

Contributism

Turns Your Spending
into an Act of Love



Giving

Looks like taking

Except to those involved.

How often Joy hangs on motive

and love

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.

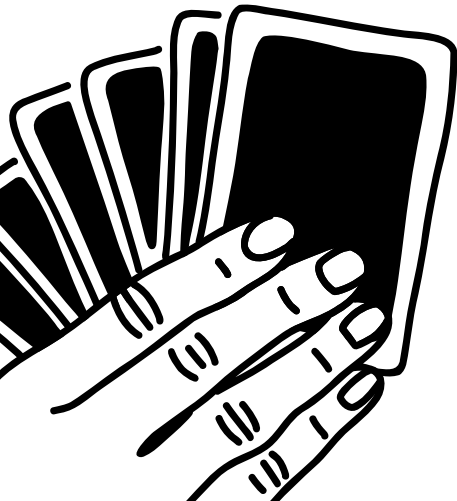
Yours,
Pablo Parabola

The

Card

My mother likes to tell a story about a time when she was playing a children's card game with some of my siblings. Each card had an ability, and the object of the game was to use your cards' abilities to attack your opponents' cards until they lost their hand. There was one type of card that made its holder temporarily invulnerable to attack. Of course, any player who got their hands on one of these cards would treasure it above all else.

But one of my sisters played differently. Whenever she came across one of these cards, she found a way to **give it away** to whichever opponent she thought most needed it.



Game

This strategy mortified my mother. She tried repeatedly to explain the rules of the game to her daughter, to point out to her that she was only sabotaging herself by giving her most valuable cards away. But my sister didn't care; she understood the rules, but she simply liked giving the cards away. She found the way everyone else played the game to be a bit too zero-sum, so she chose to play in her own way. Whether or not the rulebook declared her the winner, she would be happy, because she found joy in the way she played the game.

In the end, my sister won the game. When my mother tells this story, she kind of just ends it there, with an incredulous expression ("*Can you believe it?*"). She remains mystified by her daughter's play-style, but you can tell that she was somehow affected by it, because she keeps telling the story. And every time she tells it, she's beaming with pride.

Parable

Contributism

Turns Your Spending
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It can be hard to remember this, but spending is actually a form of giving. This is hard to see today because, in our current stage of capitalism, most of our spending has become so deeply transactional (so emptied of its human and relational qualities) that it often feels much more like mutual taking.

But take a quick moment with me to reflect on what spending may have **felt like** in societies before our own. In a pre-industrial society, before most of your spending was mediated through large, unfeeling corporate entities, when you bought from the butcher or the tailor or the shoemaker, you knew exactly where your money was going. As you handed over a few shabby bills and coins, you knew that they were going into the pockets of the workers who in turn gave you the product of their labor — the money you *spent* would help them feed themselves and their families, or procure their own set of comfy shoes. These were members of your community, and when you gave your hard-earned money to them, you experienced the warm feelings associated with giving — with being a contributing member of a rich and complex community.

In today's society, we don't get to experience these feelings very often when we spend. The problem is not that our money doesn't *ever* go to our community members; in fact, some of our modern spending still does go to helping our community. Whenever you dine out, or buy groceries, or really, shop in-person anywhere, some of the money you spend goes to the employees you interact with, who are members of your community.

The problem is that we have become accustomed to the understanding that only *a small portion* of the money we spend goes to helping these workers. The bulk of it goes into the unfeeling corporate entity, and exits

out the back to its wealthy owners, who we neither know nor trust, and who we vaguely suspect may even be exploiting those very workers who we would like to happily support. In other words, we have become *disillusioned* and *desensitized* in our spending. We have trained ourselves, through the repetition of thousands upon thousands of these unhappy transactions, to become numb to the human feelings of spending entirely. It is telling that one of the reasons we feel good when we leave a (voluntary) tip is that we know that at least *that money* is actually going to the workers. Remember, that's the feeling we were once rewarded with *simply by making the actual purchase*.

Though this picture of modern spending may be depressing, it also reveals an opportunity. What if you could reassert your spending as an act of giving? If you can find a way to ensure that your spending goes to helping people you see as neighbors, then not only can you make your spending an effective act of giving to your communities (and an effective corrective to the growing problems of wealth inequality and oligarchy), you can also *re-sensitize* yourself — you can begin to capture again the warm joy of giving with every dollar you spend.

This is what it means to be a **contributist** in your spending. Contributism is a social and economic philosophy centered around the idea that true human flourishing, economic development, and social security are all downstream of the act of giving — of participatory contribution. When our giving is **FARE** (free, active, relational, and effective), it is *generative*, producing a host of social and economic benefits *for the giver* and their community. An act of true giving both asserts your independence (“*See what I have to give!*”) and

affirms your desire to co-relate — your 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. Contributists seek to assert their own right to give, and to extend that right to others.

I will not describe contributism in detail in this pamphlet. Instead, I will show it to you through the practical lens of FARE spending. As I hope you will soon see, when we turn our spending into an act of giving, every opportunity to spend becomes for us a source of joy, rather than one of shame and anxiety.

Can We Spend Freely?

Contributist Spending Principle #1

*Recognize where you have **agency** in spending.*

Do you feel in control of your spending? Are your monthly rent or mortgage payments, your utility bills, or your credit card charges fully directed by your own free will? I cannot speak for you, but for this humble author, the answer is quite often no. The cost of living in your area, your personal and health needs, and your social responsibilities will all, among other factors, coerce you to spend your dollars in particular ways.

In other words, most of our spending is compulsory. But that doesn't mean we have no agency at all. It instead means that our spending lacks freedom *by default*; if we want the right to give through our spending, we have to assert it. This requires that we both understand what constraints exist on our spending and what it means to overcome them.

Over the next few sections, I will discuss how I recommend using your spending agency, but first, I want to focus purely on understanding what agency you have. Often, even when we do not have agency in *what* we spend, we do still have two types of spending agency — choice in where we spend, and choice in *how* we spend.

First, we have agency in *where* we spend. Often, the trials and exhaustion of daily life lead us to make decisions based on immediate convenience — *the closest one, the first one, the one with the most stars* — and to feel as if choice is a luxury we do not have. Or sometimes we feel as if our choices are so limited or functionally similar that they are not really choices at all. These feelings are often valid, but even still, I urge you to **notice** where choices do appear, however limited or unimportant. Because, as I will soon explain, these choices provide us with more power than we often understand.

Of course, we are sometimes locked into dealing with a particular merchant — our landlord, our lenders, the only company who sells chargers compatible with our phone. But more often, even when our spending is not free, we do have some choice in where we do it. We can choose which bank we use, for example, or which cell phone company, which ridesharing service, which restaurant. If our community is not too rural, we can choose which grocery store or gas station we visit. The options are often not equivalent — there are often differences in price and convenience — but for now, I only want to point out that they are *choices*.

Second, we have agency in *how* we spend. One of the consequences of modern capitalism is that most of us have come to see our spending as a way to *get* rather than a way to *give*. Unlike our predecessors, who cared

about the butcher or tailor or shoemaker on the other end of the transaction, we are no longer accustomed to thinking about the impact of our spending on the other. Instead, we see our spending as adversarial, or at least as something purely about ourselves — we want to get the lowest possible price from the other, or to extract the most value. This mindset is understandable in the modern era, in which we have been socially trained to see spending as a tool of warfare and survival, not one of thriving. But how can spending be an act of giving — with the benefits that giving brings — when each of us is only thinking about ourselves?

If we want to find joy in our spending, we have to restore our mindset. When contributists speak of **free** giving, we are not just speaking of freedom from coercion; any true act of giving must also be *free of charge*.

Of course, this doesn't mean that you shouldn't pay anything for goods. What it means is that *the gift* in the context of a transaction is the positive difference between the value you create for the receiver and the value you expect them to give back to you. Our spending is only contributist when our goal is to *give* more value than we take; when we want the merchant to *earn* rather than *lose* money on the transaction.

To be clear, there is nothing wrong with getting a great deal where you can get it. But it is the gift within the transaction, our orientation towards the other's benefit, which makes our spending generative, and which makes it joyful. You don't have to spend in this way, but you should know that you do have the **freedom** to do so.

Spending As an Act of Love

Contributist Spending Principle #2

*When choosing between merchants, choose one who you don't mind **generating value for** — who you want to see succeed.*

Of course, this type of spending — spending as a gift to the other — requires that you have good will towards your merchant. This immediately presents a problem for many of us: how can our spending be a gift when we so often deal with merchants we hate (Amazon, Walmart, Uber, etc.)?

Remember the agency you have in choosing *where* you spend? Here is the first way in which you should use it: if you want to reclaim the joy of spending, choose, as often as you can, to do your spending with merchants who you would actually like to keep in business.

When you spend your money with a merchant that you don't like, you prevent yourself from asserting your right to give — because you don't want to give to them. The best you can do is assert your right *not to give* by withholding your generosity and attempting to extract as much value as possible from them. But while this is not wrong, it does nothing to help you flourish.

On the contrary, spending your money with a merchant you actually want to see succeed becomes a joyful and agentic act — by your act of spending, you help them prosper. You wield the power of your dollar to affirm their position in your community; you give strength to the people and causes that you like; in a small but real way, you assert your values in the world. Simply by making the same purchase you would have made

anyway, you attain all the added benefits of asserting your right to give.

Of course, you may already be protesting: *I don't buy from merchants I hate because I want to; I do it because it is cheaper and more convenient.* But consider that every dollar you spend with a merchant you don't like is a dollar's worth of potential generative benefit lost. When you buy what you need on Amazon, splayed out on the couch in your pajamas — the entire transaction depersonalized, facilitated end-to-end by automated processes, and the lion's share of profits going to corporate oligarchs — you may have saved a bit of time and money, but saved for what end? To participate in more numb, transactional spending? Your dollars are the hard-earned fruit of your labor; use them joyfully! Don't let them be snatched back from you by an unethical merchant. What you gain in price and convenience when you buy from a merchant you dislike is no true gain. And what you lose when you buy from a merchant you do like is no true loss *when it is a gift*, accompanied by the joy of claiming your own dignity, and increasing the prosperity of your community.

If you squint, you might see this as advocacy for boycotts or buycotts. This is true in a sense, but perhaps you can also see that this is a deeper and more holistic principle than those on which boycotts and buycotts traditionally stand. I am not simply asking you to punish or reward this or that company for this or that ethical reason; I am asking you to transform your spending into a powerful tool of social welfare, and an expression of love for those you give it to. This is what it means to be an **active** spender.

Know Your Merchants

Contributist Spending Principle #3

*Buy from those you know —
by becoming a **repeat customer**.*

It may seem unfathomable now, but even your grandparents likely grew up knowing the name and face behind every helping hand that mended their clothes and butchered their meat. They also knew the names of their mailman and paperboy, perhaps even their milkman. This is because they had consistent, long-standing relationships with their merchants.

Not so today. In the spirit of efficiency, we have digitized, outsourced, and automated many jobs, while consolidating, contracting, and depersonalizing many others. This effort has been wildly successful, in the sense that it has allowed for an explosion of competition in the production of all types of goods. The result is that we have far more options as consumers, but far fewer relationships. Every purchase is a one-off — we don't value warranties or repairs nearly as much as we used to, because it is cheaper and faster to replace. You can probably recall the names of five or ten different chain stores where you can buy a suit, but you'll never learn the name of your tailor.

This leads to the second way in which contributists use our “*where-to-spend*” agency: by finding ways to make our spending **relational**. This too, requires some rethinking of modern cultural mindsets, but it is often much easier than it sounds. For many of us, the vastness of choices has created the illusion that there are no more locals, but there are locals all around us. We simply have to choose to become them. You

might think it strange to visit the same restaurant every time you go out, but remember: your grandparents would likely have done so, and known the owner by her first name. When you find a merchant you like, choose to spend with them again and again. Go out for every happy hour at the same bar. Get all your weed from the same dispensary. Buy all your books from the same bookstore. Go in person, and learn the owner's first name, and the cashier's too. Resist the urge to try everything; get to know your community instead.

Spend With Intention

Contributist Spending Principle #4

*Be careful with trends. Instead, buy what
is best for you and your community.*

Finally, consider how the actions or expectations of others are influencing your consumption, leading to **ineffective** and unsatisfying spending. When you spend to follow trends that don't actually serve your interests, you are redirecting money into inefficient hands; you could do better by supporting those who are actually serving you and your community.

This is not to say that popular styles or ideas are always wrong. Sometimes, they can be a boon. When I moved to Boston years ago from a much warmer climate, I quickly learned that I needed to buy winter gear. At the time, I knew nothing of GoreTex or removable liners, but I found exactly what I needed anyway simply by looking and asking around — the best way to know what I should wear was just to see what everyone else was wearing. Local social trends helped shortcut the dozens of decisions I would have had to make otherwise.

But trends can have their downsides. They often lead us to overconsume, and to consume under-critically. As an example of this, consider the most ostensibly “effective” trends: the recommendations from popular review publications like Wirecutter and Consumer Reports, which enlist expert reviewers who designate the items which provide “the best value” for the most people. These recommendations can be truly helpful — I myself swear by a number of products I’ve found on Wirecutter over the years.

But outsourcing our decision-making to online experts has some significant side effects. First, it tends to make us passive in our consumption, and passive spending is neither free, active, nor relational. In other words, even when following trends is effective, it isn’t FARE.

But worse, even these “effective” trends are often not as effective as they seem, when you begin to realize what the reviews are missing. While they cover many practical concerns, they won’t tell you how the product or service affects your community, from the hyperlocal to the national level, and every stage in between. Perhaps you care about a product’s impact on the environment, or preventing animal cruelty, or not supporting companies with objectionable political stances. Who is the manufacturer, and how do they treat their employees? How were these minerals harvested — through willing hands with commensurate compensation, or forced servitude and exploitation? By design, trendsetters encourage you to overlook many of the considerations that you would take into account if you were doing your own research. And of course, they will never recommend local options, because they write for a national or global audience.

One of the things I think Silicon Valley got right all

the way up through the early 2010s was its radically nonchalant attitude towards trends and uniformity. There was an unspoken but intentional recognition that an individual’s ability to write code had nothing to do with their willingness to conform to a specific style of dress or self-expression. This freedom of expression reverberated through that whole slice of society, reducing social pressure and further entrenching the ideals of openness and free-thinking that produced all kinds of innovation and solidarity.

This same power is available to any community made up of trend-resistant individuals. Our purchase decisions are influenced by our peers, but we also influence them back. As we assert our agency in our spending, we naturally encourage our social circles to do the same. Each of us has the ability and responsibility to leverage our spheres of influence, big and small, towards spending that better serves ourselves and our communities.

Contributist spending is a radical political act

I will not dwell here on contributist social policy, which is the focus of an entire separate pamphlet. However, our patterns of consumption are front and center in our politics, with concerns about inflation driving presidential elections, and our volatile tariff landscape predicated on the goal of returning manufacturing of every sort of good to America.

But I urge you to consider whether you truly believe that the solution to the perversities of our consumer economy is making foreign goods more difficult to access through steep tariffs, or electing more charismatic men

who make vague promises to lower costs while raking in millions of dollars from corporate donors.

I suspect we should instead reconsider why we find ourselves doing all of this joyless spending on expensive-yet-low-quality goods in the first place, and if there is some way we can regain a sense of control.

The average household in America spent \$78,535 in 2024, and with nearly 130 million US households, that accounts for over 10 trillion dollars spent. Where those dollars go is powerful. By redirecting our money away from centralized corporations, and back towards our local communities, we can trigger shifts in how modernity approaches manufacturing, labor, and investing. But put aside affecting the scales of power — consider how your dollars can improve the lives of the people you see day-to-day. The trusted auto mechanic who always tops up your windshield wiper fluid with every service. The tailor who resizes thrift store treasures with the dexterity of a street magician.

This shift in focus, from the global to the hyperlocal, is intentional — it is at the core of the contributist right to give. Contributism provides new ways to engage with capitalism, the dominant form of market economy in this globalist age, by recentring our attention on one another. This is not an abdication of political power, but a new theory of it; we aim to foster widespread social flourishing by reorienting the very same incentive structures that have led us into this K-shaped economy of widening inequality. In other words, when we reclaim our spending as an act of love, we begin to **bend towards each other** — and over time, our corporations and governments begin to bend too.

CONTRIBUTISM FOR EVERYONE 01 / 03
BUILDING A BETTER SOCIETY
BY RESTORING THE RIGHT TO GIVE

There is so much more to say. How contributism rebuilds the village, and gives meaning to your career. 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

