

THE NEW BARBARIAN MANIFESTO:

How to survive the information age

by

Ian Angell

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Whether we agree with the conclusions Ian Angell proposes or not, this book assuredly deserves our attention. It is provocative and, for the open-minded, it is food for considerable thought. It shocks and yet it doesn't. It warns us, if we accept his evaluation of the consequences of the advent of the Information Age. Above all, it challenges our complacency and calls on us to reassess the context of the near future.

For Angell, the 'new barbarians' are the winners in what, we have to agree, is a new economic reality – a reality for people who are determined to reject those forms of governance that put their central focus on the rights of the 'collective' nation, more usually known as the nation-state.

Masters of the power conferred by knowledge, these 'winners' are supposed, surprisingly enough, to be the new libertarians who support the rights of the individual, even while they spurn the idea of responsibility to the tribe that confers those rights. Because, for the author, the tribe preys on the wealth produced by the competent and only contributes slave-collars in return.

Taxation to pay for the ineffective 'solutions' of politicians is tantamount to stealing from the fruits of the producers of societies' wealth, the author claims. And he prophesies that for this reason, if no other, the new barbarians will migrate to the smarter countries which will allow them to prosper as individuals in a climate of minimally taxed freedom. This, he maintains, is one of the key global consequences of Information Technology.

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These are some of the points seized on by a happy-go-lucky, sensationalist press. But the book merits several much closer looks. The message of this Angell of Doom, as the inside jacket 'blurb' says he is dubbed by the Times (London), is not so simple. It constitutes a well thought out, reasoned case for the fact that, due to the rapid capital flows induced by globalization, the nation-state is no longer a viable form of governance.

Examining this brave world of tomorrow piece by piece is well worth the amount of time we may spend on it. Not, I suggest, by speed reading, because the key phrases frequently do not anticipate the thoughtful conclusions that are later proposed.

The six-page Introduction is a masterpiece of communication. It puts into context the idea that the grounds on which societies around the world were founded have turned to shifting sands. It concludes with the thought that the consequent collapse of the old established orders will turn into a future that will work – for some.

By comparison with the author's subdivision of the book into seven parts, I find that, for me, there are only four intrinsic parts:

1. The creation of a wide-ranging context through Parts I – III;
2. A conventional relation of the phase of transition in Part IV;
3. The contentious arguments of both Part V – Recognizing the new order – and Part VI – about the winners;
4. The final part (VII) giving a summary of a strategy for survival and success, including, on page 239, the New Barbarian Manifesto.

Quite early on, the author reminds us of Benjamin Franklin's words about merchants having no country. "The mere spot where they stand on does not constitute so strong an attachment as that from which they draw their gain." Very soon, however, Angell leads on to considerations about teleworking, mobile telephony and their consequent implications for employment. We are treated to an argument which suggests that knowledge workers are the true generators of wealth (and always have been) and that all nation-states wish to levy heavy taxes on this wealth. The key to the growth of future wealth, therefore, is seen as being the availability of knowledge workers. But talent, entrepreneurship and innovation are

in short supply and, as a result, in high demand. Particularly because innovation is only really provided by individuals who are head and shoulders above their fellows.

Chapters 7 & 8 then treat us to an assessment of the direct conflict of interest between the taxing politicians and the people who create the cake the politicians wish to redistribute. But, Angell points out, no society can vote itself into an economic utopia. Nor do the politicians have anything like the same degree of control as in the past. Untamed forces constrain the activities of all economic agents, because these agents can only act within the limits set and reset by each new trend in the modern, global, economy.

The endemic present-day problem that arises is caused by the trend for global companies simply to move their activities away from those states that begin to follow populist programs. The underlying problem posed is that of the need to cater for uneducated generations who do not produce sufficient to look after aging populations. Old ways of resolving the dilemma are no longer viable, we are told. Also the masses themselves will favor employment and well-being over representation by powerless assemblies. Therefore, since all nations aim for social stability through economic prosperity, every country tends to offer inducements to global companies by virtue of the employment they engender.

Naturally, these global companies try to establish their operations in politically stable countries. But, if they decide to move away again, the loss to a country's tax base of the company's high earning knowledge workers will be severe, Angell contends. Also, the people who initiate the moves away will be these workers themselves, who are ever seeking to further their own individual goals. They have no problem. There are many countries that will welcome their talents.

Thus far the book serves up a cocktail of comment and conjecture. But it isn't any of the mixtures-as-before. There is a new twist to the analysis. It suggests that modern society may well be on the verge of a complete change of priorities. Then, in Part IV, we are returned to a more or less conventional summary of what ails, mostly Western, society. Thoughtfully, this summary does draw out a new conclusion. Not only have Western governments lost effective control of the ball game, perhaps because of the disappearance of accepted rules, but criminal activities have rushed in to fill the vacuum. If only it were only a game. Perhaps it is more a case of seven devils rushing in to fill the empty room from which one was swept out.

Part V – Recognizing the new order, puts the dilemma squarely before us, when it states: “The very fact that we perceive ourselves to be facing profound uncertainty is just another way of saying that we don’t know who we are any more.” It continues, “Change is essential if society is to prosper”, forgetting that society shapes the changes to suit its own priorities. But we are the middle of a minor diatribe against any previously established rituals expressing the moral values of what it calls the “old barbarians”. For it seeks to convince us that “only an unsentimental understanding of what is sensible for the individual can lead to emancipation”.

Next, in Chapter 13, the reader is treated to the core of the book’s message. It is one that also reveals the author’s personal predilection for the philosophy of Ayn Rand (1905-1982), the mid-twentieth century prophet of absolutist egotism. To do justice to this chapter, we have to admit that the section entitled ‘The call for community’ puts up a good case. “Of course,” it agrees “a healthy society is one where individual rights are in harmony with civic responsibilities, where there is a balance between independence and interdependence.” “But,” it continues, “how do we achieve this Nirvana?” and then points to the very inability of modern governments and politicians to deliver, because they continue to wish to force their own solutions down the throats of skeptical populations.

The result of these failures to deliver brings us, Angell maintains, to the point where successful individuals will opt out of being exploited by governing cliques. “An independency culture is also growing among those who feel they are being milked to pay the price of dependency among the degenerate community.... Hence new barbarians are looking for new communities based around economic well-being for themselves, their families and friends.”

After outlining an intriguing definition of community and what will produce the sought for new communities, we are brought face to face with John Galt, the hero of Ayn Rand’s *Atlas Shrugged* (1957), where he claims that ‘man’s life, his freedom, his happiness are his by inalienable right.’ A view that conveniently ignores the fact that the circumstances that permit man the right to that freedom and happiness are only brought about within societies of people who don’t want their own rights trampled on by pure egotists.

We then get a worth while introduction to Rand’s principal contentions. In particular, Angell stipulates that her ‘objectivist Ethics hold that human good does not require human sacrifices’ (good rabble-rousing radicalism, wasn’t it?). And that the only correct behaviour is that of a trader, because “The principle of trade is the

only rational ethical principle for all human relationships, personal and social, private and public, spiritual and material.” (Rand 1964)

Several more quotations of Rand’s ideas serve to convince us that, even if he may not be the Angel of Doom, perhaps the author could well be classified as an apostle of the Gospel of Economic Individualism. Nevertheless, reading between the lines here and there, we can detect that he is not so easily labelled. Because, for instance, in Chapter 14 – The making of a new barbarian – we read that ‘new barbarians are not all atheists; however their religion is not the dogmatic imposition of arbitrary beliefs and morality for political ends, but rather a personal expression of spirituality.’ And then, in the last but one paragraph of this chapter, “The new barbarians....do not take their network of contacts and their community for granted. They get to know the human network: they care about it.”

The last paragraph of the chapter is perhaps the one that most invites us to read the rest of the book, take his thoughts and mull them over in our own minds. It tells us:

“By all means deny my particular truths, and ignore my predictions, but you must create your own truth to see by.... This is *my* vision for the future, my version of the truth about the play-off between the contingent and the unforeseen, my prediction of the winners and losers of natural selection. But ultimately it is you, and only you, who are responsible for your own future. If you end up a slave to old barbarians then you have only yourselves to blame.”