

Footnote: Effect of Capitalism on The Individual

In the present world, human life seems to have no purpose but to provide the labour to power the grandiose whims and endeavours of a favoured few. Caged in their suburban work camps, it is thus little wonder that the hapless slaves of capitalism exhibit an increasingly antisocial mode of behaviour. [PDF]

A Futile Existence

I am born. During childhood, my life is centred around my suburban semi with its restrictive garden or yard. It is cramped. There is no space to play and wander around the wonders and expanses of nature. The only place close to hand, which offers more space, is the street. But this is dangerous. Yuppie women speed past with their own kids safely cocooned in their little shiny four-wheeled bullets oblivious, or at least unconcerned, as to the stress and danger they present to other people's children as they pass.

I am sent to school to be taught what the elite of society want me to know and believe. Then on to college or university to be formed into a useful human resource unit to power the capitalist production lines of the immediate short-term future. A cog for a corporate machine - a fast-food waiter, an accounts clerk, a machine minder, a driver, a salesman, a programmer, a rocket scientist.

Whatever required kind of human resource I may have chosen to become, I inevitably find that I am one of many. One of too many. Consequently, upon being flung into the writhing turmoil known as the job market, I find that the wage I can expect is rarely more than that needed for [bare subsistence](#). It is unrelated to the number of years of hard study I had to endure to acquire my knowledge and skills. It is unrelated to the level of difficulty or effort required to do my job. It has only to do with how many human resource units of a given type are available compared with the number required.

If there are not many fast-food waiters around, that job will pay well. If the market is flooded with rocket scientists, then that job will pay badly. The only time I am paid [more than subsistence](#) for my labour is when the economic sector within which I work is expanding rapidly. It is nothing to do with how rich or poor the economy is as a whole. This is what I have observed to happen. This is what is experienced by the many. This is free market capitalism.

I am thus, from early adulthood, thrown into a dog-eat-dog competitive world called the job market. Hoping desperately to find myself in the right place at the right time, knowing the right people. There to sink or swim. So if I am lucky (because luck is what it is) I manage to get a job. I report to work each morning at my master's premises. I perform my narrow set of allotted tasks until evening. Then I return home again.

In time, by chance I meet a mate, get married, mortgage a semi in the suburbs, have children. I continue reporting to work each morning at my master's premises, performing my narrow allotted tasks until the evening then returning home again. I escape on a fortnight's holiday each year to stave off madness. I pay tax and social security. I pay my mortgage. I work hard for 30 years. I am made redundant. I am ejected onto the scrap heap.

I am provided with [just enough social security](#) money to sustain my basic biological existence in suburban isolation. I am hounded continually to [find a job which is not there](#). Fortnightly [inquisitions at the Jobcentre](#). Threat of loss or reduction in social security benefit and pension. A burden on society. A malingerer. Can no longer afford annual holiday to escape the madness. I retire. I survive for about two miserable years on State pension. I die.

Whatever other events take place along one's path of life, they are only incidental and peripheral to the main purpose of being a good obedient human resource for the greater economic good of the capitalist elite. All such events and activities like going to the pub, bingo, spectator sports, and above all television, are not provided for one's edification. They are encouraged merely to keep one's mind sufficiently torpid to prevent one from becoming dissatisfied with one's conditions of life as an arbitrarily expendable economic resource.

Dispossessed of any natural means of transforming my labour into my needs of life, I, as a generic citizen of the capitalist world, am reduced to selling my labour in order to survive. Whatever skill I may acquire - academically, professionally or socially - my only recognised value is the going rate for whatever useful economic function the market perceives me as being able to perform. And the going rate for my skill is set purely by supply and demand. The quality of my work - provided it be *adequate* for the purpose - is irrelevant. Neither the years of training, nor the intellectual effort these required, have any bearing.

Investment in a Skill

There are two aspects to an acquired skill: personal investment in time, effort and money needed to acquire it; and the financial reward for applying it. Should the investment become too large relative to remuneration then few will bother to acquire the skill.

Technology has precipitated an explosion in the number and depth of special skills needed to support an economy. Assuming a basic education, some skills require only minutes to acquire. Others take years of intense study and practice. Some, once acquired, are put to work almost effortlessly. They become natural and automatic. All they consume is time and physical energy. For other mentally creative skills, applying them is every day as hard as was the process of learning them. I notice how much more sleep I need when engaged in long-term mental creativity than I need when applying an automatic skill - be it mental or physical.

The remuneration a person receives from his future employment therefore has to justify his investment in terms of:

1. the time and effort he has to put in to study and training,
2. the cost of keeping himself and paying the necessary fees,
3. the amount and quality of effort put into doing the job.

The injustice of employment within a capitalist free market is that a person's remuneration in a job is based on none of these.

The Return on Investment

Morally, I should be rewarded, at least, according to the effort and dedication I put into my work. But morality has no part with capitalism. By fair economic exchange, I should be rewarded, at least, according to the productive yield of my effort. But this is not the way it works either. Fair exchange has no part with capitalism. Capitalism is not - and as far as I know, does not even claim to be - fair. My *return on investment* for the time I spend working for an employer within the capitalist free market is determined, like everything else, purely by the forces of supply and demand.

As technology advances, the disparity in skill levels it requires accelerates. Education and training in the higher skills occupies a greater and greater portion of one's working life. As technology advances, the demand life-span of such a skill becomes shorter and shorter. Soon, the time taken to acquire a skill will become longer than the time over which that skill will remain saleable.

Just because I am a highly specialised rocket scientist does not automatically mean I will be in high demand. The market may not need me at the moment, or ever again. Just because I am an unskilled labourer does not mean I will be the last to get work. The market may need more than there are available right now. Just because I am a skilled specialist does not mean I will earn more than - or even as much as - an unskilled labourer. It depends entirely whether, and how badly, the market wants my skills at the time.

The threshold of [chaos](#) in supply and demand is rapidly approaching. This could create a sudden excess of rocket scientists, making them '10 a penny'. It could equally create a sudden shortage of floor sweepers, making them each worth a king's ransom. Rocket scientists - for all their years of personal effort, expensive education and training - would thus become better off [downshifting](#) to floor sweepers. Their years of supreme formative effort would then have been all for nothing.

This is even complicated by the fact that the market will not necessarily buy *my* skills, even if it is absolutely desperate for them. It will only buy skills it *perceives* me to have. If I am above a certain age, and people of my age stereotypically do not have my skills, the market will not buy them from me. I am an expert in leading edge computer software development, but the market will not buy such skills from me because I am 57 [Ed.1999]. The stereotypical 50+ knows nothing about computer software. In fact, it has now become convinced that nobody over 36 does. Markets are driven by fad and fashion. Even highly technical markets are steered by nothing more robust than authenticated hearsay or celebrity endorsement.

Inappropriate Employment

My daughter had a reasonable job in a merchant bank. After having worked for 3 years from leaving the 6th form, she decided to spend 3 years taking a degree. It was a big investment. She gave up her income and 'lived on porridge' so to speak. She was falsely led to believe that a degree would lead to a better job.

Now, 3 years after having gained her degree, she is yet to acquire a job which pays anything like the salary she had before taking her degree. Her current job is supremely boring and is driving her to despair. It demands absolutely none of the extra knowledge and skill she gained from her degree. She is not *unemployed* but she is certainly [inappropriately employed](#).

Market Forces

The force of supply and demand is not the only force acting within the market. There are other forces at large which influence the going rate for a particular skill. These tend to moderate - or even out - the extreme effects of supply and demand. They act like a damper in a car suspension or the graphite rods in a nuclear reactor.

One of these is the force of collectivism. This drives the members of a given trade or profession to form themselves into a guild, a union or a professional institute. Acting together, the members of such instruments of [restrictive practice](#) establish and hold for their skill an accepted status within the social hierarchy. This status in turn gives rise to a generally accepted 'going rate' relative to other skills and professions.

The other major influence is subjective perception. Where no collective voice exists, the applying of a skill is rewarded only according to its value as perceived by *they who hold the purse strings* of the industry concerned. These people are inevitably accountants, administrators and managers. Such bureaucrats rarely have any direct notion of the depth of technical content of the skills they presume

to evaluate. They are nonetheless invariably positive that such skills have nothing approaching the value of their own, or of skills whose values are determined by restrictive practice.

Convergence of global educational standards and the disparity in currency values has resulted in high-tech skills being [cheaper abroad](#). Consequently, although your skills may be in demand, and though the market perceive you to have what it wants, you can still suddenly find yourself unemployable. Skills you have taken half a career to perfect can thus become useless over night. As globalisation proceeds, the livelihood of the individual will everywhere grow more precarious.

Distorted Value

The result is that many skills are undervalued while others are overvalued according to how they are perceived by those who control the purse. The notion of money being a means of providing fair exchange of one's skilled effort for those of another has lost all integrity. One person may apply hard-acquired skills for long hours for little monetary reward while another applies deftness, casually acquired, for which wealth drops into his lap. Money and value thus have a [distorted and convoluted relationship](#) like points on a warped membrane, which has been randomly stretched and compressed.

How does capitalist money perform as a means of exchange? What is a dollar? What is a pound? Ten minutes of my effort? 100 seconds of yours? By what yardstick? Who is qualified to say? Certainly not any subjective observer. And that rules out all human beings. Nevertheless, self-appointed rulers called capitalists presume to decree the monetary values of other people's skills. Consequently, for as long as capitalism rules, gross unfairness and extreme disparity will reign.

Imprisoned and Frustrated

So despite my efforts in acquiring a skill and diligently applying it, I remain dispossessed, trapped and frustrated in this constrictive glorified work camp called suburbia. This is not a natural or conducive habitat for the human animal. It crams neighbour against neighbour with no latitude, no freedom, no space to move or sit in peace. Each is desperate for his own space.

But my tenure, even in this horrible place, is fraught with uncertainty. In order to maintain its so-called economic health within the global economy, the capitalist State has to adjust economic parameters like interest rates as international exchange rates ebb and flow like ocean tides. But [interest rates](#) have a devastating effect on the likes of me. They can land me in a state of negative equity which can result in my being ejected from the brick box I have striven for years to pay for. This permanent prospect adds to the stress laid upon me by the global skills market.

But what about the house itself, and all the things I need to make it into a home? It is shoddily built at minimum cost for maximum price. The furnishings and appliances foisted upon me by capitalism in exchange for my labour are inevitably from a [narrow range](#) of artificially expensive, over-marketed [consumer goods](#), which are designed to look as cute as possible in the shop window and then wear out as soon as possible after the statutory minimum warranty period has expired.

Burdened with all these stresses and frustrations, it is little wonder that the generic suburbanite has become such an irritable and inconsiderate neighbour.

Inconsiderate Neighbour

I see tigers and bears at the zoo in their cages. I watch as they pace back and forth, round and round, in endless ritual. My stomach reaches as I see a caged gorilla eat its greens, then vomit them up, devour the vomit, spew it up again, eat it again. In an endless ritual. I hear that caged chimpanzees,

out of boredom, engage in all kinds of perverse activity with each other, and that when provoked they defecate in their hands and throw their faeces at taunting human spectators. Unnatural behaviour caused by confinement in unnatural environments. Capitalism dispossesses the labouring majority of their rural heritage and cages them like zoo animals in what can only be described as an up-market work camp called suburbia. It should therefore come as no surprise when they start to exhibit similar antisocial behaviour.

The vast majority of people today live in little brick boxes crammed together in rabbit warren housing estates. Each family's domain is no more than a postage stamp sized plot of land. Here they may freely stay. With the exception of a few public areas such as parks, the only other place they are free to move is on the public road. But they may not *stay* in public parks. They may not camp there - even for a night. If they wish to travel anywhere, they essentially need to be able to get there and back in a day. Those of limited means, like the poor and unemployed, are essentially trapped, like caged animals, in their little brick boxes.

In this unnatural state, life drags, frustration mounts, tensions build up. The results are inevitable:

1. petty authoritarianism
2. rowdy unsupervised [street kids](#)
3. [speeding and inconsiderately parked cars](#)
4. [noise nuisance](#) from radios in other houses, gardens and delivery vans
5. [powerful external lights](#) shining through neighbours' bedroom windows
6. [pet animals fouling](#) public places and other people's gardens

Then, because people are all so tightly packed together, there are the all-too-frequent boarder disputes between neighbours in which fences seem to acquire a strange habit of creeping ever closer to your house while you are away. This illustrates well the frustration-induced psychotic selfishness of the modern suburbanite, which is so neatly captured in the saying "What's yours is mine and what's mine's my own".

Petty Authoritarianism

This sentiment is intensified to its ultimate level when people are crammed, even more tightly, in apartment blocks. This way of living necessitates a further tier of petty authority, namely a condominium. This, theoretically, comprises all the apartment owners in the building, voting together for what they honestly believe to be best for everybody. Sadly, however, this is not what happens. A specific situation illustrates what does.

In Brazil, I live in an apartment, which I own. It is one of 15 in the building shown on the right. Maintenance of the common aspects of the building is administered by a condominium, which comprises the owners of the apartments. The reality, however, is that the building is ruled by a clique, which is made up of less than half of the apartment owners. These arrange things the way *they* want, in some cases voting to overturn Federal and State laws they considered to be "impractical" for what they want to do.

The (supposedly elected) chairman of the condominium announces committee meetings by email. He has deemed



that all condominium communication outside official meetings will be by email. Hard luck if you do not have a computer or your computer is faulty or your Internet connection is down. The meetings are scheduled always at times when it is impossible for me to attend. I do not know about other apartment owners.

At one such meeting, the clique discussed security and decided, at great cost, to install cameras all over the building and its approaches. The camera images are supposedly viewable by all the apartment owners via their computers. I have 3 computers, plus a laptop and a tablet. [The reason I have so many computers is because computers were my life. Back in the days when I was employable, I was a programmer.] However, the camera viewing software, as supplied by the vendor of the camera system, is incompatible with all of them.

I did, manage to fire up a disk partition in my oldest computer (the laptop), on which Microsoft Windows XP was still installed. I downloaded the camera viewing software and was able to view the camera images. The definition was so poor that it would be impossible to identify anybody from the images. So they couldn't be used to catch a thief.

The viewing software was written in Active-X, so I am thankful that I had absolutely no non-system (or private) data in that Windows XP partition. Who knows what back doors the security company or its software provider put into their closed-source Active-X code? The rule of thumb is that if they can, they will. There is no such thing as paranoia as regards Information Technology, only naivety. Technically, it is possible for the security company, its software provider or any of their relevant employees to access whatever information may be stored on the computer of any of the apartment owners who has this Active-X camera viewing software installed.

Furthermore, any employee of the security company, who administers client passwords, can access the camera views. Such an employee is also able to pass on our building's password to anybody else, who could then access our cameras over the Internet just as we can. That person could then take as long as he likes to "case the joint", seeing who comes and goes and when. Immensely useful to a thief. If they can, they will.

I am retired and living on a small pension. Occupiers of certain other apartments are not exactly rich. Yet, because of decisions made by a younger more wealthy minority, we all have to pay equal amounts for the installation and maintenance of these cameras and their on-going service. And all for a system that, in reality, renders our apartments less secure and more vulnerable. How well the microcosm of the condominium illustrates the [macrocosm of national democracy](#).

The condominium meetings are generally attended only by members of the clique. I suspect that the majority of other apartment owners voice their disapproval by not attending. Or perhaps they are simply apathetic. Or perhaps, like me, they cannot attend meetings at the stipulated times. The result is that the chairman is always elected from members of the clique and becomes evermore authoritarian.

One extreme example of this authoritarianism is the payment of the condominium fee each month. For the first 6 years I lived in the building, apartment owners paid their condominium fee each month by cheque. There was never any incidence of people not paying or even paying late. Notwithstanding, a new young man, who moved into one of the apartments, about a couple of years ago, quickly burrowed his way into the clique and (I presume) became elected as the chairman of the condominium.

He immediately implemented a new system of payment. Each month, he emails a bar-coded bank payment slip to each apartment owner. The bar-code is unique for each apartment and for each month. Consequently, an apartment owner cannot pay his fee until he has received his slip for the month, by email, and printed it on his computer printer. One has to assume that now each occupant

is legally obliged to have a computer, an Internet connection and a printer, which are required always to be functional.

The payment slip is issued on the 28th of the month usually, although that is a condescension by the chairman. It is officially issued on the first of the month for which the fee is due. However, each apartment owner has until the 7th of the month for the payment to have been received by the bank. That is usually 5 working days. If he is late in making the payment, he is required **by the bank** to pay an extra 10% fine.

Please note: he cannot pay early because he cannot pay until he has received and printed the payment slip. So he has only effectively a 5-day window in which to pay or be fined 10%.

To my mind, this is outrageous. It means that one is not allowed to be away from home between the 1st and the 7th of any month unless he is prepared to pay the 10% fine and be recorded by the bank as a late payer. He cannot go away on business during this time unless there is somebody in his apartment who can make the payment for him. He cannot be away on holiday during this time unless he is again prepared to include the 10% fine and being branded as a late payer by the bank as part of the cost of his holiday. I complained about this but my complaint was ridiculed.

The chairman of the condominium does say that, if one needs to be away during this tight period, then contact him for an early despatch of the payment slip. This, however, is fraught with stress and uncertainty for the apartment owner: not the chairman. The one time I requested an early payment slip, it arrived at the 11th hour the night before we were due to leave. Sometimes the bank's on-line system for issuing the payment slips has been unavailable for more than a day.

There are innumerable scenarios whereby the apartment owner may be in an impossible position to pay on time through no fault of his own. But whoever's fault it may be, it is the individual apartment owner who has to pay the fine, which is automatically added to the following bill by the bank's computer. And it is the bank that will automatically and blindly take legal action to recover the fine if it isn't paid: not the condominium chairman.

This practice is vastly over-authoritarian and I have a notion that it is also illegal: although the latter is irrelevant when it is an individual against the might of a faceless bank. Thus, as always, in a capitalist society, onus and stress are externalized, by the corporate, onto the shoulders of the individual - the weaker party. The mentality of the [omnipotent cretin](#) permeates downwards to the lowliest of authorities.

Street Kids

Today, both parents are forced to work to pay the mortgage while their unsupervised children run riot in our streets, being a thorough nuisance to everybody else. Who's to blame: the parents, the kids? No, it is he who has precipitated all the ills of modern society: the profiteering capitalist.

We live in a dead-end street - often called a *close* or *cul-de-sac*, depending on where you come from. We don't get a lot of traffic. For 25 years it had been a quiet street inhabited by people who maintained a tranquil neighbourhood. Two years ago, 3 of the 16 houses changed hands at around the same time. The 3 new families completely changed the whole atmosphere of the street.

Their children ran riot. They played football, cricket, tennis and even golf in the street. They hit balls into people's gardens. They broke flowers. They dropped litter. Above all, was their constant rowdiness. One particular 5 year old boy constantly annoyed neighbours by standing behind their cars when they were trying to back out of their driveways. Then he took to squatting down behind cars instead so that the driver could not possibly see him while reversing. A girl of about the same age from another family would ride her little bike straight down her drive and into the road between

two parked cars. Cars and delivery vans driven by outsiders could not possibly know the stupidity of these children. How they survived, I do not know.

It all meant that I could not work (writing and applying for jobs, telephoning contacts etc.) after 3:30pm in the afternoon because of this tribe of screaming kids in the street. And all day at weekends and during school holidays. Being necessarily home based, how could I possibly compete with people in offices who are able to work from 9 to 5 in a conducive environment?

Tranquillity Returns

The rest of the residents were absolutely fed up with these 3 families also. And we all made it very clear. Providentially, the family of the 5-year old boy moved out after less than a year. The children of the other families seemed miraculously to disappear during weekdays until 6pm, all weekend except Sunday afternoons, and during school holidays. Their parents must have arranged for them to go somewhere at these times.

At the height of our plight, we looked into the law as regards this kind of situation. Although laws do relate to it, we found nothing that could have brought an end to this circumstance. It is just providential that 13 out of the 16 families in the street wanted peace and were able to induce enough passive pressure to affect the 3 new families. It is frightening to realise, though, that if 8 houses had changed hands and 8 such new families had moved in, the remaining 8 would simply have had to live as best they could in the new adverse circumstances. It is over, but it could happen again. Any time. There is nothing to stop it.

Others have it far worse. Popular "Neighbours from Hell" television documentaries show people in various parts of the country who endure far worse than this. Lone elderly people are taunted, robbed and driven to suicide by teenagers whom society has deprived of any meaningful purpose in life. Boundary feuds and creeping fences erupt into antagonism and violence. Police crackdowns and punitive sentencing will not stop it or change the social climate. Only by addressing the primary cause can any solution be effected. And that cause is the unnatural caged existences which all but the favoured few in this country have to endure for their entire three-score-and-ten.

Who Is To Blame?

Does one have the right to live in peace and tranquillity? Or would such a right violate the rights of other people's children to be able to play freely and as they wish? In my opinion, the ones to blame for this kind of clash and conflict are the greedy aristocratic landowners, capitalist land speculators and builders who cram the vast majority of ordinary people into over-packed housing developments, which are nothing more than up-market work camps that do not have the minimum necessary and sufficient facilities to support a functional community.

There is a supposedly *proper* place for these children to play: it is a 100 hectare *dog latrine*, which the local authority calls a *park*. But most parents, quite sensibly, do not allow their children to play there unsupervised. And working parents cannot supervise their children most of the time. This is all because the "park" is out of sight of most houses. The few houses from which it can be seen, back onto it. It is therefore very difficult for parents to see their children all the time even from these houses.

In the 1950s, the local authority built a little circle of 24 houses round a central green of about a hectare. The kitchen and sitting room windows of each house faced the green. In those days, when mothers were mostly homemakers, there would be at least 6 pairs of eyes scanning the green at any time. Children could play there in complete safety. There were a few trees and bushes. A place for a

bonfire. It was not quite the original rural heritage I think is the birthright of every child, but it was defensible space belonging to the immediate neighbourhood.

Two years ago they pulled down the old council houses and filled in the entire area with small close-packed yuppie commuter boxes. The motive? - **capitalist profit**.

Speeding Cars

The car, in concept, is an ideal means of personal and family transport. Sadly, this ideal has been diluted, then ruined, by profiteering producers who tune their pathetic products to appeal to the shallow macho lusts of an irresponsible majority rather than supply a sensible form of transport for all.

The modern car is designed for speed. Its feel, poise and gearing actually makes it difficult and irritating to drive at a sensible suburban speed. It makes its driver itch to get into top gear. It insulates him from outside noise and makes him too comfortable. This gives him a false sense of speed and a diminished sense of danger. It protects him in a steel safety cage with energy-absorbing crumple zones front and rear. It has side impact bars and crash-triggered air bags. These make the car and its occupants safe.

But not the cyclists and pedestrians outside. They are in mortal danger. Their interests are not considered. The manufacturer has no commercial motive for considering them. They are not paying for the car. And you certainly cannot expect the generic British driver to consider them.

See the young dolled-up modern mother collecting her children from school. Once she has cocooned her *own* children safely in her protective steel cage, she speeds along narrow suburban streets, chicaning in and out of parked cars without a care for the safety or nerves of other people and their children who have to walk home.

See the inevitable and pathetic young Mr Testosterone squealing around the tight suburban streets in his beat-up "hot hatch" with pounding music drowning the sound of his cracked exhaust. Trumpeting around the empty late night supermarket car park doing hand-brake turns into the disabled parking bays. Basking in the marvel of his gormless peers.

See the morning rush yuppie dressed in his immaculate power suit as he speeds off to work in his car, splashing carelessly through puddles soaking any hapless pedestrian in muddy water. Watch him menacingly tailgate anyone driving at a sensible speed in the wet leafy conditions. It will never happen to *him*. But it does. The good driver has to stop suddenly to avoid a child. He stops in time. The tailgater doesn't. He shunts the good driver's car over the child, then denies it was his fault and blames the sensible driver for the child's death and for the damage to his car. That's the way it is.

And I thought this was as bad as it could get. That is, until I went to live in Belo Horizonte-MG, Brazil. There, you have to learn a whole new ball-game and fast. The first thing is that cars do **not** stop at zebra crossings to allow pedestrians to cross. If you expect them to do so you will be run over: guaranteed. A zebra crossing merely indicates where you are most likely to be able to get across the road unscathed, provided you wait until there is no traffic and cross quickly before a car comes screaming out of sight at high speed and nails you.

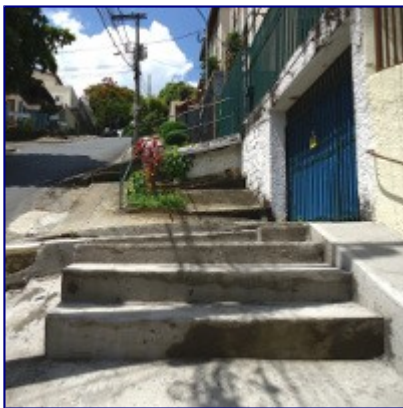
Do not think either that it is safe to cross the road at traffic lights when the green pedestrian "go" light (the little green walking man) is lit. Cars will turn right on the red and clobber you. I was very nearly killed that way shortly after I first arrived there. Motorists don't expect pedestrians to cross in front of them under any circumstances. You can cross in front of traffic that is waiting at a red traffic light. However, the reason they stop is to avoid hitting other vehicles crossing in front of them on a green light. If there is no traffic crossing their path, then they are likely to go on the red and any

pedestrian crossing in front will be skittled. To their minds, the pedestrian is not supposed to be there.

But perhaps the motorist cannot be blamed for everything. The traffic authorities are also negligent. Once, whilst driving in the centre of the city, I saw pedestrians suddenly start to cross the road in front of me. I saw no traffic light telling me to stop. However, a woman crossing the road pointed to a pedestrian crossing light that showed the little green walking man. They were perfectly correct to cross in front of my car. Mystified by this, I went back to the same place; this time on foot, having taken the bus into the centre. I looked far and wide within the vicinity of this controlled pedestrian crossing. There was no traffic signals to control the traffic. It is not as if there were a traffic signal that was not working. There was simply no traffic lights installed for the road direction. I later learned that the relevant road traffic was supposed to be controlled by a traffic light that was over 200 metres away, on the assumption of how much time it would take a car to cross the enormous 200 metre intersection. The traffic engineers just hadn't considered the ramifications of slow crawling queues of traffic. Hey ho!

Another trick frequently played by Brazilian motorists is to go the wrong way along a one-way street. I have seen this all too often. Frequently, this is done by locals who know full-well that the street is one-way only, but it is a convenient short cut for them. Others simply don't agree that it should be a one-way street and so ignore the fact that it has been so designated by the traffic authority. All this is inside a city, by the way! Motorists who are strange to the locality may not realize that the street is one-way. The road signs are of the tiny United States type and are more likely than not to have been long since bleached out by the sun. So there is no arrow visible on the sign, making it completely ambiguous.

This ignoring of one-way restrictions by motorists is extremely dangerous for pedestrians who, knowing it to be a one-way street, will look only towards the permitted direction for approaching traffic before crossing the road. It is always vital to look both ways. Pedestrians are also in the habit of walking in the road when the pavement becomes impassable. In a one-way street they will step into the road without looking in the prohibited direction for traffic. I was also nearly clobbered doing this when I did not hear the approach of a car travelling against the permitted direction.



But why walk in the road at all? Why not keep on the pavement? I think the adjacent picture illustrates why people walk in the road. I can't negotiate some of these pavements. I pity anybody in a wheel chair! Notwithstanding, cars pass aggressively close to pedestrians walking in the road. Their message is that as a pedestrian, I should not be in the road. The road is for cars. Perhaps I should get some climbing rope and pitons and keep to the pavement. The local authority is supposed to maintain the pavements but doesn't. The money obviously goes somewhere else.

Please be aware that the steps that you can see in these two pictures are not normal sized steps: they are huge. An older person certainly could not get up them without the aid of somebody else. For an invalid's wheelchair, or a child's push chair, they are utterly impossible. The road is the only option.

So it is up to householders to maintain the public pavements in front of their dwellings. And the householders do this to suit themselves: not the passing pedestrian. The householders make convenient access ramps for their vehicles outside on the pavement to avoid using space inside their private plots. If you click on the image to get a large view, you will see that the householder has made the pavement extremely steep in order to make his vehicle entrance ramp as level as possible.



Note that the access ramp of this householder's neighbour, higher up, is over a metre higher, creating an impossible step for a pedestrian. The sloping pavement in the foreground is impossible to climb up in the wet. It is far too slippery. These two illustrations are tame compared with others I encountered on the walking route I used for exercise three times a week. But those are in areas where I did not wish to take my camera. Some of these householder-maintained pavements are extremely uneven and full of ruts, making it extremely easy to trip up and fall, as I frequently did when I first arrived in Brazil.

Pedestrian Minority

Back in the UK, in our modern suburbia, pedestrians are now an uncatered-for minority. With so few now actually walking suburban streets, drivers do not consider them. Concern for their safety, and stress caused to them by speeding traffic while walking the streets is not of majority interest. Police are far more concerned with majority public opinion than with enforcing laws which protect a mere minority from injury and death.

One particular suburban road near my home in which I frequently have to cross is very dangerous. It is in a 30mph speed limit. Most cars travel at about 45mph which is extremely dangerous for pedestrians. One has to depend on hearing whether or not a car is coming because cars come round the corner at speeds at which they could not possibly avoid pedestrians who had already started to cross the road. I used to see a black Peugeot which sped down that road every morning as I was on my way to catch my train. I am certain it hit almost 70mph down the straight part of that road. Yet the police do not want to know. They are not interested until there is an accident in which somebody is injured.

For a short time I regularly had to go to Cambridge. I had to get used to the fact very quickly that most cyclists ignore traffic lights at pedestrian crossings and that the small buses ignore zebra crossings. They simply do not expect pedestrians to expect them to give way. I had one or two close calls before I got wise to it. Perhaps the same happens in other cities.

Motorway Madness

Then there are the motorways. The rules are that there is no speed limit and that might is right. A small family hatch-back with three children in the back seat travelling at 70mph past a lane of slow trucks. Impatient businessman is in a hurry. He has been travelling at a nice cool 100mph in his four-wheel-drive monster complete with bull bars. Suddenly and irritatingly, he is confronted by the back of this little family car. He has to slow down. He will be late for a very important meeting. He may lose the contract.

He tailgates the little car at about one or two metres. Half a mile goes by. Still the trucks are smoking their way slowly up the incline. He stares at the rear bumper of the offending hatch-back. A ghost-jam suddenly materialises. Before he realises it, the businessman's bull bars have crushed the hatch-back. The rear parcel shelf of the hatch-back has decapitated the children and partially crushed the parents in the front. One dies. One is maimed.

The businessman is upset. He "did not mean to do it". However, there are no willing witnesses to the tailgating. They are all desperate to avoid getting involved. Think of all the inconvenience. It is classed as "an accident". The businessman is fined for not leaving sufficient distance to stop. Years go by. Soon it is all out of sight and out of mind. He enjoys Christmases with his family. He is soon once again laughing and joking and pursuing his selfish ends. But for the survivor of the hatch-back there are no merry Christmases. Her spouse and children are forever out of sight but *never out of mind*.

The motorway was once heralded as the ultimate means of free passage for all. But the forsaking of law, manners, consideration for others and self-discipline by the arrogant and reckless has made it their exclusive domain. It has left much of society, for example:

- those who have too much common sense to venture onto the motorway,
- those whose vehicles are not substantial enough to protect them from the dangers of motorway travel,
- those who do not have a vehicle,

with the expensive and restrictive alternative called public transport. But not all of us can afford to use public transport. We therefore no longer have the effective [right of freedom of movement](#) within the 'free' country to which we supposedly 'belong'.

Now back to Brazil. By far the most dangerous road, on which I personally have ever driven is, without any shadow of a doubt, the 300 kilometres of the BR135 between its junction with the BR040 in the south [19°09'13.96"S 44°31'55.10"W] and the outskirts of Montes Claros in the north [16°46'33.37"S 43°50'23.59"W]. It is a hair-raising drive. The road is full of large heavy trucks. Heavy is the right word. Most of them are clearly well over-loaded. And their speeds? They go a lot faster than I dare in my car. I drove that route 5 times. Never again. From then on I took the night bus.

I always saw dead animals by the side of the road, so I decided during one trip that I would count them. Over the 300km stretch I counted one dead horse and four dead dogs. All run over. This may not seem many. However, one has to remember that, in this tropical region, the urubu (South American vulture) will demolish a dead dog in 20 minutes, leaving nothing. They appear out of nowhere en-mass and just gorge. I doubt whether a dead horse would last much longer. There would be simply more urubu eating it. This rapid clear-up of dead animals means that any dead animal one sees on the road hasn't been there very long. Probably only a matter of minutes. So how many dogs and horses per day do the trucks despatch, I wonder?

Humans too are also frequent victims. Yet I am burdened with wonder as to why there aren't more. I don't remember driving the route even once without encountering at least one serious truck accident. This usually results in at least one truck with its enormous trailer on its side and with produce strewn all over both carriageways. I expect the drivers are usually killed. So be it. However, what to me is wholly unacceptable is when these irresponsible cowboy truckers kill the defenceless occupants of cars and pedestrians.

My closest call was when I was approaching a blind bend. I had my headlights on, as always, even during the day on that road. The on-coming traffic was a train of heavy trucks. Suddenly, one of the monsters appeared round the bend on my side of the road, with headlights ablaze. He was overtaking

a stream of other trucks on the blind bend on the wrong side of the double centre-line. I flashed my lights to main beam repeatedly. He flashed back and sounded his horn. He was not going to stop or fall back. He was coming through whether I was there or not. My only option was to hit the side of the road as fast as possible. The dirt track at the side is frequently populated by pedestrians and mule carts. Luckily, there was none there at the time. This kind of behaviour is typical. It is an unwritten rule that, in this situation, it is up to whichever vehicle is in my position to get off the road - assuming there is space at the side to do so.

I had learned well the first rule of the road in Brazil: might is right - in all circumstances. Forget the official Regulamentos do Trânsito. That's just stuff written in a book. It isn't reality.

Another close call was when I was driving on the relatively tranquil stretch of the BR135 north of Montes Claros. I was driving at the stipulated 80km/h along a clear straight stretch when, all of a sudden, without warning, an ancient beat-up Chevy pick-up came straight out of a field gate onto the road only 20 metres or so in front of me. I hit the brakes and just managed to stop in time to avoid shunting into the back of the pick-up. I later overtook the pick-up and looked at the driver. He was a young boy. He can't have been more than 12 years old.

I decided that, if I were the State governor (or whatever they have), I would decree that all road accidents on the BR135 would simply be bulldozed to the side of the road and left there as mute testimony. Then, perhaps, one day, the message might dawn on some of those psychopathic Brazilian truckers. As for me, I reluctantly accepted that my dream of driving far and wide to see the different parts of Brazil was entirely too dangerous and utterly impractical. I'll leave travelling by car for when I visit other countries.

Country Skittles

When I was young, I used to walk miles along country roads. But not any more. I would neither walk nor cycle along country roads today. Country roads are now speed tracks for yuppies in their 4-wheeled bullets. They blind along country roads without a care about what may be around the next corner. The steering and poise of a modern car makes it easy to handle at speed down winding roads. Once a young driver "knows the road" he thinks he can drive safely down it at the very edge of his car's handling envelope. He could, if he were the only human inhabitant of the planet. The trouble is that he assumes that he is. He gives no consideration to the fact that people may be walking or cycling round the next corner. He also pays no heed to the possibility that there could also be a slow farm tractor round the next corner with a raised buck rake on the back ready to send a steel pile through his windscreen.

Still, who cares if one skittles a few cyclists or walkers as one blinds down country lanes in one's big 4-wheel drive monster. A certain Member of Parliament and former Tory Cabinet Minister doesn't. Presumably he represents the views of those British constituents who unceasingly vote him into power each election. Of course he has the wealth never to need to dash his dainty feet against the tarmac. He undoubtedly leaves that to the big fat tyres of his 4 x 4 monster. I remember him laughing and joking about this while being interviewed on television by a well known motoring presenter. They both jokingly condoned such a game of "country road skittles" as a perfectly legitimate sport.

Inconsiderate Parking

Back in suburbia the car is again the means by which people exhibit yet another form of inconsiderateness towards their neighbours. And that is bad parking.

People from outside the area frequently park outside houses close to shops or railway stations. They thus deny the house owners access to their own homes for genuine visitors or deliveries. They also frequently park across driveways or directly opposite them in narrow roads, thereby preventing the house owners from getting their own cars in and out of their garages or driveways. There are also some neighbours who, being van or truck drivers by trade, park their massive vans and trucks outside other people's homes at great inconvenience.

Other people's cars parked slightly down the road from my house make the council sweeper truck have to veer round them. In so doing, the sweeper truck has to miss sweeping the gutter across my frontage. By pulling out it also dumps debris over the road. I have to sweep it up myself. The car owners do not condescend to clean up the road in front of my house themselves. The road in front of their house is, of course, cleaned by the truck.



Where I lived in Brazil, people frequently park their cars not only *on* the pavement, but also *right across* it. The inconsiderate woman, who drives the car shown on the left, always parks this way. Pedestrians, including women with children in push chairs, have to detour around the car into the road where fast traffic enters from round a corner about 15 metres behind the camera. This inconsiderate way of parking is far from untypical.

Below is another one, just across the road from the one above.



The car, designed and used sensibly, could have been a blessing. Its exploitation as a means of making capitalist profit, coupled with the antisocial behaviour evoked within its drivers by their frustrating and impersonal suburban existences, has made it a curse.

Noise Nuisance

The greed for profit, shared by land owners and builders, results in as many houses as possible being packed into as small an area of land as possible. This places neighbours too close for comfort.

To help achieve the tightest possible packing density, houses are joined together in pairs (semi-detached houses) or in long rows (terrace houses). Each house shares a wall with at least one other. Noise in one house is therefore readily transmitted to houses adjoining it. The noise of rowdy children or domestic arguments. Noise from music systems, television sets or workshops.

When we were first married, my wife and I lived in a terrace cottage. It was an old terrace. The adjoining walls were very thin. There we had to listen to the constant noise of football matches from a neighbour's television all Saturday every Saturday. We could not so much as hold a conversation in our sitting room. Each night our neighbour's television would be on loud until very late so we could not get to sleep. This was especially trying when I had to work early shifts commissioning the software for flight simulators; a task for which I had to be mentally alert. Our neighbour's attitude was that *he* had a right to listen to *his* television in *his* living room. Our contention was that we had a right to be able to hold a quiet conversation in our sitting room and to be able to sleep in our bedroom.

Then there is the young delivery van driver who shatters the peace of a quiet neighbourhood when he opens the door of his van and unleashes the full force of his pounding sound system into the surrounding homes. Then there are the jobbing builders repairing a roof or a driveway who, for the duration of their job, assault the ears of all who live and work in the street to constant nauseating pop music from their ghetto blaster. No concern for anybody around whose work may require them to think or concentrate. They are totally selfish and inconsiderate towards others.

We have 3 neighbours whose gardens back onto ours. Their houses are in a different street from us. One of them is a large family whom we rarely hear. Another is a childless couple who seem to go to work at night and sleep during the day. The third is a family with two boys. It is the rowdiest family imaginable. From when the boys were very small, their mother tried to control them simply by shouting at them at the top of her voice. Consequently, the two boys followed their mother's example and shouted everything they said at the tops of their voices. As a result, the whole neighbourhood knows all sorts of intimate and clinical details about every member of the family.

This family (who embarrassingly shares our surname) is not a nasty family. In fact, they are quite reasonable. They are just extremely **loud!!!** They hold conversations in the garden at a constant **shout**. The most annoying thing about them is that none of their adjoining neighbours (including us) can enjoy sitting in the garden in the summer without having to endure a constant chuntering football, cricket or racing commentary from their radio. This is punctuated regularly by a loud rendering of "Tragedy" by Abba. We still get this even in 1999. This in itself is a tragedy.

I think that this family, if they choose, should be able to make a noise and enjoy themselves the way they want to. But so should all their neighbours be able to enjoy peace and quiet if they want to. The reason we cannot is because people of totally different temperaments, interests and cultures are forcibly squashed cheek-by-jowl in densely packed housing developments like caged animals. And this is because they have been dispossessed of the space families need. There is plenty of habitable land on this planet for all families to be able to have adequate space in which to live the way they want to.

In Brazil, the problem of noise is even worse. In the condominium apartment block where I live, there is a common room called a *Salão de Festas*. A *feira*, as I have observed, is a rowdy Brazilian all-night party. Any apartment owner can reserve the room to throw a party. I am led to believe that, in Brazil, there is a law which stipulates that people can make party noise until 10pm, after which everybody has the right to silence. But unfortunately, law is simply words written in a book. It has no relevance to reality. The dominant members of the condominium voted that this law was impractical and would not have force within the condominium building or its grounds.

The apartments of these dominant members of the condominium are on the road side of the building. The *Salão de Festas* is on the other side of the building where my apartment is located. Normally a party takes place outside in the yard, right underneath the bedroom windows of the apartments on my side of the building. Noise from the *festas* is funnelled upwards between the walls of our building and the next building, filling the bedrooms of the apartments on my side of the building with an intolerable level of intense sound. The suspending of the "impractical" Federal, State and Municipal laws of silence result in the *festas* continuing to output an ever-increasing din until past 04:30am on Sunday mornings, as the participants consume more and more alcohol.

Eventually, we resolved that, in order to be able to have a well-earned sleep at the weekend, we would have to find somewhere else to sleep on Saturday nights. So that is what we do whenever there is a *festa*, something of which we only become aware when we see the tables and chairs being laid out in the yard. We simply have to accept that our apartment is not ours on Saturday nights.

There is also a neighbouring house populated with several generations of the same family. They have noisy *festas* too. However, their noise level is nowhere near so high and they always fall silent around 11:30pm at the latest. Consequently, as far as *festas* are concerned, they are not so much of a problem. Unlike the *festas* in our own building, the neighbours' *festas* do not create the devastating bedlam that drive us from our home on a Saturday night.

Their *festas* may not be quite as devastating but their industrial noise certainly is. They frequently use very high-powered water jets to clean silk screen off glass plates, which they use in some kind of printing process. The jet is driven by a screaming high-speed electric pump. During this process, it is impossible to hold a conversation in our kitchen with all the windows shut. They also have power-saws that sound as if they are cutting ceramic or glass and grinding wheels, all of which make an all-invasive din inside our building. These are in day-to-day regular use in some kind of industrial process: they are not simply home DIY projects. And this is supposed to be a residential area, whatever that may mean in Brazil.



Fortunately, the industrial noise from the adjacent neighbours only takes place during the daytime. Not so with the inhabitants of the apartment below us. In a supposedly residential middle class condominium building, the residents of the apartment below us operate some kind of industrial production process. They have what are obviously non-domestic machinery operating, often very late at night (that is, after midnight). The most dominant machine makes a regular thudding noise at about two beats per second, rather like a very old fashioned washing machine with a reversing agitator, but much louder. Furthermore, the machine starts slowly at about two beats per second and gradually, over the period of its cycle, speeds up to about twice that rate. I don't think that is characteristic of a domestic washing machine. It is also far too loud and vibratory.

Apart from the machinery, somebody frequently appears to be working at a workbench in the bedroom below ours. Moreover, they do so at all hours of the night. Sometimes the entire night. They tap with a hammer, as if like a cobbler driving nails into shoes. They also have a radio on loud enough for them to hear above the noise of their machines. There was some gossip that they made teddy bears, but I have no confirmation of this. Whatever they do, it is very disturbing to our sleep. We are frequently woken up in the early hours of the morning to the sound of a tapping hammer and the banging and clanging of tools and containers.

My partner, who is a Judicial Analyst, wrote a formal letter to the chairman of the condominium (The *Sindico* in Portuguese) complaining about this noisy activity at night. He came to our apartment and discussed it with us. He adopted a very cynical attitude to our complaint and did nothing. From then on, we disrespectfully referred to him as the *Sinico* (the cynical one). The nightly noise continues, although happily, it is now punctuated at times by relatively quiet periods.



Notwithstanding, there is another source of noise that wakens us at all kinds of random times, especially during the early hours. It is the intense sound of an alarm in the adjacent apartment block shown on the left. Our condominium building can be seen in the background on the right of the picture. The noise from this alarm is immense and devastating. No amount of time would ever be sufficient for a person to get accustomed to it and sleep through it. It is simply too loud. And it is placed directly opposite the bedroom windows of our side of our building. It produces a powerful shrill noise I can only best describe as a piercing scream. It is of a loudness I would expect only for air raid or tornado warnings. Yet it sounds every time anybody leaves the front door of that building open beyond a short time limit.

As a result, it is impossible to have the bedroom window open, even on steamy hot tropical nights. Without the window tight shut, the sound of that alarm at three o'clock in the morning would be enough to trigger a heart attack. Whoever installed that alarm is plainly a mentally deranged sociopath.

The condominium building is fairly new. Practically all its occupants are the first to live in their respective apartments. Yet, shortly after moving in, one after another decided to "reform" or completely re-model the insides of their apartments. Why they would want to do so, I cannot understand. The apartments are architect-designed and are of what to me is an ideal layout. Despite this, each apartment owner, in turn, hires a jobbing builder to completely re-model the interior, moving walls, altering the sizes of rooms, integrating the varanda with the main living room, smashing up a beautiful new ceramic floor and replacing it with marble or polished granite. The result looks posh but I perceive that they soon realise that the new layout is rather awkward and impractical.

As a writer, I work at home. Most of the other apartment owners are out all day. Consequently, over a period of 10 years, I have had to endure, for three month at a time, the incessant hammering of smashing the ceramic floors, reducing the thickness of the concrete and drilling holes. The building is framed in steel-reinforced concrete. Hammering anywhere is transmitted, most effectively, into every other apartment. The externalised cost to me, in lost time, is probably much more than the re-modelling cost to each of the apartment owners. And all for what? These people obviously have more money than sense.

In fact, the whole surrounding district over the 10 years has been a construction site. Every day was cloaked in a backdrop of concrete mixers, pneumatic drills, hammering, pile driving, ceramic saws, grind-stones. I had to keep the windows shut always. Then, more occasionally, the "silence" of the construction noise is shattered by a stupidly over-powerful loudspeaker car advertising some pathetic irrelevant product. I just had to stop work until it gradually faded into the distance. I remember, we were walking in the street one morning when a pick-up truck, with a tower bristling with

loudspeakers, passed us. The sound level literally invoked auditory pain. We had to put our fingers in our ears. Of course, there are always the teen freaks, with powerful external loudspeakers in their beat up old pick-ups, who drive the streets in the early hours playing loud rock music. But they are relatively tame.

But there's more. The *pièce de résistance* of noise nuisance is the helicopter. There is nothing to compete with it. An old airfield, in the centre of our residential district, became licence to operate helicopters. It is a little over a kilometre from my apartment. As a result, 6 helicopter pilot training schools opened. The helicopters fly low straight over our apartment. They make an infernal racket, much worse than normal passenger aircraft. It sounds like a giant lawnmower grinding through forest undergrowth, or a wood chipper grinding bones. They also pass straight over the university. Most days they fly around their circuit all day.



Thankfully, I have my noise-cancelling headphones, which I bought in Canada. They reduce the noise to almost nothing. So I can concentrate on my writing. It is nonetheless irritating to have to wear them all the time and replace their battery every 35 hours. But I pity the students at the university. During the morning and afternoon sessions, a helicopter passed every 30 seconds. Thousands of residents complain. Perhaps, one day, when they have an accident involving the deaths of residents, they'll suspend flights for a while.

IT IS ABSOLUTELY IMPOSSIBLE TO EXAGGERATE THE UTTERLY DISRUPTIVE NOISE NUISANCE OF HELICOPTERS. They are a curse. They render the whole environment impossible for any kind of creative thought. But clearly, the authorities don't give a shit about that. What's more important to them is to keep these elite gung-ho Biggles's happy, leaving them free to fly around in their stupid little noise machines.

So, if your work requires creative thought or mental concentration during the week and you need to relax and chill out at the weekend, then Brazil is most definitely **not** the place to be.

Again, I think people should be free to live, work and construct as they wish. I think each should be able to have adequate space in which to be able to do so without disturbing others. Notwithstanding, given the unnatural restrictions in which capitalism forces most of us to live, I think it incumbent upon each to consider- and accommodate to - the peace of his neighbours.

External House Lights

Suddenly in the dead of night, without warning, my bedroom ceiling is floodlit by a powerful lamp turning it into the brightness of day. Curtains have little effect. I am catapulted back to consciousness from the depth of sleep.

Unnerved by the experience I cannot get back to sleep. I can only wait out the long night until dawn approaches and it is time to get up again. Thus starved of essential sleep, I am unlikely to be able to apply my mind to my work - especially if it is creative mental work. Prolonged sleep starvation could eventually render me incapable of doing my job. A neighbour's light could thus destroy my career and hence my living. It seems that in England there is no law against robbing a neighbour of his sleep, sanity and career by beaming bright lights into his bedroom window at all times of the night. I have personally suffered from this for over 25 years. The problem is becoming ever more wide spread.

On the other hand, if after having been driven systematically mad by sleep deprivation, I smash, or otherwise disable, my neighbour's light, I will be "guilty" of criminal damage to his precious property - all £10 worth of it! It seems that the law of this land considers one person's £10 floodlight to be of far greater worth than another person's sleep, livelihood and sanity. Little wonder that though I may fear the law, I have lost all respect for it.

The owners of these lights are quick to point out that people can sleep perfectly well in daylight. That is true. But daylight is different. Firstly it is a different spectrum of light. Secondly it moves and changes continuously according to a 24 hour cycle which is older than the human species. Consequently, the human biorhythms, which take their cue from daylight, have evolved to expect bright light to change its direction, spectrum and intensity continuously according to this eternal cycle. A daytime sleeper would doubtless wake up in a very disturbed state if the sun stayed at exactly the same angle in exactly the same direction at exactly the same intensity, switching on and off sporadically. It does not even do that during a total eclipse.

The purpose of these lights is supposedly to help keep one's home secure. Some insurance companies even give them away free with new household policies and reduce the premiums of those who fit them. The concern of insurance companies is of course to increase their profits slightly by, they suppose, reducing the risk slightly. The fact that it costs others their sleep, livelihoods and sanity is of no concern to them.

Common sense strongly suggests to me that alienating neighbours by shining powerful lights into their bedroom windows at all times of the night is not exactly the best way to protect one's home. Any neighbour who, having been forcibly kept awake by a powerful light, on seeing a burglar breaking in to one's home is likely to be of a mind to wish the burglar the best of fortune and pray that the first thing he steals is the confounded flood light.

The bedroom in which my wife and I sleep has two windows. To block up either would breach planning regulations. Either alone is too small. On a wall parallel to one window and only 5 metres away is a bright light. It is mounted slightly off to one side of our window and about half a metre below its sill level. This light shines upwards into our window at a most awkward angle. We have a Venetian blind + a blackout curtain across that window at night. However, even these together will not keep sufficient light out to allow me to sleep when the light is on. If it comes on during the night, it immediately wakes me up. Despite my complaints, the light has been there for 25 years. My neighbour apparently "has the right" to light up his driveway if and whenever he wishes. And he seems to want to have it on late into the night, long after my wife and I have gone to bed. For many years, it was switched on at 5am when my neighbour got up to see to his plants before leaving for work.

For several years, a bright light shone in our other bedroom window also. That was across the road roughly 15 metres away. It was a 500 watt quartz halogen lamp mounted at the same level as the window. It was an automatic lamp controlled by an infrared sensor. As a result, whenever a cat or a hedgehog came anywhere within sensor range during the night, on would come the light. Then it would go off again. On and off it would go all night at random and unpredictable intervals. My wife's sister came across some genuine World War II blackout material her mother had not used during the war. She gave it to my wife who lined the curtains of that bedroom window with it. Even this made little difference. The light was so intense that we could not get to sleep until the early hours. We complained to our neighbour, then rowed, about this light going on and off all night. So he arranged to keep it switched on all night - coming on at dusk and going off at dawn. We got little sleep until that neighbour moved. The light is still there, but it is now never on. The total inconsiderateness of such people is illustrated by the fact that this problem could be so quickly and easily solved by simple shields.

Currently, a third neighbour at the back of our house has two spot lights plus a halogen lamp that shine straight at my elder son's bedroom window. This got so bad that my wife called the local environmental officer. The officer spoke to the neighbour concerned. He told the neighbour that, although there were no specific regulations regarding external house lights, it was causing a nuisance and therefore would he kindly point them in a direction in which they could not be so. The neighbour was visibly annoyed. He said he would take out the bulbs. He then went back to Pakistan for 6 months, during which time my son could sleep. However, upon his return, on went the lights again. That neighbour's family go to bed very late and appear to get up very late also. In the summer they stay in the garden until very late with the lights on. Fortunately in summer, some shielding is afforded by the leaves on our apple tree. However, once they thin out and fall in the autumn, the lights beam straight into my son's bedroom window every time a cat or a hedgehog walks across the neighbour's garden.

People have suggested that, since there is no law against beaming lights into other people's bedroom windows, I could retaliate. I could fit a 500 watt quartz halogen lamp and set it to trigger off the neighbour's lights, thus depriving his daughters of their sleep and sanity. Perhaps then he would refrain. There are two reasons why I do not retaliate. Firstly, my lamp would cause grief to other neighbours who cause no trouble at all. Secondly, with 4 adults in our house currently having to live on the amount of benefit designed for two adults, we can hardly afford to eat, let alone waste money on such a frivolous device.

I simply had to embark on a project for which I had little money, time or skill; namely that of fitting a thick plastic impregnated blackout lining to my son's bedroom curtains to try to reduce the glare to a level that would allow him to sleep. In the event, it didn't. So I also fitted a roller blind to see if the combination of the two would reduce the light sufficiently. It didn't. The light is so powerful it splays out around the edges of the curtains and lights up his bedroom. It also takes away from him the convenience and well-being of being able to awaken naturally with the dawn. In the bright light of day his bedroom is still very dark. Like me, he has to rely on an alarm clock to awaken him in the height of summer as in the depth of winter - all because of inconsiderate selfish neighbours.

Forced sleep deprivation is a serious thing - especially to my son who, partly as a result of this, now suffers from [mental illness](#). If the random switching on and off of a powerful light were used by any oppressive regime as an aid to interrogation, it would be internationally condemned as torture. Yet when perpetrated by an inconsiderate householder against his neighbours, this acute form of psychological torture isn't even against the law. This is despite the fact that *protection from torture* is one of the only two *unconditional* human rights granted to us under the [European Convention](#). The whole situation is rankly despicable.

As technology makes available all kinds of powerful gadgets to a nation populated in significant proportion by conscienceless self-centred inconsiderate excuses for humanity from whom the law affords no practicable protection, problems like this are bound to escalate. The environment will become increasingly polluted with unnatural light and noise.

Enacting a law to forbid such lights would annoy the selfish majority of voters. A [democratically elected](#) government is therefore unlikely to enact such a law. I doubt such a government would even consider bringing in a regulation stating that all external lamps should

1. shine downwards,
2. be of limited power,
3. have no part of the filament or reflector visible beyond the owner's boundary,
4. be automatically rendered inoperative between 10pm and dawn.

But that would require a modern Brit to take direct action to benefit his neighbour without gain or advantage for himself. And that would never do. In fact, just about every rule, regulation and statutory requirement of this kind could be done away and replaced by the rule "Love thy neighbour as thyself."

The only practical solution is for the offended parties to construct some means of passive defence against these lights. One could build bedrooms in future homes with very small horizontal windows sporting light-proof shutters. Just so that you can see the world outside during the day. The bedroom's main source of daylight would have to be from skylight windows in the ceiling. Grants would have to be made available to enable poor people to convert their existing homes. Perhaps these grants could be financed by a tax on external lights.

But would this be a solution? Perhaps sooner or later the same problem will come from inconsiderate airline pilots leaving their powerful landing lights on. You probably guessed. I live near an airport. The only real solution is a change in the hearts of the British people to make them into good neighbours. But I can't see that happening.

As always, though, the ultimate culprit is industrial capitalism for driving people from the land and caging them in unnatural proximity to power its factories and offices - and then persuading them to buy lots of silly gadgets with which to annoy each other.

Fouling By Pets

The cramped conditions of modern suburbia are not natural. It leaves both human beings and their pets with insufficient open space in which to exercise and perform their natural functions.

For instance, the only large area near my home where children can play away from traffic and experience something of a natural environment is a 100 hectare dog latrine they call the park. Dog owners walk their dogs in this area each day. Principally for the purpose of defecation. Anybody walking there in the morning without a dog is likely to be mobbed if not attacked by a pack of free-running dogs whose owners show no concern about the offence and distress their dogs cause to the lone walker.

The dog population fouls the open space at a rate beyond the ability of nature's reducing agents to keep pace with the influx of fresh faeces. It is on this polluted earth that the local children must gain their formative experiences of running about freely and climbing trees. They constantly run the risk of blindness from diseases, which can be contracted from dog dirt.

Closer to home, cats constantly foul my garden. Other people's cats thus subject my children to the same danger of diseases from faeces even in the privacy of their own garden. Furthermore, the habit, which other people's cats have of digging up the plants and laying dusted-over faeces everywhere, make it impossible to grow anything for food to help reduce the family food bill during these hard economic times.

Why are cat owners so shocked when frustrated vegetable growers occasionally manage to get an air gun pellet in one of them? They are vermin. They endanger human health - and even life itself with their filth. It is the cat owners who are to blame. Cats can easily be trained to use a toilet tray or sand pit in their owner's garden. Instead, they choose the convenience of having their cats foul other people's private places.

The Cause

The cause of this sad condition of life is capitalist greed. The land owner, speculator and builder all want to get as much **profit** out of as small a piece of land as they can. To achieve this, they need to

pack as many houses on it as planning restrictions will allow them to get away with. They hire high-priced lawyers and expert witnesses to win appeals against planning refusals. They have the capital. They inevitably win.

Of course, the land owners, speculators and builders do not subject themselves to the cramped living conditions they impose on the majority. They use their massive profits to furnish themselves with spacious palaces set in boundless acreages.

The Effect

The effect of capitalist greed is to imprison the suburban inhabitant in a constrictive environment, and place upon him a large life-long financial burden called a mortgage. This is not the natural state for the human animal. He needs space and freedom which he cannot have. He therefore becomes stressed and frustrated.

The suburban inhabitant knows he works as hard and as best he can. He also knows this does not get for him what his nature requires. He therefore rightly assumes that it is somebody else who has created and is sustaining his sad condition. He therefore looks for somebody else to blame.

The Culprit

The real culprit is, of course, capitalist greed. But the capitalist is rich and clever. He employs some of his capital to use [mass-media advertising and editorial](#) to divert the blame for the suburbanite's sad condition away from himself and on to a defenceless scapegoat, namely, the poor and unemployed.

The average working suburbanite is thereby brainwashed into believing that the reason for his financial burden, and inability to escape from his sad suburban existence, is high taxes. And the sole reason he has to pay high taxes is to support a sub-population of lazy good-for-nothing layabouts called the poor and the unemployed. The poor and the unemployed thus become the focus of his frustration.

Perverved Conscience

Since, in the mind of the average working individual, the poor and the unemployed are to blame for his frustrations, he does not, in consequence, regard them as deserving of his charity. In fact, he sees them as decidedly *undeserving* of anything.

But there is a conscience in the human mind. It can never be suppressed completely. In a world of such obvious disparity, it cannot be easily appeased without action. The average working individual therefore needs some worthy cause on which to focus his sympathy and charity.

Nevertheless, he is a busy man. He cannot afford to devote much consideration as to where he should focus his sympathy and charity. He is therefore most easily wooed by charities whose causes he can most readily appreciate and understand such as:

- those who purportedly relieve Third World starvation,
- those who improve the lot of those of low ability, and
- those who purportedly support the physically disabled.

He seems blissfully unaware that the Third World poverty which attracts his sympathy was originally caused, and is to a large extent now sustained, by First World capitalist exploitation. Of course, this blissful unawareness is engineered by capitalist controlled mass-media and governments.

His sympathy or charity will never reach those whose problems are too difficult for him to understand through casual consideration. Neither will they reach any of those whose disabilities are not visibly obvious. Among these are:

- those with mental disabilities, and
- those who are prone to mental illness

Though my wife has [suffered the latter](#) for over 30 years, she has yet to receive any help - or even contact - from any of the so-called charities that supposedly help those with her affliction.

Misguided Charity

Its fading embers of morality thus force the apathetic majority of the modern capitalist democracy to pay lip service to the needs of the *deserving* needy minorities in its midst, appeasing their consciences through publicly visible acts of charity. But these reward only those causes which:

- have been popularised by the media, or
- have the means of marketing themselves.

Consequently, those in greatest need, receive not; while those who receive most are they who already have most with which to promote themselves to get even more. It is capitalism by another name. This perverted mode of conscience appeasement makes itself manifest in modern suburbia in the endless charity bags shoved through people's letter boxes.

A procession of self-appointed do-gooders knock on my door, shaking their tins in my face to try to shame me into giving what I need to feed and clothe my own children. If I refuse, their rehearsed politeness cannot hide their silent cry of "Scrooge!".

The problem with these people is that they seem to have got their Dickensian characters mixed up. In modern suburbia, things are not necessarily as they appear. The modern suburban house may be the nightly resting place of a highly-paid double-income couple who commute to the city each day to make their countless thousands with which they fly off to the four corners of the world several times a year, living life to the full. On the other hand, it may contain a couple struggling to keep their children provided for on the misery of welfare, the breadwinner having been severed from his career unexpectedly, just as he was about to reach his peak earning phase.

So beware, Mrs Tinsmaker, for you cannot know upon whose door you knock. It may be that of Mr & Mrs Average. Or it may be the door of Tiny Tim. There is one thing you can be sure of. The house of the real Mr Scrooge, in today's capitalist society, is way beyond the streets on which you will be allowed to collect. The dogs and security cameras would not let you anywhere near his citadel without a prior appointment. And the likes of you are most unlikely to get one. To the real poor and needy in your midst, to those whom capitalism has robbed of the opportunities they deserve, what kind of neighbour are *you*?

Degraded Human Character

So, how does living in this viciously-competitive economic treadmill affect the human character? What kind of people has being forced to live together in the crowded isolation of late 20th Century suburbia turned us into?

It has made us adversarial and confrontational. It has made us selfish, inconsiderate and intolerant towards each other. It has made us quick to take and give offence. It has made us treat strangers like things instead of people. It has made us isolationist. It has made us compare people, forever evaluating and ranking them according to their perceived economic worth. It has locked us into

eternal competition. It has made us suspect and distrust each other. It has made us paranoid fearing what others may be doing behind our backs. It has put fear onto the streets. It has turned groups of young friends into gangs of hooligans.

Consider our changing suburban environment. People are afraid of their homes being burgled. They fit powerful exterior lights which are either on all night or are set to come on if a person approaches their premises. Or a cat or a hedgehog for that matter! But these same people are not in the least concerned about the annoyance and inconvenience their external lights are to their neighbours. Another major annoyance caused by inconsiderate neighbours in suburbia is noise and roaming pets which foul other people's gardens. I have already mentioned speeding cars. There are many other examples of selfish anti-social behaviour wrought by so-called ordinary people upon their neighbours in modern suburbia.

Unnatural Behaviour

Gangs of city youths. Going nowhere. Wandering the geometric streets. Breaking radio aerials off parked cars. Throwing empty beer bottles at anything that catches their eyes. Neighbour behaving inconsiderately to neighbour. The irrational aggression of motorway madness and road rage. Unnatural human behaviour caused by the constraints of an unnatural socio-economic environment. An environment in which people are geographically close yet culturally far apart. Physically close together yet socially isolated. Neighbours yet strangers. With fixed postal addresses yet never belonging. Franchised citizens of a nation-state, yet dispossessed sojourners in a strange land.

The legacy, which capitalism has bequeathed to the modern individual, is to be:

- locked in a permanent condition of forced exploitation by an economic elite,
- compacted into tight suburban labour camps,
- thrown into fierce everlasting competition with one's peers.

A consequence of this legacy is the kind of character it has created within him. He acts the part of a team player while at heart he is a self-seeking individualist. He gives visibly and patronisingly to Third World charity while callously despising the poor and needy of his own street, claiming they have the same chances as he and are poor and needy through their own sloth.

This is clearly not the natural way of life of the human species. Humans are gregarious. The [natural or anthropological community](#) of the human being is larger by far than that of any other terrestrial life-form. Relationships within it are far more highly developed and intense than in any other. It cannot be a concatenation of unrelated commuters. It must be a socially caring and economically fair community of trusted friends.

Sadly, a socially caring and economically fair community can never take root within the jurisdiction of a [socio-economic system](#) which is based on rules and protocols that bestow wealth on arbitrary individuals through unmerited privilege or through the fickle frolics of commercial caprice.

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