

Rother Baron: The Trap of Selfishness

*First Conversation with Paula:
Talk about Money and Property*



On Paula's small South Sea island there are no prisons and no army, no parties and no property. She looks at what we take for granted with the astonished eyes of a child.

"With her wrap-around dress, on which exotic birds screamed in bright colours, her face that seemed to be carved like out of ebony, her thick black hair, in which the sunlight sparkled, and her supple feet whose smoothness formed a striking contrast to the cracked asphalt, Paula looked so alien to me that I stared at her as if she were a hallucination."

from: [How I got to know Paula](#) (Conversations with Paula, Introduction)



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Diving into the Belly of the Earth

Paula's visits to me always follow a certain pattern. At the beginning, she usually throws herself into the city life as if it were a never-ending party. Then she spends hours roaming the city, with me in tow, patiently watching as she talks to every dog, marvels at every colourful dress, and delights in the tanned bodies of the construction workers. Most of all, Paula loves to rummage around in the many bric-a-brac shops. It's not that she is looking for any knick-knacks to take

home to her island as souvenirs. What fascinates her about the shops – as she once explained to me – is the variety of things in which the human spirit can manifest itself. Furthermore, Paula has a great passion for the subway. On the escalator ride into what she calls the "belly of the earth", she always makes a face as if she were on an expedition into the interior of a volcano. And when the train enters the labyrinthine tunnel system with us, she regularly acts as if this everyday trip were an exotic adventure for her.



The Tunnel of Time

Once, annoyed by the crampedness and the stuffy air in the wagons, I dared to object that there was nothing to see in the tunnels and that it would perhaps be more appealing to go on a city tour.

"But that's exactly the thrilling thing about it!" Paula had countered with joyful excitement. "I always imagine myself entering the tunnel of time that carries me away through space and time until I arrive in a completely different world."

"But isn't it terribly disappointing for you if the destination turns out to be nothing but a new underground station that is hardly any different from the start of your journey?" I had asked her.

Paula's tongue-in-cheek answer: "Actually, I'm rather relieved when there are no Martians lying in wait for me at the next station. Besides, every trip I've made so far has been worthwhile."

I knew exactly what she was alluding to. Somehow she always manages to choose the exit so that we walk straight towards one of her favourite ice cream parlours.



The Earth between the Toes

However, these joyful walks through the city are only typical of Paula's first days with me. Her euphoria usually fades away quite quickly and gives way to a kind of claustrophobic attack. Suddenly she feels as if she is

suffocating between the skyscraper canyons and complains that her feet are gradually turning into two little lumps of rock themselves from walking on asphalt all the time.

"I have to feel the earth between my toes again – otherwise I no longer know who I am!" she once urged me when I told her that others also live like this every day.

The place Paula is attracted to in such situations is anything but spectacular: harvested rape fields, cow fields, a horse paddock, a narrow country lane – that's all there is to be seen. But as soon as we get off the suburban train, Paula spreads her arms like a caged bird that has been given back its freedom, throws off her sandals as if they were shackles and lets her toes sink into the thicket of grasses. When I warn her about the cow pats, she just laughs: "You know, they're warming so nicely ..."



"Can anyone possess other living beings?"

As soon as we approach the horse farm, where horse owners without property of their own can stable their animals, Paula quickens her pace. She has given names to all the horses - and because she never fails to take some carrots and apples with her, the horses actually come running as soon as she calls for them.

Once, when the horses were romping around exuberantly, Paula sighed sympathetically: "Isn't it a shame that such freedom-loving animals are not allowed to live

in freedom?" She pointed to the electric fence that surrounded the pasture.

I wondered whether she might not identify too strongly with the animals. Cautiously I countered: "If the horses were not fenced in, they would probably get lost and perish. Besides, the owners of the animals would probably hold the horse farm liable for the loss in this case."

Paula looked at me in surprise: "What does that mean – the owners of the animals? How can anyone own another living being?"

Typical Paula! She had to judge everything according to the conditions on her island. Of course, they didn't need fences there – where could the animals escape to?

So I didn't let her indignation distract me and replied firmly: "Having an owner is the best life insurance for horses. It means that they always have someone to look after them!"

Paula shook her head in amazement. "That doesn't seem logical to me. After all, I don't

have to own someone to take care of him! Or do old people become the property of others when they are too weak to look after themselves?"

"That's quite different!" I protested.

Paula looked at me challengingly: "And for what reason?"

"Because ... because they belong to the same species," I replied. "And because humans are rational beings," I added, although the question was actually self-answering.

But once again Paula didn't give in: "Are you really sure about that?"

With that she had opened a new chapter. If I had continued the discussion with her, it would have been about the moral power of human reason and the rights of freedom resulting from it. That was a bit too complex for a simple summer stroll. So I just left the question unanswered and waited until Paula decided to move on.



"Don't you have any property on your island?"

A few metres further on we came to an orchard of apple, cherry and pear trees. The pears were still unripe, while from the cherries only a few rotting specimens, buzzed by wasps, were still hanging in the upper, inaccessible branches. The August apples, however, had just reached full ripeness and shone greenish-yellow in the sun.

"Come on – let's snack on some of the fruit!" Paula encouraged me, running towards one of the apple trees.

"You'd better not do that!" I called after her. "This is private property!" The meadow was not fenced in, but a sign clearly stated that trespassing was forbidden.

Paula turned to me in surprise, almost a little annoyed. "I'm sure I'm allowed to pick up the fallen fruit – otherwise it would just rot!" she objected.

Only after she had defiantly picked up as many apples as she could carry did she come back to me. "Here," she offered me one of the apples, while she herself was already chewing on another. "Try one – they are really delicious!"

Not wanting to appear a stickler for principles, I let her force the apple on me and bit into it. It really had just the right degree of ripeness.

"I don't think the people in this community will die of starvation because of this little

petty theft!" Paula remarked triumphantly as we walked on.

"The orchard is not owned by the municipality," I corrected her. "Private ownership means precisely that something does not belong to the general public."

"You mean all these fruit trees belong to one single person?" Paula marvelled.

"Yes – or to an owners' association," I nodded. "In any case, this is not municipal land." Paula frowned disapprovingly. "Why in the world do you always have to possess everything?"

"Don't you have any property on your island?" I asked back a little grumpily. After all, no one was a hardcore materialist just because he owned a small piece of meadow.



Archaic Blood Ties

Paula took another bite of her apple. "Wait a minute ...," she mused, munching. "No, I don't think property in your sense really exists on our island. Of course, we know of things that certain individuals are linked to so narrowly that these things are, in a sense, regarded as part of them. But these are not actually things you own, but rather things that belong to you – talismans, for example, the cup you drink from, a shell necklace you adorn yourself with ... Of course, something like that only has a special meaning for the

person using the things – which is precisely why you don't take anything away from others with it."

"That's not what I had in mind," I clarified. "I was rather thinking about the really valuable things ... Let's take the houses you live in, for example – surely they are private property in your case too, aren't they?"

Paula looked at me with sincere astonishment: "No – for what reason? It's enough to have a place to live in. Why should you have to own the house yourself?"

"Well, because ... in order to ..." I stammered, bemused by the ingenuousness with which Paula denied the need for ownership. "For example, in order to give your children the possibility to inherit the houses from you," I finally followed the first reasoning argument that came to my mind.

But Paula once again just looked at me with wide eyes: "Inherit?"

"Well, I mean that you can pass your house from one generation to the next," I ex-

plained. "That it remains in the hands of the family."

Paula laughed. "But we don't have any families on our island! The children are raised by all of us together. Besides, I don't see why I should favour someone just because there are special blood ties between him and me. Such a way of thinking seems quite archaic to me."



"Does selfishness strengthen the community?"

Probably, I said to myself, the two cultures simply cannot be compared with each other in this respect. In Paula's small island community, everyone was related to everyone else in some way. That's why there was no need to emphasise the blood relationship and put it under special protection. The necessity for this apparently only arises in more complex societies, in which the wealth acquired by the parents can only attain continuity if the inheritance within the family group is guaranteed by the state.

I therefore did not pursue the topic any further. Instead, I drew Paula's attention to the approaching thunderstorm, which was becoming noticeable in the distance through the rumbling of thunder and flashes of lightning.

Paula glanced briefly in the direction of the oncoming thunderstorm, without being par-

ticularly worried. "You haven't answered my question yet," she insisted instead. "Why is property so important to you?"

Admittedly, I was annoyed by her inquisitorial questioning. But since I knew that she would not rest until I had answered her question, I explained: "Well, because you can only dispose completely of things if you own them. Ownership gives me quite different possibilities for rearranging things. If I own a house, for example, I can remodel it according to my wishes, adapt it much more precisely to my needs than if it were owned by the general public. Moreover, I don't make the investments that are necessary for something like this if I am, so to speak, filling someone else's pocket with it."

"So you wouldn't renovate a house if it didn't belong to you alone, but to the whole community?"

Instead of letting her put me in the corner of immorality, I replied with defiant calm: "So what? That's quite normal! It's just the way

people are – they always think of themselves in the first place. You can even use this fact for motivating people to serve the community! Those who do a lot for the community will also be granted a correspondingly high income, from which they can then fulfill additional wishes."

Paula looked at me in consternation. "So you promote selfishness in order to get people to do something for the community in which they live?"

"If you want to put it that way ..." I agreed with her, shrugging my shoulders.



The Possession of the Possessionless

I was already hoping that the discussion had come to an end. But after a short silence, Paula followed up again: "Have you ever considered whether you are perhaps confusing cause and effect?"

I looked at her questioningly: "What do you mean by this?"

"Well," she explained to me, "in our culture we assume that people don't do something for the community primarily because they hope to benefit themselves from it, but because they enjoy being with others, enjoy creating something together with others, or

because they find it satisfying to help others. And on the whole, that's indeed true for us. We would really feel amputated if we had to cultivate our gardens alone and could not plan and implement the renovation of our houses along with others."

She kicked aside a stone lying on the path in front of her, then continued: "So I wonder whether people wouldn't be different in your country, too, if you had a different image of yourselves; in other words, whether you perhaps are so selfish simply because you tell yourselves that God – or whoever – has created you this way."

Laughing, she added: "In the end, we might even possess more than you precisely because we don't possess anything. Since nobody owns anything on our island, everything belongs to everybody. So I can be sure that no one will take anything away from me or withhold it when I need it."

At this point I decided to end the discourse with my South Sea philosopher. It seemed to

me that we had once again reached a point where we were both arguing from too different, incompatible cultural positions.

Paula's argumentation was, as it seemed to me, all too much based on the state of a pre-civilisational society in which humans have not yet really awakened to their individuality. Seen in this way, egoism would only be the reverse side of a further intellectual development of the human being, a development that has led us to the discovery of our self and thus to the desire for self-development.

To put it in exaggerated terms, we could perhaps even say: only those who have reached this higher level of self-development are capable of egoism. If we would try to reverse this development and prohibit personal property, this would only end – as has been shown repeatedly in the past – in a totalitarian, oppressive society.



The Eroticism of Sharing

Paula emitted a suppressed scream. A bolt of lightning had discharged directly above us. She hooked onto me and we both accelerated our pace to find shelter in time before the thunderstorm broke out. But in the open field we had no chance. Not for long, and a veritable torrent went down on us.

At least the actual storm front moved on quickly. Thunder and lightning had already died down when the rain really started. So I was able to open the umbrella that I had

taken with me in view of the warnings in the weather forecast.

"May I come under your umbrella, or is it private property?" Paula asked me shivering, a trembling smile on her lips.

"You're welcome!" I laughed, while Paula clung with her hands to the arm holding the umbrella and pressed her rain-soaked body against me. Rarely have I been so happy to share my possessions with someone else.



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