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BLESSED UNREST: HOW THE LARGEST MOVEMENT IN THE WORLD CAME INTO BEING AND WHY NO ONE SAW IT COMING.

PAUL HAWKEN. VIKING, 2007

Reviewed by Anne Faith Mareck, University of Kentucky

For years philosophers and dreamers have insisted that in order for human society to become socially and environmentally just, for us to develop a truly sustainable society in every sense of the word, we, collectively, will have to undergo a paradigmatic shift of consciousness. But how does such a shift come about? Change theorists have described change as residing in the behaviour of individuals, that the nature of change is psychological, slow, unlikely, paradoxical. In contrast, philosopher Michele Foucault has described large-scale social change as a sort of “rupture” in the social fabric—a sudden, critical mass “sliding” from one state to another.

The late ecosopher Arne Naess described much of our societal effort to achieve environmental sustainability as “shallow.” The shallow vision Naess detailed includes things like narrowly conceived recycling efforts, unexamined deployment of “clean” technologies, and the manufacture of “environmentally friendly” products that are “friendly” in name only. Many “green” efforts remain critically unanalyzed, in actuality being traditional market-based efforts repackaged to appear as “new” and “green.” Instead, as Naess puts it, a systemic revisioning of the place of humans in the global complex of ecosystems is necessary—our efforts must conform to a deep understanding of our ecological reality. But how does such deep, systemically alternative change come about? Can it be decreed, legislated, forced top down upon an unwilling populace?

In *Blessed Unrest*, renowned environmental entrepreneur Paul Hawken, author of *Natural Capitalism*, *The Ecology of Commerce*, and *Growing a Business*, describes the way in which the necessary deep, systemic change is already underway, taking place in a multitude of places and a multitude of forms around the world. While some reviewers have dismissed the book as “preaching to the choir,” its strength is that it offers us hope for the future. While national governments have been distressingly slow to acknowledge global ecological degradation, Hawken shows how local nonprofits and communities have themselves shouldered the task of societal transformation.

The first 190 pages of the book consist of nine thoughtfully choreographed chapters that lead the reader from Hawken’s initial impetus for the book project, on through to our current global project of ecological restoration. The first chapter, “The Beginning,” reveals the way in which, due to his frequent speaking engagements, Hawken slowly became aware of the scope and depth of myriad small nonprofit social/environmental justice projects around the world. He describes the people involved with these

projects as “working on the most salient issues of our day: climate change, poverty, deforestation, peace, water, hunger, conservation, human rights” (1). Hawken claims that he wrote the book to discover what he didn’t know and that:

Part of what I learned concerns an older quiescent history that is reemerging, what poet Gary Snyder calls *the great underground*, a current of humanity that dates back to the Paleolithic. Its lineage can be traced back to healers, priestesses, philosophers, monks, rabbis, poets, and artists who speak for the planet, for other species, for interdependence, a life that courses under and through and around empires. (5)

It is this spirit, the continuity and endurance of a powerful and decent human will to survive, that permeates the book. Despite regimes of power and the rise and fall of nations, a certain percentage of people have always quietly gone about the business of doing what needs to be done. And in this age of widespread human-caused ecological holocaust—what the World Watch Institute, ICUN Red List, and American Museum of Natural History identify as the sixth and fastest mass extinction in our planet’s history—it can give each one of us hope that the dream of restoration is attainable.

The second chapter, “*Blessed Unrest*,” considers some of the deep ecological problems we are experiencing and contrasts those problems against the tripling of our population since 1900. It took modern homo sapien perhaps 250,000 years to reach a global population of 1 billion people by the year 1900CE. Yet just 100 years later our population has exploded to over 6 billion. Writes Hawken:

Evolution is not about design or will; it is the outcome of constant endeavors made by organisms that want to survive and better themselves...evolution arises from the bottom up—so, too, does hope...this book asks whether a significant portion of humanity has found a new series of adaptive traits and stories more alluring than the ideological fundamentalisms that have caused us so much suffering. (25)

Hawken’s pensive consideration of our ecological condition and the phenomena of a rising systemic grassroots social response is extensive. In chapters three through seven he painstakingly stitches together many complex pieces: a compelling history of the Western environmental tradition; a scrutiny of the relationship of business to our present predicament; insight to Ralph Waldo Emerson’s influence on Henry David Thoreau and Mahatma Gandhi and an interpretation of their contributions to the intelligence and compassion of the growing systemic grassroots social response; an examination of the 500-year old conflict between indigenous peoples and Western business interests, discussion of the value of indigenous knowledge and a reflection on the societal impoverishment—loss of knowledge, loss of interpretive perspective, loss of alternative societal form—that results when cultures and languages are extinct; and the significance of the World Trade Organization and the intense organized grassroots resistance to the WTO. This intriguing crazy-quilt of interrelationships sets the stage for the two

final and perhaps most compelling chapters.

In “Immunity” Hawken considers Sir James Lovelock’s Gaia Hypothesis—the notion that the earth has the same traits of self-organization and self-regulation common to any life form, thus the earth itself might be understood as a single, living organism. If we accept this premise, then, as with any organism threatened by disease, a systemic immune response is to be expected. Hawken emphasizes that the immune system operates below the level of consciousness: it is a natural bodily response. What if the expanding systemic grassroots social response that Hawken notices is a sort of planetary immune response to the sustained human assault on its global ecosystems? His inquiry here is especially intriguing and intricate—and begins to pull the sundry pieces of the book together like a drawstring. Finally, in “Restoration” the drawstring pulls taut and the focus sharpens: we are living in an age of new beginning. While the industrial revolution and all its various colonizations and technological innovations have brought us to where we are today, the job now is to restore our health. Says Hawken, “we *are* nature; a realization that stopped Emerson dead in his tracks in Paris, and it may stop us in ours. We live in community, not alone, and any sense of separateness that we harbor is illusion. Humans are animals, albeit extraordinary ones, and have no special immunity conferred upon them. Given the present rate of planetary pollution and destruction, we need to negotiate a *détente* with nature and with ourselves” (171). The hope Hawken offers is that:

Just as *life assembles into chains*, nonprofits aggregate either by linking up interests, people, or communities, or by linking to related organizations. The building blocks of all life forms are polymers, long chains of smaller units...the social polymers are profuse and include women’s rights, wetlands, wildlife corridors, water, waste reduction, wealth disparity reduction, wind power, workers’ rights and women’s health—and these are just some of the areas that begin with “w.” (176)

Concludes Hawken, “life tends to optimize rather than maximize” (183). The hope he sees is that the planetary immune response manifesting as myriad, self-organizing nonprofit social/environmental groups will, in the end, lead to the restored health of our planetary ecosystems, our societies, and our communities. This response he recognizes as a “large-scale spiritual awakening.” In marked contrast to today’s dogmatic traditions, Hawken suggests that perhaps the rising systemic grassroots social response is similar in quality to the origins of some of our great religions. That the original goal for those ancient individuals whom we now see as great teachers, prophets, mystics, and sages “was to foster a compassionate society, and the question of whether there was an omnipotent God was irrelevant to how one might lead a moral life. They asked their students to question and challenge and, as opposed to modern religion, to take nothing on faith...they did not proselytize, sell, urge people to succeed, give motivational sermons, or harangue sinners. They urged their followers to change how they behaved in

the world” (184).

This dogged movement toward change, manifested as the organic growth of myriad grassroots social change groups, is the “unrest” Hawken calls “blessed”: an innate human urge to lead a compassionate and moral life.

The nine chapters are followed by a 140-page appendix that introduces the reader to a sampling of the organizations that have their projects linked to Hawken’s community networking website WiserEarth.org. In developing this complex, freely accessible online networking database, Hawken walks his talk. *Blessed Unrest* offers an explanation for our current predicament and hope that there is a way out. WiserEarth.org provides a means of connection, communication, and networking that can accelerate the spontaneous collaborations of social/environmental justice organizations that Hawken sees as leading to the way out.

I’ve enjoyed reading *Blessed Unrest* quite a bit. Hawken has given me a lot to think about, has made a number of unexpected and compelling connections, and has drawn some interesting conclusions. Is it perfect? The book is decidedly Western and decidedly masculine, and the perspective constructed to some extent certainly mirrors those views. Yet for my two cents, it’s a thoughtful reflection that anyone curious about our ecological future will want to factor into their kit bag of awarenesses.

Anne Mareck is a postdoctoral fellow and Associate Director of the Writing Program at the University of Kentucky in Lexington. Her interests include rhetorics of technology and environment, writing sustainability across the curriculum, and professional and environmental communication. Her poetry has appeared in *Trumpeter* and *Pank*, and her chapter, “Acquiring Biospheric Literacy” was included in the 2009 collection *Rhetorics, Literacies, and Narratives of Sustainability*.