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Blessed Unrest for a Wiser Earth: John Stauber Interviews Paul Hawken

Submitted by John Stauber on Tue, 06/19/2007 - 09:11.

My first introduction to author [Paul Hawken](#)'s work was his 1994 book [The Ecology of Commerce](#). It is essential reading for anyone grappling with issues surrounding capitalism, social justice and ecological sustainability. Hawken is, among his plethora of accomplishments, a highly successful businessman, but *The Ecology of Commerce* pulled few punches in its criticism of even those companies truly trying to set and reach a higher standard of [business social responsibility](#).



I met Paul in person the first time in early 1999 over dinner in his hometown of Berkeley, California, some months before the now-legendary "battle of Seattle" protest, a world-changing event that catalyzed his thinking and eventually led to his newest book, [Blessed Unrest: How the Largest Movement in the World Came into Being and Why No One Saw It Coming](#).

The November 30, 1999, anti-corporate protests at the Seattle meeting of the World Trade Organization ([WTO](#)) became a global media moment, a highly visible but inaccurately reported coming out party for the movement Hawken documents and touts in *Blessed Unrest*.

"More than seven hundred groups, and between forty thousand and sixty thousand individuals, took part in protests against WTO's Third Ministerial in Seattle, constituting one of the most disruptive demonstrations in modern history and, at that time, the most prominent expression of a global citizens' movement resisting what protesters saw as a corporate-driven trade agreement. The demonstrators and activists who took part were not against trade per se. ... Their frustration arose because one side held most of the cards; that side comprised heads of corporations, trade associations, government ministries,

most media, stockholders and WTO. From the point of view of those on the streets, WTO was trying to put the finishing touches on a financial autobahn that would transfer income to a small proportion of the population in wealthy nations under the guise of trade liberalization."



WTO Seattle: WTO protests in Seattle, 1999. Courtesy of Portland IndyMedia.

Hawken penned an insightful and widely read first-hand [account of the Seattle protest](#), an event typically depicted by a surprised and shocked mainstream media as a violent anarchist uprising right out of a bad Hollywood movie. "Most accounts of the Seattle demonstrations refer to them as 'riots,' even though they were 99.9 percent nonviolent," Hawken writes in *Blessed Unrest*. He relates how a Newsweek reporter in Seattle asked him who the leaders were of this uprising. He named names -- Vandana Shiva, Jerry Mander, Lori Wallach, Maude Barlow -- but was interrupted by the reporter who said "Stop, stop, I can't use these names in my article because Americans have never heard of them." Instead of the many real leaders of the Seattle protests, Newsweek placed on its cover Ted Kaczynski, better known as the Unabomber, although of course Kaczynski had absolutely nothing to do with Seattle's protests, but he epitomized the corporate media's defaming image of how they chose to portray the event and the movement behind it.

The WTO protests sparked Paul Hawken's investigation to better understand the global movement he is part of, its size and depth, its leadership, its goals, and its potential for birthing fundamental political, social, economic and environmental changes to remedy the intertwined crises of social injustice and ecological collapse. His best estimate is that there exist many more than one million organizations worldwide in this movement that "has no name." *Blessed Unrest* is his "exploration of this movement -- its participants, its aims and its ideals." Through his own non-profit organization the [Natural Capital Institute](#), he has launched an ambitious new website at www.WiserEarth.org to catalog the movement, give it visibility, and to better enable groups to find each other and work together online.

"Groups are intertwingling (sic) -- there are no words to exactly describe the complexity of this web of relationships. The Internet and other communications technologies have revolutionized what is possible for small groups to accomplish and are accordingly changing the loci of power." Hawken believes that this movement is the last, best hope for humankind, describing its promise as "a network of organizations that offer solutions to disentangle what appear to be insoluble dilemmas: poverty, global climate change, terrorism, ecological degradation, polarization of income, loss of culture, and many more. ... Even though the origins and purposes of the various groups comprising the movement are diverse, if you survey their principles, mission statements, or values, you find they do not conflict. ... What its members do share is a basic set of fundamental understandings

about the earth, how it functions, and the necessity of fairness and equity for all people dependent on the planet's life-giving systems."

Blessed Unrest is a 342 page book, but the last third is a long appendix from the www.WiserEarth.org website categorizing and describing the [mind-boggling areas of focus](#) that the myriad of environmental and social justice groups are addressing. That section is best accessed not in the book but online at www.WiserEarth.org.

The book is not a manifesto and it doesn't attempt to define or proscribe any strategies or tactics for the revolutionary structural changes necessary to solve the interwoven political economic, and ecological crises defining the start of the 21st century. These immense problems often overwhelm one's sense of hope. Hawken has hope and he has faith in his movement; he believes it will "prevail." He also believes that its success will be defined by "how rapidly it becomes a part of all other sectors of society. If it remains singular and isolated, it will fail. If it is absorbed and integrated into religion, education, business and government, there is a chance that humans can reverse the trends the beset the earth."

Blessed Unrest, www.WiserEarth.org and Hawken's related efforts are important contributions to furthering the movement. Perhaps he was wise not to examine too deeply the differences and divisions within the movement, or the real-world political challenges of how to reclaim democracy and to build power at the grassroots, taking it away it from the corporate elite, the ultimate challenge. Congratulations to Paul Hawken for creating a place where the movement can better see itself, meet up and collaborate online. Whether the website he calls "Wiser" will succeed, and to what degree, will depend on how it benefits and is used by the movement. In any case, Hawken has taken his best shot and broken new ground trying to help the movement forward.

I have not had a long face-to-face discussion with Paul since our 1999-dinner meeting, but I caught up with him in cyberspace for this interview below.

STAUBER: *Twelve years ago when I was writing [Toxic Sludge Is Good For You](#), I quoted your book *The Ecology of Commerce*. You criticized the fundamental structural problems of business and you wrote, "Rather than a management problem, we have a design problem that runs through all business."*

*It struck me reading *Blessed Unrest* that you do not address in it the issue of replacing the business corporation as the dominant engine of economic activity, with new forms of economic structure that can be more accountable to human needs, human rights and ecological sustainability.*

Business corporations are structurally incapable of meeting human and ecological needs, and the largest corporations dominate global politics. Isn't the movement's meta-challenge to bring about democratic structural change in both the economic and political spheres, to make business and government accountable to people and the planet?

HAWKEN: Yes! Absolutely! There is a pervasive subtext to most of the issues [NGOs](#) focus on: the abrogation of rights, the damage to place, and the corruption of political process by business. I didn't address the idea of replacing the corporation because the book was about civil society. It is about the largest movement in the world. It is not about what I think the movement should do nor is it about what I think we should do about corporate charters. My record is pretty clear on this in previous writings. I was being more an anthropologist, trying to figure out where this movement came from and how it works.

STAUBER: *Thomas Friedman uses and abuses the term "economic democracy" to describe the corporate globalization he promotes. I would like to rescue and revitalize "democracy" and make it meaningful. Do you think that "democracy" is a common theme in the movement for ecological and social justice, and how do you see the movement's relationship with democracy?*

HAWKEN: My sense is that the word and concept of democracy has lost much of its meaning. We have these winner-takes-all slugfests in the US where there are truly no ethical or moral limits and have the audacity to call it democracy because there were voting machines. Our democracy is corrupt from the top down and I think this movement is forming from the bottom up to correct the lack of process and governing principles that inform democratic movements. Although most of the media thinks this unnamed movement is about protest, my guess is that more than 98% of it is about solutions, and these are usually about solutions to problems in regions or communities. To achieve this requires the creation of what I call handmade democracies, processes that are not win-lose, and it requires a quality of interaction, respect, and listening that is now lost in US politics.

STAUBER: *On pages 64-65 of Blessed Unrest you write about the PR flack [E. Bruce Harrison](#), whose attacks on [Rachel Carson](#) in the early 1960s on behalf of the chemical industry gave rise to [greenwashing](#) and the tactic of coopting of groups like [Environmental Defense](#) to partner with polluters. Given your examination of greenwashing, corporate PR, and [front groups](#), I was surprised that no where in Blessed Unrest do you analyze the shortcomings and contradictions of these Big Green Groups that raise and spend tens or hundreds of millions of dollars annually, pay their executives six-figure salaries, partner with corporations, place corporate executives on their boards, and have no meaningful accountability to anyone except a small elite group of funders. You lump these groups with the hundreds of thousands of smaller grassroots groups. Why did you not try to better differentiate groups that are under-funded, grassroots and voluntary, from groups that are essentially large, sophisticated non-profit corporations that, while staffed by well-meaning people, often undermine and thwart fundamental change?*

HAWKEN: I don't believe I am lumping. I am describing a movement that is more complex and diverse than any prior social movement. Its strength and resiliency derives from this complexity. I understand your concerns, but I was describing something, not evaluating groups in order to announce to the world which ones I think are good and

which are bad. I made it clear that some of the organizations that arose from what I attribute to George Perkins Marsh's influence are wealthy and very establishment oriented, and those that are Emersonian/Thoreauvian in origin tend to be smaller and under-resourced.

We tend to be uncomfortable with contradictions, we want the world to be the way we want it be, and are not happy when it veers. But the world is never the way one person wants it to be. That would be hell. That is why I included Barry Lopez's quote in the beginning: *"One must live in the middle of contradiction, because if all contradiction were eliminated at once life would collapse. There are simply no answers to some of the great pressing questions. You continue to live them out, making your life a worthy expression of leaning into the light."* I do not like where we are, but I believe in my heart that we will have to figure this out together, and that we will not get out of the situation we are in by throwing each other overboard.

STAUBER: *You often make the point that the movement is "leaderless" in terms of a King or Gandhi type leader. Yet obviously some form of leadership and accountability exists and better leadership and coordination are necessary if the movement is going to prevail, as you believe it will. Could you elaborate on this issue of leadership in the movement, and how more leadership might emerge that can begin to better coordinate, synergize, and cross pollinate within the movement, and make the parts more aware of the whole?*

HAWKEN: My point is that it does not have a charismatic leader in the traditional sense, that there is no one person or group of persons who speak for it, and thus it can be overlooked by the media that thrives on that kind of centrality. I believe there are thousands and thousands of leaders, stunning in their qualities, courage, and faithfulness to principle. I agree with the sense of your question, that it is time to link and connect up in more powerful ways. The movement is atomized because that is how it came into being. It now has the communication and technological tools to work far more closely and effectively.

STAUBER: *I sensed in our dinner conversation in 1999 that this issue of envisioning structural change and how to bring it about might be the focus of a manifesto you were considering. Is a manifesto still in the works?*

HAWKEN: I remember well speaking with you about writing down a list of principles that reflected a universal set of values coupled with clear actions that needed to be taken in order to bring about justice, eliminate poverty, and prevent ecological collapse. I think about it all the time. Sometimes when I read Murdock's 63 Universals and other anthropological literature I wonder if there is not a set of such values that inform socio-political-ecologic-economic matters.

STAUBER: *Our [primary mission here at CMD](#) is exposing propaganda and revealing how the powerful use propaganda and the media to manage public perceptions, opinions and policies. It struck me how the pollution of our information environment and the*

nefarious role of big media corporations in serving the powerful and preventing fundamental change are not addressed in the book. Likewise, when I looked at [the categories](#) for [WiserEarth](#), I see little regarding the pollution of our information environment and the issues of propaganda that we address here at CMD.

HAWKEN: www.WiserEarth.org is an online relational database that can be edited by its users. It is not finished but a work in progress created by its community. We are receiving excellent suggestions and there are lively discussions on how to expand the taxonomy. [Your contribution here](#), given your experience and background, would be so welcome and hugely constructive.