

BOOK REVIEW

Blessed unrest: how the largest movement in the world came into being and why no one saw it coming

By Paul Hawken

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Blessed Unrest: How the Largest Movement in the World Came into Being and Why No One Saw it Coming is environmentalist Paul Hawken's explanation and celebration of worldwide anti-globalization activism. Though there are millions of nonprofit groups and community organizations dedicated to a myriad of different causes, Hawken ties them together into one collective entity loosely described as an "environmental and social justice movement". He likens the decentralized movement to the human immune system, with civil society "antibodies" combining to defend life on earth from greedy and rapacious corporations. Hawken also offers a very comprehensive classification system - in the form of an appendix - outlining a diversity of interconnected socio-political concerns ranging from global governance all the way down to the seemingly obscure "light and noise pollution".

It is hard to imagine a more extreme, almost fundamentalist perspective on the subject of globalization. This is ironic considering that Hawken goes out of his way to condemn religious and ideological fundamentalism and implies that globalization is an outgrowth of a mixture of Western, free market, and Christian fundamentalisms. Hawken repeatedly returns to a Manichean theme of enlightened social activism (a "blessed" form of unrest, as the title implies) versus wicked corporate profiteering. In Hawken's hackneyed worldview, virtually all business and corporate activity as we know it is oriented toward exploiting workers, poisoning natural resources, and destroying local economies. He gives no quarter to any corporation, save the one in which the CEO has confessed to past sins and done his penance by joining an environmental sustainability council under President

Clinton. Groups of social and ecological policy activists, on the other hand, are referred to as "congregations" who are in the process of "healing the wounds of the earth" (again, inflicted by corporations). Continuing his use of odd, quasi-religious imagery, Hawken calls this earth-healing "a sacred act" in which the activists repair "sanctuaries" of life on earth from those commercial enterprises that threaten to "destroy these biological arks".

Hawken stands against the entire Western system of markets and property rights that is responsible for the industrial revolution, flourishing of world commerce, and high living standards in the 21st century. He prefers a collectivist system of small, localized production, somewhat akin to autarky, that is vaguely more virtuous due to what he considers a greater harmonization with nature. Though international trade is not condemned per se, self-sufficiency is hailed as the highest virtue and even described as "a human right." This naturally leads to a question Hawken never addresses: does one individual's assertion of the right to self-sufficiency trump another's desire to trade internationally? Hawken seems unconcerned that some essential commodities, goods and services might simply be unavailable in remote communities if the so-called human right to self-sufficiency is meaningfully enforced. Hawken's preferred system offers no remedy to consumers, businesses, or communities, except for civil unrest, if governmental powers are used to protect certain local producers from competition under the guise of promoting human rights.

While it would not be entirely accurate to characterize Hawken as a neo-Luddite opponent of technological progress, he reveals himself to be a sympathizer with the actual Luddites in England during the early

1800s. This group of textile weavers protested the use of new, wide-framed mechanical looms that could be operated by lower-skilled workers and threatened to displace established weavers from their jobs. The Luddites resorted to violence, destroying mechanical looms, burning down textile mills, and making death threats to mill owners. While the Luddites are usually remembered as short-sighted opponents of progress, Hawken calls them proud artisans who were justifiably concerned about the infringement on their rights by the new technology being employed by the greedy mill owners. He laments that the Luddites' fundamental question - What is progress without full employment? - "has yet to be answered satisfactorily". Evidently, his definition of full employment does not include unskilled laborers, who would have lost their jobs if employers had met the Luddite demand that all weavers complete seven years of job training prior to employment.

In some places, *Blessed Unrest* comes off as a smear-laden harangue. Hawken compares "conservative spokesmen," presumably people who defend modern business and trade, to defenders of slavery in the 1800s. Such a comparison is not an argument, but an insult. Hawken does not define the pejorative "conservative," which could just as easily apply to former US presidential candidate Patrick Buchanan, who is every bit as opposed to free trade and globalization as Hawken. In an additional smear, Hawken cites another author to the effect that "business unchecked becomes criminal. Consider Russia. Look at Enron, Tyco, Unocal, Worldcom". The statement is not developed further, but mentioned off-handedly as if it were alone sufficient to prove that unregulated markets are the cause of dishonesty and theft. Yet Hawken fails to mention that Russia's economy is not a capitalist system but rather one of oligarchic cronyism.

Likewise, Hawken mistakenly assumes that some high profile misdeeds of US corporations are attributable to a completely unfettered free market in the US rather than a system of corporate statism. His understanding of corporate wrongdoing would be better informed by referencing Timothy P. Carney's *The Big Ripoff: How Big Business and Big Government Steal Your Money*, (2006), which details the ways in which large corporations use regulatory maneuvers to advantage themselves at the expense of competitors and consumers in the marketplace. Specifically with regard to Enron, Carney shows that the company's apparent early business success was facilitated by numerous government subsidies, rulings, and policies that tilted the playing field in Enron's favor, including accounting standards that helped Enron defraud investors and shareholders.

The misguided attribution of economic failures to free market policies extends to Hawken's perception of the World Bank. In several places, Hawken erroneously depicts the World Bank as a fanatical proponent of free market capitalism. At one point, he calls economists at this institution "true believers" for whom "markets are exquisitely calibrated mechanisms that always work perfectly". He claims that the World Bank is guided by "the theory that unimpeded market-based systems deliver more goods to more people than any other method". Perhaps he is relying on the Bank's occasional lip service paid to markets, which does not prevent it in actual practice from recommending extensive market interventions to borrower governments. Almost in the same breath as he is denouncing the Bank's free market zealotry, Hawken approvingly cites a policy paper co-written by World Bank economist Augusto de la Torre (entitled 'Washington Contentious: Economic Policies for Social Equity in Latin America') laying out numerous policy recommendations, including more social and educational spending by government, more expansive workers' rights, redistribution of land, protection of small businesses from competition, and higher taxes on the rich. From this example, it is hard to see why Hawken considers World Bank economists true believers in anything except heavy interventionism.

Hawken is all too aware of the World Bank's dismal track record around the world. He recounts a parade of horrors committed by the institution. "In borrower countries - including Bolivia, Argentina, Haiti, India, Brazil, Mexico, Ecuador, and South Africa - the indigenous and the poor have initiated countless protests against the corruption, political cronyism, privatization schemes, job losses, environmental destruction, human rights violations, deracination, mega-dams, and loss of sovereignty brought about by the World Bank." Unfortunately, Hawken fails to connect the World Bank's development fiascos to its bureaucratic role as a central planner of economic development. He prefers instead to assert indignantly that the World Bank's failures are the consequence of a *laissez faire* policy orientation. But then again, the misconception that a "juggernaut of free market fundamentalism" has created a totally *laissez-faire* world financial system pervades the entire book.

The notion of the World Bank as a bastion of free market economics is also hard to square with the stated purpose of the organization: to provide subsidized loans and grants to developing countries in order to alleviate poverty and promote sustainable development. Thus, its very *raison d'être* is to make loans to finance development projects that cannot attract financing from the private

sector. If, against all evidence, the anti-globalization NGO movement considers the bank to be a government-funded promoter of free market policies, Hawken neglects to explain why nearly all the major green NGOs continue to support US government funding of the institution. As the bank has made rhetorical gestures toward environmental sustainability, the most influential NGOs have clung to a piecemeal strategy of lobbying the World Bank to withdraw financial support for only the most objectionable individual development projects. Indeed, they appear to favor substantially increasing World Bank lending and development planning overall. It would have been useful to hear specifically whether Hawken believes the World Bank, which he correctly criticizes as a tool of well-connected corporate interests, should be abolished. When Hawken calls for enlarging the concept of the separation of church and state “to include the separation of corporation and state,” he appears open to the idea of dismantling the World Bank, IMF, and World Trade Organization, which he savages as instruments of “corporate-sponsored totalitarianism fed by religious zealotry”.

Blessed Unrest serves well as a self-righteous tribute to the global environmental and social justice movements. It also serves as a well developed elaboration of the perspective which informs radical and sometimes violent anti-globalization activism around the world. However, Hawken is more interested in preaching to the converted than in making a convincing case against either economic freedom or globalization. In short, *Blessed Unrest* is unlikely to persuade anyone not already committed to an implacably anti-corporate worldview.

References

Carney, T.P. 2006. *The Big Ripoff: How Big Business and Big Government Steal Your Money*. New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons.