

# Fredy Perlman's Chronicle of the World Changers

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Forty years after his untimely death in 1985, Fredy Perlman's last work has been published, a second volume of his novel, *The Strait*, which he left in handwritten form.

In 1986, the anarchist activist/historian (and FE contributor) David Porter commented in the journal *Kairos* on Perlman's contribution to anarchist ideas, identifying a central, unifying concern in the work as "the obstacles, inhibitions, and illusions that prevent genuine social liberation." Although Fredy had begun with a critique of capital as the "overall framework for domination and self-repression in the modern era," he continued, "Fredy's special talent was to demonstrate the variety of its political forms," a dialectic he described in his essays and books, in which "accumulation of unequal power leads to the privilege of a few and the degradation of the others." Moreover, resisting tended to produce its own feedback "Every major step toward apparent liberation produces further domination..."

This had led to a longer view, back to the earliest empires and the roots of domination and extractivism. Mistrusting even revolutionary theory, Fredy turned to storytelling. In *The Strait, Book One, Obenabi's Songs*, which he started in 1977, he sought to recreate the worldview of Woodland Native Americans confronting the invasion of conquistadores, clerics, and confidence men from the east. He not only described Native non-hierarchical societies; "the language and syntax of the presentation itself [were] an attempt to articulate non-Western consciousness through the poetic imagery of that culture."

In 1983, plagued by a serious heart problem, Fredy feared he wouldn't finish his story, as told by a primal person, of what he called the "world changers" and world destroyers. He laid out his vision of the history of this world in his rapidly written *Against His-story, Against Leviathan!* This vertiginous rant against history and the domination of nature and human communities seems to be delivered by a clairvoyant, well-read grandmother from prehistory, now speaking at the end of time's arc, looking back at the wreckage of history like Walter Benjamin's famous angel, and forward toward tentative next steps out of the nightmare.

In this extraordinary, idiosyncratic soliloquy, Fredy's narrator describes the "monstrous body" of Leviathan (a term taken from Thomas Hobbes's apologetic for the State and its Leader), our repressive civilization that has unleashed a "widening gyre" of terror and destruction over millennia, its "ignorant armies" clashing by day and night. This is "the Beast's body," a kind of vast, mechanical worm. "For it does have a body, a body that has become more powerful than the Biosphere. It may be a body without any life of its own. It may be a dead thing, a huge cadaver. It may move its slow thighs only when living beings inhabit it. Nevertheless, its body is what does the wrecking."

This tragedy begins with enslavement and mass deportations carried out by ancient Fertile Crescent empires, continuing to the Trail of Tears and—let us not forget, since these recent chapters were Fredy's concern as well—the modern mass deportations and killings during his lifetime and ours, including in the Middle East now

Fredy's anti-history soon gained and continues to gain admirers and has been translated into several languages. One worthy reflection on *Against History* is Max Cafard's "The Dragons of Brno," in the Spring 1996 Fifth Estate [#347]. Echoing Porter, Cafard writes, "Fredy Perlman's diagnosis for our own age sounds at first rather dismal.

History seems to become a Night of the Living Dead, with the hapless humans cowering before the advancing lifeless Creatures... Moreover, as the monster destroys the social fabric, the ‘human communities, once dead, stay dead.’” This was written before AI. Now, our very words and stories seemed threatened with melting away, to be reconfigured as grist for the leviathanic machine-worm, when, as Fredy put it, “the Beast becomes its own sole [and our own and only] frame of reference.”

Others have noticed the despair in Fredy’s sweeping late works on Leviathan—indeed, two central literary references in *Against His-story* on ignorant armies and the widening gyre, from iconic poems by Matthew Arnold and Yeats, were singularly pessimistic, crepuscular. “Yet, we should not despair,” Cafard urges us. “The good news is that the entire Monster is beginning to destroy itself, and there is hope for a new beginning, for regeneration.” And he insists, “let’s begin again. The Earth does it every year. And the human community can do it occasionally, too.” Thirty years later it has become a popular meme that the good news is frequently, alas, also bad news. But as Cafard concludes, “If we do survive our encounter with the Beast, Fredy Perlman will have helped us find our Way...”

After finishing *Against His-story*, Fredy returned to and nearly completed his project to depict the story of the catastrophic effects of the world-changers on the original communities around the Great Lakes and Tiosa Rondion, the colonial outpost that became Detroit. Among many other themes, his family saga incorporates the deadly impact of capitalism and technology, the subsequent pulverization and dispersal of once stateless communities, and perhaps especially, in the words of his life-partner and biographer Lorraine Perlman, “the hazards of one speaking to many and, of course, [of] saviors who claim to protect their followers from all of the above.”

The first volume, treating the early contact, was published posthumously in 1988. This second volume, *The Strait 2*, was also largely written when he died, though a couple of key sections needed completion.

A few years after Fredy’s death, Lorraine took the handwritten chapters of the second volume with her on an extended visit to France and transcribed them on a manual typewriter. After that, the text sat for decades. In 2023, she decided to return to the project and retyped it on a computer, completing a couple of sections based on Fredy’s extensive notes, doing so with as light a hand as possible. *Fifth Estate* staff and friends helped by reading and copy-editing the text, which was finalized and published in the spring of 2025. Each chapter starts with beautiful, haunting photos of natural settings of this region by Laurie LePain Kopack.

The second volume brings events to the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, completing the story of the families and communities that experienced the disaster of conquest, colonialization, and the triumph of the state and capital. According to Lorraine, this work had germinated as early as 1959, when Fredy began his lifelong critique of what he called “The Rise and Fall of Capital and Labor,” a concept that started as an historical polemic, but which he would abandon as perhaps just another his-tory, a tool learned from the empire he wished to oppose. Instead, he chose a kind of story that strives to name and speak for Leviathan’s unnamed victims, some of whom can’t help but become its inevitable agents.

People interested in the lifework and ideas of Fredy Perlman or who appreciated the first volume will want to have a look at this book. Having helped on the project, I won’t review it, but look forward to seeing how readers (and future reviewers) respond. It’s an imperfect book. (Nowadays, one is not even supposed to write that truism in reviews, I know.) Readers will judge for themselves whether, be it volume 1 or 2, *The Strait* is an authentic depiction of its time and successful novelistic attempt to tell our well-known terrible, traumatic, collective tale. But if we manage to find our way out of it (for we too are players on this stage), Fredy’s thesis may have helped us find our way.

The book is available from PM Press [pmpress.org](http://pmpress.org), AK Press [akpress.org](http://akpress.org) and [blackandred.org](http://blackandred.org) or Black & Red, PO Box 02374, Detroit MI 48202.

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