in **one hundred parakeets**, more than enough for one per resident. Why *parakeets*? Because they are *alive*, and living things *enliven* other living things (like retirement home residents). Thomas's employees assured him that this would spell a logistical *catastrophe*, and it probably wasn't even allowed under industry regulations.

But Thomas was stubborn, and once he got his birds, a miracle ensued: as they were assigned their new feathery friends, some residents who had been entirely unresponsive began to show signs of awareness, because now they had a little creature in their room that needed their care and craved their attention. With the parakeets' birdsong piercing the mindless sterility of an institutional existence, the nursing home began to **come alive**.

The simple institutional adjustment of giving residents another living entity to take care of yielded astonishing results: prescription drug use fell by half, with “[p]sychotropic drugs for agitation ... decreas[ing] in particular. The total drug costs fell to just 38 percent of the comparison facility. Deaths fell 15 percent. The study couldn't say why. But Thomas thought he could. ‘I believe that the difference in death rates can be traced to the fundamental human need for a reason to live.’” (*Being Mortal*, Atul Gawande)

Thomas's experiment reveals the deep human need not only to be cared for, but to **care** for others. As humans, we need to be needed. We have an innate desire to do for others what they cannot do for themselves, whether that be offering assistance with complex legal or financial services, or simply giving the gift of a listening ear.

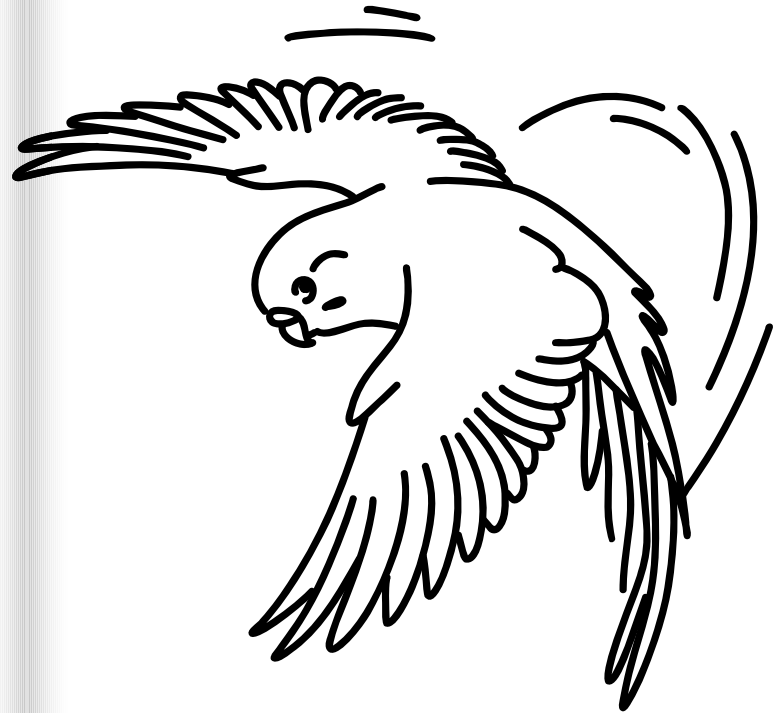
of the **Parakeets**

Just as our medical and elder-care institutions have become adept at preserving life while inadvertently stripping it of much of its meaning, so too have our economic and political institutions succeeded in optimizing for something — GDP growth, perhaps — while subtly undermining other goals deemed immaterial by the capitalist impulse. T. S. Eliot once lamented:

Where is the Life we have lost in living?

Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge?

Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?



We likewise lament:

Where is the meaning we have lost in money?

Where is the value we have lost in productivity?

Where is the flourishing we have lost in growth?

We should not blame capitalism. It has carried through on its every promise, bequeathing technologies and treasures untold. But it never promised happiness, moral fulfillment, or a life worth living. Contributism offers a better way, and the promise of a calling more compelling than ceaseless acquisition. How does it do this? By rebuilding the village.

Contributism

Rebuilds
the Village



“It is not good for the [hu]man to be alone.” This ancient adage is familiar for its location early in the biblical book of Genesis, but is by no means uniquely religious. Rather, it communicates a fundamental truth about human nature: that we exist in relationship to other human beings, and this is part of what makes being human “good.” Aristotle similarly observed that humans are “political animals,” by which he meant social animals — animals that spurn isolation. Indeed, human beings everywhere naturally, spontaneously, and irrepressibly organize themselves into voluntary associations — first to survive, and then to flourish. Another adage maintains that “it takes a village to raise a child.” This is true not only because many practical and logistical challenges are best solved through collective action, but also because only the “village” can make out of a child an adult entity that can meaningfully be called “human.” It is not difficult to visualize that a human being raised in “the void” likely would not possess certain capacities — such as language or rational thought — that we consider integral to what it means to be human. The very definition of our nature is therefore socially contingent; in other words, not only is it not **good** for humans to be alone, but it fundamentally is not **human** to exist alone.

This is not to deny that some humans have greater preferences for solitude than others. But each of us implicitly recognizes that our lives would be incomplete without other people to fill them. Indeed, our species is incapable of “r-selected reproduction,” meaning that our species cannot propagate itself without taking care of its young. None of us would have made it this far were it not for other people — and that’s not just a platitude. More saliently, we know from personal experience that it is better to live a life of shared love and service than one of self-aggrandizement. For exam-

ple, we know that sharing a meal multiplies, rather than merely adding, the joy of two individuals eating alone.

One of the great perils of modern life is that we are losing our access to the multiplicative power of community — or more accurately, *trading* it away for lesser goods. Modern social media attempts to replicate the communal function, counterfeiting convincing us that we are living meaningfully “shared” lives when we share our lives only online, and that internet “likes” can replace inter-personal connection. But by imagining that modern media can replace authentic connection cheaply and efficiently, we have unwittingly lost the real thing, deepening our despair while simultaneously accelerating our schizophrenic search for technological solutions to fundamentally human problems. This is not progress; it is delusion. Technology can do many things for us, but it cannot replace community. Hence a world that seems to be crying out for connection, compassion, and community like never before.

Contributism enters at this historical moment, just as the village seems destined for decay — offering new **hope** through an understanding of how we can rebuild it. Contributism begins by asserting that humans today, no less than previous generations, need community to thrive. And then it reminds us of how community is built: through the humanizing act of giving.

The Contributorist Steps To Rebuilding Community

I have said that contributism provides us with the reorientation and the tools we need to rebuild the village. But what is contributism, and where are our tools?

Contributism is a social and economic philosophy — a framework of thinking that aims to describe the social and economic conditions of the world as it is, and to guide us towards shaping it into the world we want it to be. Contributism’s core insight is the idea that true human flourishing, economic development, and social security are all downstream of the act of giving — of participatory contribution. Specifically, when our giving is **FARE** (free, active, relational, and effective), it is *generative*, producing a host of social and economic benefits both *for the giver* and for their community. With every act of FARE giving, we both assert our independence (“*See what I have to give!*”) and affirm our desire to co-relate — our capacity to love. This is, perhaps, the central and only point — we must remember that, at our core, we find fulfillment not just in being loved, but in the act of loving. Contributorists seek to assert their own right to give, and to extend that right to others.

The necessary tools to rebuild the village are found in FARE giving. Giving that is FARE inherently builds community. I can’t tell you, a stranger, that exactly this or that action is what you need to do to rebuild

your own village. But through FARE, I can tell you what types of action will naturally produce the desired result.

Let's walk through each element of FARE to explore examples of how you can apply contributism to build your own community.

Rebuilding the Village Through *Free* Giving

First and foremost, in order to foster true human connections, consider how you can step out of the twin frameworks of *obligation* and *transaction*, and instead claim the right to give freely — *free of coercion* and *free of charge*.

In other words, the point is not to give to others in ways that feel hard, or in order to earn their favor; instead, give in the ways that come easily to you and that bring you joy on their own.

- Perhaps that means hosting a potluck to build community in your neighborhood, or inviting friends over for a monthly movie night.
- Or if you have any professional skills that you are proud of — is there any way you can make use of them for your friends, family, or broader network?

Contributists embrace the concept of *comparative advantage*, and of *specialization* — that each of us has unique gifts, talents, and abilities that enable us to contribute in especially impactful ways. Rather than going out of our way to give in ways that feel new or uncomfortable, contributists constantly look for

opportunities to make use of our existing talents. And rather than getting tied up in obligations, contributists assert that any act of giving must be *freely chosen* or it is not true giving.

The commitment to **free giving** ensures that giving feels fulfilling to each of us as unique individuals, and that it seeds and waters positive social dynamics rather than negative ones. By asserting the right to give freely, you are asserting your right to find a role in community that does not feel inauthentic or forced.

Rebuilding the Village Through *Active* Giving

Second, recognize that what builds community is participation. It is not so much what we give that endears us to one another, but the *time*, *effort*, and *attention* that we put into our act of giving. This is why contributists use the terms *giving* and *participatory contribution* interchangeably. In a very real sense, *to give* is simply to be an *active member* of our community.

- *Take the time.* Linger after work or class. Walk or drive the long way with a friend. Listen to their stories and tell your own. Write long text messages or hand-written cards.
- Whenever you have an opportunity to give money to a cause or a person, pause and consider if there is a way you can give actively instead? Of course, it is good to give your money; but it is even better to give your time, your effort, and your attention.

- Remember how valuable your presence is to others. Accept invitations. You are giving so much simply by showing up.
- If nothing else, don't binge watch that show alone — binge watch it with a friend.

Rebuilding the Village Through *Relational* Giving

Third, contributism recognizes that the most effective and sustainable giving is always relational, like the sustained effort of a parent to raise a child, or the commitment of a teacher to helping a student succeed, no matter how many failures — however long it takes.

The relational benefits of contributist giving are twofold. First, contributist giving promotes repeat interactions, thus engendering ongoing relationships — one of the things that makes human life worth living. Second, contributist giving sparks reciprocity, because there is something inherently more powerful — more inviting and more demanding — about receiving from another human being than from a far-away, faceless institution. This provokes a pay-it-forward effect, inciting a positive feedback loop of synergistic generosity.

Consider a residential complex with 15 single-residence apartments. Each of those residents is going to cook dinner for themselves each night. Imagine if each of them were to cook dinner for their neighbor instead. In circular fashion, each would still cook the same amount, and each would still have the same amount to eat, but 15 people will have given the gift of food to 15 other people, creating 15 bonds, and inviting ongoing investment in

those bonds (especially as they will need to discover what their neighbour likes to eat).

In exactly this way, contributism gives rise to joy, love, fulfillment, and meaning, as if *from nothing* — no extra effort required, just a new and more conscientious orientation. For example:

- Consider showing up in person for a friend's soccer game, instead of spending that same evening watching soccer on TV.
- Decompress over a game of chess with an elderly grandparent, instead of playing chess against a robot or anonymous user on your phone.

There are a thousand small things that contributism invites us not to stop doing, but to start doing in a relationally contributist way.

Rebuilding the Village Through *Effective* Giving

Lastly, contributism rebuilds the village through effective giving. It does not encourage us to waste our resources or our efforts. It invites us to see where we can provide the most lift, including donating efficiently when we give of our means. Just as we are zealous in our private spending — to get the best deal, to avoid getting cheated — we should be equally zealous in our giving, to ensure that our dollars reach their destination, and that we are helping in the ways that can have the farthest reach.

Just as each individual must find a way to give that feels individually authentic, free, and uncoerced, so too must each individual decide for themselves what gifts of money, talent, and time have the greatest utility — one person might prioritize educational initiatives for underserved communities, while another favors preventing malaria or polio in the Third World. To the contributor, of course, the most effective giving is giving that further extends **the right to give**.

The point is, we don't just give up our money, efforts, or time solely to feel that we are good people for giving them: we look for where there are real needs, and where our capacity to give best meets those needs. An act of giving might still be laudable in spite of the fact that it is ineffective — as in the case of a child who tries to help with cleaning but ends up making a worse mess of things — but never because of it. The more effective the giving, the closer it approaches the ideal.

- *Pay attention* to the needs around you — what is taking up people's time and attention; what are they complaining about? But instead of simply empathizing, consider how you can help meet their needs.
- Give others *the right to give*. Make it a goal to ask others for advice — give an old war veteran the chance to tell his stories, or ask your parents how they met. If you're visiting a city, ask a friend if you can stay with them before checking Airbnb or a hotel. At the very least, let your friends pick you up from the airport.
- *Teach* someone else a new skill. Don't just cook for your children, cook with them. Don't just play guitar for a friend, teach them some chords. Teaching multiplies opportunity — it extends the right to give.

Restoring the village, restoring the human

The American ethos has long been one of independence — as seen both in the Declaration of Independence and U.S. Constitution, as well as deeply embedded within the individualism of capitalism. But the underlying idea that we are naturally isolated and independent beings, who must grudgingly sacrifice some independence from time to time in order to secure certain collective rights, is a fiction. Without exception, we exist in and for community; we cannot flourish without it.

But don't confuse contributism for blind collectivism — the sacrifice of the individual for the whole. Contributists reject the sacrifice or suppression of the individual; indeed, at the core of contributism is an opposition to the obligation to give. Just as we cannot flourish without community, we cannot flourish if we are not free.

Instead, contributism offers a third way, a true synthesis between individualism and collectivism. It invites us to *assert the right to give* — to reorient our individualism towards each other. And when we give intelligently, *FAREly* — because we want to — we set into motion a virtuous and elegant cycle. Our giving compounds our joy and induces reciprocity, making us more collaborative and therefore collectively more targeted and effective in our production. And because we recognize the joy we gain from giving, we naturally reinvest this new productivity back into our giving, further elevating our own flourishing, while extending both the depth and size of our community — and so on.

This is a simple, but profound proposition: when the contributist restores the village, the village in turn restores her humanity, molding her into a better contributist, and a better human.

How does this begin? It begins with **you**.

CONTRIBUTISM FOR EVERYONE 02 / 03
BUILDING A BETTER SOCIETY
BY RESTORING THE RIGHT TO GIVE

There is so much more to say. How contributism gives meaning to your career, and reclaims your spending as an act of love. How contributist policies can, and will, transform societies by realigning incentives to promote human flourishing. How every act of contributism lessens the power of oligarchs, by reducing our dependence on them. How contributist businesses perform better than capitalist ones, because economic contributism corrects core inefficiencies built into capitalism.

My friends and I have written about all of these things, in other pamphlets. If you are curious, **come find us** at a local **contributist meetup**.

Our core project is the **Contributist Pledge** — an iterative, community-developed set of mutual commitments that make up the whole character of a contributist society. Think of the pledge as a *constitution*, but one that is continually created and collectively owned by the people, rather than by political elites. If you're curious about this project — or if you want to help us build the pledge — scan the QR code below.

Scan this QR
code to find your
nearest meetup.

contributism.org

