

DED--It's Never Too Late to Change

The target had been selected. Profiled and researched. The date and time had been set. Nothing could go wrong. They waited.

Dr Eric Holthaus, Distinguished Professor of Economics, stood as the admiring audience filed out of his Thursday afternoon graduate seminar. Today's topic had been the paper he'd presented at the most recent G-20 Summit, and advance publicity about his lecture had led to an overflow crowd of guests and students. The paper, entitled "Dynamic Stochastic General Equilibrium Modelled Against Convex Preferences Probative of the Desiderata of Oligopsony As Opposed to the Elision of Autarky and Socialist Proclivities," had been met with considerable acclaim at the summit. And it had already led to three new consulting contracts with developing countries, in addition to his regular work with various domestic NGOs and think tanks.

"Thank you, Professor," a student smiled as she walked out.

"Awesome," said another.

"Inspiring."

Eric smiled at the accolades, wondering as he walked back to his office if any of the students truly understood the subtle richness of the ideas he had presented. The biggest frustration in his professional life was constantly having to explain his concepts, as he liked to put it, in small words to small minds. Whether it was undergraduates in backward baseball caps or bemedaled heads of state.

In his office, he quickly checked his messages, then fastened the clasp on his Brunello Cucinelli Leather Portfolio (a gift from the finance minister of an African client) and left for the day.

He was a familiar figure on the southern California campus, even though, or perhaps, because he spent as much time on talk shows and in the world's capitals explaining the inexplicable as he did in the classroom.

Everyone recognized the tall, slim figure with his flawlessly sculpted Van

Dyke--the beard and moustache as distinctly separate as macro vs. microeconomics.

As he got to his car, the door of a white van parked next to him slid open and hands grabbed him, pulling him inside. The door slid shut and Eric struggled in the darkness. Quickly overcome, he felt his wrists and ankles secured. A light came on and he looked up at two masked figures. He'd lost a Testoni slip-on in the struggle and one of the kidnappers held it up and dropped it unceremoniously on Eric's chest. "Nice shoes," said a deep male voice. "Too bad you won't be needing them where you're going."

The light switched off and the van started moving. Eric quickly became disoriented. And panicked. "Who are you?" he demanded.

"Shut up."

"Where are you taking me?"

"Shut up."

"You'll never get away with this!"

"For a big shot academic doctor, you're not too smart. How many times do I have to tell you to shut up?"

Eric occupied himself by worrying and thinking about some of the cop shows he'd seen. What should he be doing to help himself? He tried to listen for any sounds or indications of where they were going. Could he tell if they were crossing a bridge or going through a tunnel? Not likely. He took some comfort from the masks, which he assumed meant his captors wanted to disguise themselves. On the cop shows if the perps didn't try to conceal their identity, it usually meant that the victim was expendable.

It helped, too, when he thought about how many organizations and individuals would rush to his aid if they knew what was happening. Why, he had some clients in the developing world who would probably send their private armies to rescue him. If they only knew.

Eric soon lost track of time. There were a few stops, and at one point he was blindfolded and covered with what felt like soft bundles. His captors weren't rough or violent but they were very incommunicative. After what

seemed like a long stretch of starting and stopping, he sensed that they were turning onto smaller and less well maintained roads and he found himself glad for the cushioning the bundles provided as the van bounced along.

When the van stopped, the door slid open and he was carried out. After a few twists and turns, which convinced Eric he was in some kind of building, he was laid on the floor, surprisingly gently. Someone pulled off the blindfold and untied him. There were four people, all masked and dressed alike. "Just relax," one of them said as they closed the door and left.

Eric looked around. He was in a very primitive building. Barn? Old factory? The floor was earth and the walls were stone. There were tiny windows that were too high and small to provide a possible escape route. The room was neither too dirty or too clean. He had no idea how long he sat there and figured it was part of his kidnappers' mind games.

The door opened and four masked figures came in. "Get up," one barked.

Eric slowly got up, aching from the ride and confinement.

"Stand up straight."

Eric stretched, trying to get comfortable.

One of the captors stepped forward and from behind the mask a female voice said, "Welcome to your new home."

"What!" said Eric. "Where am I? You can't do this."

"Shut up. We already *have* done it," said the male who had been in the van.

The female held up her hand. "We will explain everything. After your trial. Which begins in about thirty minutes. After you've had a chance to freshen up after your journey. Isn't that what you people do? Freshen up after a journey? I'm sorry, the hot towels and bathrobes aren't available, but there's a bathroom and hot water." She nodded to the other guards.

"This way," said a male guard.

After he'd had a chance to clean up, Eric was led to a kitchen whose design and accessories matched the overall décor of the building. "In case you

haven't figured it out yet, we're in Mexico," said the guard. He invited Eric to help himself to a chicken dish and some fruit and, amazingly, beer. "We smuggled you over the border to make things, uh, less complicated."

Eric looked at the masked figure. "You call international kidnapping uncomplicated? Do you have any idea the kind of trouble you're in?"

"You could be right. But my troubles, if any, are in the future. Yours, you may have noticed are--how should I put it--immediate. So sit down and enjoy your dinner."

"But what do you hope to gain? What's your point? Why kidnap me? I mean, I know I'm famous, but I'm hardly rich."

"When are you going to figure out you're not getting jack from me. You'll find out at the trial."

"Trial? But I haven't done anything wrong."

"That's for the court to decide."

As he ate, Eric asked, "What's the point of a trial? Aren't you holding me for ransom?"

Eric didn't expect a response, based on how forthcoming the guard had been and was surprised when the guard turned a chair backwards and sat down at the table across from him.

"Actually, we've thought long and hard about that. Some of us wanted to ransom you off so we could pay back our student loans. But others thought that was just going to perpetuate the system of oppression. I mean, why pay back a loan for an education that isn't getting you a job?"

"Well maybe you shouldn't have majored in Art History, or whatever it was."

"Doctorate in Economics to be exact, asshole. And I don't have any student loans. I worked for Wells Fargo while I studied. Foreign currency trading."

"Really?" said Eric.

"Oh yeah. I developed some of my own algorithms and everything."

"I can't believe you can't get a job with credentials like that."

“Well, you’d be surprised how badly interviews go when you suggest that there might be alternatives to free market capitalism.”

Eric nodded, “That explains everything, doctor. *You* have a solution to all of the world’s economic problems and no one will listen.” He spread his arms to indicate the room. “This is a really mature response to your frustration.”

“Not just *my* frustration. I’m not an individualistic capitalist, I’m part of a collective. We’re all frustrated. And that’s a euphemism. You’ll see.”

“So it was your idea to have a trial instead of ransom me?”

“No way. I wanted the money. But so as not to insult you, I wanted the ask to be ten million.” He shrugged. “That’s a little more than our combined student loans. Anyway, let’s get this over with. Showtime, doc.”

Eric was led to another room. The tables and chairs had been arranged like a courtroom and a masked figure sat at the front table—clearly the judge. Eric was directed to a table facing the judge, his guard stood behind him. A masked figure stood next to Eric at the table and behind a table next to theirs stood another masked figure. In the back of the room were about a dozen people of all ages, without masks.

The judge, a female, said, “The prisoner will rise.”

Eric decided it was time to fight back. “No way. I don’t recognize any authority here.”

“What? You don’t recognize the authority of people who brought you to another country against your will?” asked the judge.

The guard behind Eric leaned down and whispered in his ear. He stood up.

The judge continued. “You are a prisoner of the DED Army. That’s dead with no ‘a.’ Got it?”

Eric looked around the room, wondering who the DED Army was and why it didn’t like him. The name didn’t fill him with a lot of comfort.

“The judge asked you a question,” barked the guard.

“Yes, I get it,” whispered Eric.

The judge said, "It's like this, Doctor, or Professor, or Distinguished Professor or whatever it is you call yourself . . ."

"Actually, any of those are fine," said Eric.

"Shut up," said the guard.

The woman continued, "The DED Army is a group of people from all walks of life. We started as a Facebook affinity group. We're international. A few of us who live in town started meeting up. You know, talking and stuff. We are what you would call a diverse group. Disunited, even. But we are joined by a common bond and the bond is our anger. You will see. Be seated."

Eric sat down and the judge pulled off her mask. The others followed. Each of them was young and – the only word Eric could think of was – normal looking. He'd expected something scarier.

The judge said, "By way of introductions, I am General Chaos, judge of these proceedings." She pointed to the other formerly masked figures. "That is Captain Anarchy . . ." His guard, the other doctor of economics in the room was a tall curly haired blond. He smiled at Eric--totally out of character based on his behaviour up till now. General Chaos pointed to the two standing figures, a man and a woman. "That is Major Mayhem, the Peoples' prosecutor and Major Pandemonium, your public defender. We follow democratic rules. The people in the gallery are part of our community. You will meet them later. Major Mayhem, please read the charges."

The young man at the other table opened a folder. "Thank you, your honor. Allow to me outline the guilt of this person."

"Objection!" shouted Eric. "How do you know I'm guilty before the trial?"

Major Pandemonium, standing next to Eric said, "Excuse me. Actually, as your attorney, objecting is my job," she smiled brightly. "But in this case, I don't. Object that is. We wouldn't have gone to the trouble of bringing you here if you weren't guilty. We abducted you for your crimes,

not to find out what you've been up to." She smiled again and gave a sort of apologetic open palmed gesture.

"Well said, Major," said the judge. "Please continue Major Mayhem."

"What's the point of a trial if my attorney think's I'm guilty?" said Eric.

"Shut up," said Captain Anarchy.

"Now. Dr Holthouser. On the matter of your guilt."

"What are you talking about? I've done nothing wrong," shouted Eric. "I'm an academic. A theoretician. I work with abstract concepts. I've done nothing wrong."

"We'll see." He turned on a projector. "This is a summary of your economic theories that you have written about and peddled over the years. Eight basic concepts. Would you say I got them right?"

Eric studied the slide on the wall. "Well, it's grossly oversimplified, and shows no nuanced understanding of the issues, but fundamentally correct."

"Thank you. Now this slide shows case studies of where your theories have been applied around the world. Technically, it should show how all these concepts work to increase well being. Spoiler alert. The bottom line is that they don't work. Your programs to control inflation create it, programs to reduce unemployment increase it. Your ideas on how to improve economic well being have precipitated recessions and your insistence that complex derivatives and financial instruments are important to a functioning global economy has led to the wiping out of trillions of dollars of wealth. Professor, you don't know what you're talking about. Here is the strategy you proposed for the yen crisis. It made things worse. Here is your third world debt concept. It hasn't worked anywhere it's been tried. And here is your rationale for austerity programs. Here are the growth rates of the economies where your ideas have been applied. Can I say it for you? Oops. They are worse off than they were before. The only thing that has increased is inequality and degradation of public services by governments that have gone broke bailing out industries and propping up your failed policies."

“I don’t see your point. I deal in theory. Pure science and research. Application of the theory is subject to numerous variables. You can’t hold me responsible for that.”

“Maybe this slide will explain it. It took a bit of doing to get the information.”

Eric squinted at the slide. “That’s confidential information. You have no right . . .”

“It’s no longer confidential, Doctor. This shows the funding you received from various foundations funded by corporations who mysteriously benefitted when your policies were implemented. The middle column shows the position they advocated and the last column is the summary of the research you provided. I’m no economist or statistician, but that looks like perfect correlation to me. You said something about pure science, Doctor. Would you care to elaborate about purity?”

“No comment,” hissed Eric. “This is a gross misrepresentation.”

Major Mayhem continued, “Doctor, if you were a real doctor, all your patients would die. If you had just been a bumbling incompetent, you wouldn’t be sitting here. But no. You refuse to admit that you’re wrong. That there might be a better way. That you might not have all the answers. No. You fly around the world spewing this, this bullshit that you’ve been hired to come up and that you think is so brilliant to dumb government people who buy it and when it doesn’t work, you blame them. And in the meantime, you make peoples’ lives miserable. Your honor I rest my case.”

“Thank you. Major Pandemonium, please speak for the defense.”

“Thanks!” said Major Pandemonium, way too cheerful in Eric’s opinion. “OK, Doctor. Name one good thing that has come out of your work. Where have you made things better?”

Frustrated and scared, Eric struggled, “I, I don’t know. I’m an educator. I train young minds.”

“To do what? More of what you do? That’s not a very good defence!”

"I'm a scientist in an esoteric field. It's not like prescribing a pill for an infection, or even going to the moon. There are grey areas. It's not an exact science."

"Who do you help, Doctor?"

"Everyone. Governments. People. I'm trying to explain the complexities of the modern global economy."

Major Pandemonium gave her sweet smile, pointed to the slide on the wall and said, "But where does it show up? Help me out. You saw the presentation. Maybe you should understand those modern complexities a little better before you start explaining them and telling governments to do things that change people's lives. And not for the better. Oh, and if you're really a pure, independent academic, do research instead of what your employer tells you to say. The defence rests."

"Thank you," said the judge. "I will now pronounce sentence."

"You have no authority to sentence me to anything!" shouted Eric.

General Chaos shrugged and said, "Well, technically, we had no authority to bring you here in the back of a van, but voila, here you are. So just go with it, OK?"

"W-w-what are you gonna do?"

Captain Anarchy, who had moved from behind Eric to stand next to the judge flashed his killer smile and pantomimed blowing out a candle.

"You wouldn't dare!" yelled Eric. "I'm an internationally known academic."

"Like it matters," said Captain Anarchy. "I think we've pretty much demonstrated the value add that internationally known academics provide. Sort of what you might call your marginal utility. It's pretty marginal!"

"That's enough," said the judge. "Doctor, this court finds you guilty as charged. You are in a position of trust. You can help people. Or hurt them. But you don't ask which it is you are doing. You don't know how your theories and methods really work and you explain away failure as other peoples' fault or due to external complexities. You have created misery."

Ruined lives. You've sold yourself to the highest bidder without regard to how it will affect people. Just for the sake of your ego."

"But that's no reason to kill me," whined Eric, unable to believe what has happening.

"Of course we're not going to kill you. Look behind you." She gestured at the gallery. "Meet your new community. You are sentenced to live and work in this village until you demonstrate that you understand why we went to the trouble of bringing you here. From these people you will learn how economies really work. We want you to learn to be self sufficient. To work for your food and housing. You will come to understand and respect that most people in the world have to work very hard for those things. It doesn't make them peasants. Or statistics. Or interchangeable parts. It makes them human beings, worthy of your respect. No better or worse than you. You will live with a family and work in the community. We will check on you periodically to determine whether it is safe to reintroduce you to society."

"How long will that take?"

"Up to you. And don't get any ideas about escaping or being rescued. Your phone is still in LA, so that's where everyone thinks you are. No one knows where you are and you don't have a passport. You are a long, long way from any place where you can contact someone and if you try to run, you probably really will die because you'd have to survive for a long time on just your wits. And you don't seem to have a lot of street smarts. So my advice is, learn from your experience, make the best of it and work hard. Court is adjourned."

The General and the DED Army left the room and the locals in the gallery came down, welcoming Eric and introducing themselves.

After a month or so, the DED Army convened what General Chaos called a "Performance Review/Parole Hearing." At the hearings, the villagers talked about how Eric was fitting in and contributing and Eric was interviewed extensively about his experience.

The General gently reminded him that he was there to learn and the sooner he showed that he was learning, he might be released. "You should know that the cops aren't looking very hard for you anymore. So give up any idea of rescue and get on with your new life."

"What are they saying happened to me? Have there been memorials? Articles?" Eric asked.

"Whatever I tell you might make you feel bad and you won't believe me anyway. But the answer to your first question is you wouldn't believe some of the stories and the second is no. Now. As far as your performance, the family you are staying with is too nice to link the amount of food they give you to your productivity. The nearest English translations for the words they used are 'obnoxious,' 'sullen' and 'worthless.' This is not the sort of feedback that is going to get you out of here, Doctor."

"But that's not fair. I do jobs, I've tried to learn the language. I talk to them. You have no idea how hard it is!"

"Well that's progress. You realizing that it's hard work to survive when you don't have tenure. But the real question is whether you have come up with ideas on how to undo the damage you've done. Whether you understand why we've done this to you and that you support us and want to go home to do some good. Tell me, doctor, is that possible? That you might have thought about a better way to run economies to help people rather than hurt them."

"Yes, of course it is!"

"In that case, what's your plan?"

"Actually, I've given this some thought. I'm thinking that I could tell this story in a grant application and get funding to do a study about the economic system of this community."

"And what would that accomplish?"

"Well for all practical purposes, I've done some really unique field research. I should get something out of it."

Major Mayhem winced. "And would you recant any of your earlier work?"

"No. Why? Nothing I've seen here invalidates or even affects my oeuvre. You have to realize that my economic research and writing is about sophisticated developing economies. Not Third World subsistence economies."

"Populated by peasants?" said Captain Anarchy.

"I didn't say that!" said Eric.

Major Mayhem said, "So we have a problem. What do we do now? We don't like you any more than you like any of us."

"I say we give him another month," said General Chaos. "He's still in shock. Not thinking clearly."

"You really think that will help?" said Captain Anarchy. "We'll be doing this forever."

"It's up to you, Doctor."

Three weeks later, Eric contacted the General through the people in the village. She came to visit him along with Major Mayhem and Captain Anarchy. "What is it you want to say," she asked.

"Better if I show you," said Eric. "I've done some thinking and come up with this."

He handed over a folder with handwritten notes and some simple diagrams. General Chaos looked through it and handed each page to Captain Anarchy as she finished. When they had both looked through the material, she turned to Captain Anarchy and said, "Well?"

The Captain shuffled through the papers and said, "A couple of questions. Here on page five. These graphs. Is there anything else?"

"No," said Eric. "That's the point. I think I've figured something interesting out."

"I'd say so. And you really believe this? You're willing to publish it? Stand behind it."

"Absolutely."

“How do I know you’re not just saying that?”

“You don’t. I know you have every reason to believe that I’ll tell you what you want to hear so I can get out of here. And you also know that I know there’s nothing you can do about it if I get home and say it was produced under duress. But I’ve been talking to the people here. I think we’re both willing to take a risk.”

“Well, I really like the idea,” said Captain Anarchy.

“What is it?” said General Pandemonium.

“At the risk of oversimplifying, he’s revised his models. They make more sense and he’s stripped out all the bullshit that gets economies in trouble. Focusing on social rather than corporate welfare. It’s what we asked for. It’s a way to undo the damage he’s done. Another way of looking at things.”

“Really? Will it work?”

“How can you ask that about any economic theory! But it’s a step in the right direction.” He turned to Eric. “Here’s what you’re going to do. Take some time and work this into a program that you would teach in your seminars and present to governments instead of that snake oil you’ve been selling. Not just the program, but also the bridge to explain why you’ve changed your mind. If what you come up with makes sense, we’ll start our program to, uh, reintroduce you.”

“But you have to convince us you’re sincere,” said General Pandemonium. “We know that once you get back we have no control over you. You can say we grabbed you and threatened you and you said whatever it would take to make us let you go.”

“I think I’ve learned something. I’ll write it up.”

A few days later Eric presented his report and Captain Anarchy reviewed it in detail with him. The next day, they took Eric back to the building where he had been held when he first arrived. There he was introduced to an older man from the village who he hadn’t met before. “This

gentleman will drive you to the border. What you do after that is up to you," said General Chaos.

"You're really taking my word for it? That I'll recant my work?" said Eric as they stood by the old car that would take him home.

"What choice do we have? I think you know by now we aren't going to hunt you down and kill you. And it's not like we can complain to anyone that you're not playing fair. But I prefer to look at it as developing your theories further based on research, rather than recanting. As you said, you've done some intensive field research. You had an epiphany. Good luck, doctor."

The older man apologetically held up a blindfold and indicated he wanted Eric to put it on. "Sorry, just a precaution. Just till we get to the main road."

As Eric took the blindfold, a white van like the one he'd arrived in came up the drive and parked next to the building. Shocked, he looked at General Chaos who smiled. "Yes, doctor. You weren't the first and you're not the last. We're patient."

"I don't understand."

"There's a lot we haven't explained. Like why we call ourselves the DED Army. 'DED' stands for democracy, equality and dignity. Three things that have been engineered out of society by modern materialism, greed and corporatization. Our aim is to restore those. All reasonable attempts fail because the people who actually can make changes for the better are the very people who would suffer if change were made. I mean, if you were a congressman would you vote to enable laws that would prevent you from making yourself a millionaire? So the gap between rich and poor gets wider. The gulf between what democracy is supposed to be and the way it operates gets wider. So we are changing it. One person at a time."

She reached into her pocket and pulled out a little lapel pin in the shape of a sunflower. Under the flower were the letters "DED" almost too small to see. She pinned it on Eric's shirt.

“You might as well help us, because if you don’t, others will. They already are. You may even make some new friends when you get home. Think of it as an alumni group. They’ll be in touch. And now you know how to recognize us.” She adjusted the blindfold and helped Eric into the car.