

Fast Company

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Wired for Anarchy

London School of Economics professor Ian Angell is a brilliant man with a dark and disturbing vision. And if he's right about the future, you'd better learn to think like a "new barbarian."

by Paul C. Judge
photographs by Jillian Edelstein
from FC issue , page 382

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If Ian Angell is right about the future of the new economy, most of the world is screwed. From his vantage point as professor of information systems at the prestigious London School of Economics (LSE), Angell, 53, spins a scenario of the future in which the world's business and technical elite use the Net to live wherever they want and to do whatever they please, without government intrusion. Leveraging their wealth and their much-in-demand professional skills, the chosen few (who really aren't so few) can live in countries that will bid to have them as residents -- through offers of tax relief and through promises of noninterference in their affairs.

What will governments get in return? The unprecedented wealth-creating power of this group of charmed individuals, whom Angell calls the "new barbarians." And what will become of the billions of people who are left behind? For some unfortunates, it will be a world of chaos, run by gangs of thugs. Others will live under the "tyranny of democracies" -- societies where people will have votes, but where the majority will be ruled by racial, religious, and ethnic bigots.

So much for teary-eyed talk about the "digital divide." Most of that earnest but shopworn discussion focuses on the powerlessness of the have-nots. So what about the haves? After all, they are the ones who will be in charge -- the agenda setters, the power brokers, and the virtual architects of the new digital order. What will their world look like? Angell has thought a lot about that question.

His answer reflects an unabashedly somber vision, sort of like Free Agent Nation on a global acid trip. Self-interest and security are the mantras of Angell's new barbarians. Commerce and communities are disembodied, existing for the most part on the Internet. Government's role is to shelter new barbarians from the scourge of disease, to protect the food supply, and to provide a clean, well-lighted place for data, the plasma of the new economy.

Who would want to live in such a world? Ian Angell, for one. His recent book, *The New Barbarian Manifesto: How to Survive the Information Age* (Kogan Page, 2000), conjures up a world that makes the brutal Darwinist ecology of *Blade Runner* seem downright benign. But Angell isn't offering remedies for rescuing society from such a fate. He believes that this dark world can't come soon enough.

"I'm an anarchic capitalist," says Angell. "I believe that business should be running the world. Every major technological shift creates winners and losers. Europe's a disaster because of a sentimental attachment to the welfare state, which is just a vestige of the Industrial Age, when politicians extracted taxes to buy votes."

Needless to say, Angell revels in being an extremist. He has used his position as a tenured faculty member at LSE to needle the British government on issues ranging from privacy rights to its proposal to levy a "bit tax" on information that passes through computer networks. When *The New Barbarian Manifesto* was published earlier this year, it created a stir among British intellectuals and led the *Times* of London to dub its author "the Angell of Doom." He appears to be enjoying the attention, but Angell is still a long way from being mainstream. "Whenever large numbers of people start to agree with me, I think I'm wrong," he says.

That's the attitude you might expect from a new barbarian. It also gives Angell a certain currency as a maverick. Companies such as A.T. Kearney, Cambridge Technology Partners Inc., USB Warburg, and Warner Lambert Co. have invited him to speak at their corporate gatherings, hoping that he'll shake things up with speeches about the changing nature of work, the end of democracy, and, of course, winners and losers. "When the consultants want to rattle their technologists, I get up and talk about how methods are dangerous and statistics are worthless, because they make for tidy minds," he says.

Angell's own intellectual journey has been anything but tidy. His background and upbringing as a working-class intellectual would seem more likely to have made him into a champion of the little guy. Angell is a policeman's son who grew up in the coal-mining district in Wales. He credits his mother, who "lived in a working-class town and was too clever for her own good," with giving him an appreciation of anarchy and a distrust of government.

He started an academic career as a brilliant mathematician, but at the age of 30 he lost his faith in numbers and in their capacity to make sense of the world. That's one reason he believes that "most of what they teach in business schools is bunkum. Business is alchemy, anyway, not science." Math kept him too isolated from flesh and blood, so he switched fields to computer science. But Angell grew more and more disillusioned with Britain's modern institutions -- particularly with the government and the universities -- and he was nettled by the view that information technology was merely a benign force that would liberate humans from monotonous toil.

Eventually, Angell says, he realized that businesspeople -- and entrepreneurs in particular -- knew of better ways to exploit information technology. The more time he spent as a speaker inside companies, the more fascinated he became with those companies' potential to detach themselves from their surroundings and to continue to flourish. And so, at the center of the new-barbarian society is the virtual enterprise, the primary organization in Angell's dystopia.

"The information system is the firm; nothing else is permanent," argues Angell. If the system gets cracked, either by criminals or by governments, "the organization is finished." The threat of attack will be constant, Angell believes, as disgruntled losers strike at the heart of the new-barbarian society, and as computer hacking takes on all of the dimensions of class warfare.

A few years ago, Angell's special scorn for taxing authorities led him to propose a banking system that was out of this world. Satellites acting as depositories for digital cash would allow companies and individuals to move money anywhere, using computers or even handheld devices linked to satellite transceivers. With a secure system in place, commerce would move beyond the reach of any government's ability to tax it. Tax payment would then take the form of a negotiation between new barbarians and the countries that are vying for their citizenship. How much would you pay for security? For trees? For health care? "Companies and countries will be scouring the globe, competing with each other to attract this top-quality 'people product,' dragging them off the planes if necessary," Angell believes.

Even without bank accounts in space, Angell says, new barbarians are flexing their muscles in plenty of ways. He points to the U.S. government's H1-B visa program for top-notch technologists from around the world as one example. "The new rootlessness of economic mercenaries who are looking out for welcoming institutions that are in tune with their own aspirations, has the power to destabilize the wealth of any unsupportive community," he argues.

Bad science fiction? It would be, if there weren't a serious core to Angell's arguments: Who can really argue with the proposition that elite knowledge workers can dictate their demands to governments, as opposed to the other way around? At the end of his book, Angell offers a few pointers on how to become a new barbarian: Get an elitist education; keep your assets liquid, and spread them around the globe; familiarize yourself with economic hot spots that will be the most receptive to people like you. And finally, "Be ready to flee at a moment's notice."

Spoken like a new barbarian.

Paul C. Judge (pjudge@fastcompany.com) is a Fast Company senior editor. Contact Ian Angell by email (i.angell@lse.ac.uk).

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