

Book Review

Paul Hawken, *Blessed Unrest: How the Largest Social Movement in History is Restoring Grace, Justice and Beauty to the World*, Penguin Books, 2007.

1. Introduction

According to Paul Hawken (author of *The Ecology of Commerce*) “human ecology examines the relation between human systems and their environment” (p. 67). It is not surprising, therefore, that readers of *Blessed Unrest* (BU) will discover many powerful resonances between the book and ideas associated with this journal (cf. Zeleny [6]). However, they are presented in a different context and for somewhat different purposes. Starting with the title of the book, the phrase “grace, justice and beauty” quickly brings to mind Zeleny’s earlier account of “beauty quality and harmony” in the world of advanced for-profit manufacturing. In BU, however, there is an enduring emphasis on forms of justice (i.e. distributive, social and environmental). It tells the story of *The Movement*, that is, the “one – and maybe even two – million” (p. 2) civil-society organizations who are currently pursuing hundreds of inter-related social and environmental causes (listed in the book’s Appendix and at wiserearth.org). These causes range from agro-ecology to watershed management and encompass corporate governance reform, health care access, cultural diversity and sustainable community building, to mention but a few. With the movement always as its subject, BU illustrates endorses and develops many tenets of HSM, such as:

(i) *Self-organization*: The movement is coherent, organic and self-organizing (p. 3). Yet it is also dispersed and inchoate. It is fiercely independent and has no overriding authority to check with.

(ii) *Organization as organism*: In the chapter *Immunity* the defensive strategies of a single biological organism are likened to the movement’s collective activity. By implication, the only qualification for joining is the action-based know-how or competence of the non-profit entity; just like the “cells” of an “amoeba” for-profit organization, or as Zeleny once put it, the cells of a cellular slime mould.

(iii) *Autopoesis*: In *Restoration* we are reminded by Paul Hawken of the evolutionary principle that “life

creates the conditions that are conducive to life”, as has also been explained most effectively in Robert Axelrod’s *Evolution of Cooperation* and depicted in Zeleny’s *autopoietic* cycle of production, bonding and degradation. Biological principles such as these provide us with “a framework to bring a different vocabulary” to productive enterprise; one that contrasts profoundly with the “slaughter of language” that Arundito Roy once attributed to contemporary managerialism.

(iv) *Optimality*: Later in the same chapter we read that “maximization is another word for addiction” and that “life tends to optimize, rather than maximize”. In a sense, the theme of *de novo* optimization pervades almost all of Hawken’s works. By my reading BU also poses (but does not really solve) the problem of how to overcome a tradeoff at the *macro*-level, between:

objective 1. Financial capital formation through Adam Smith style efficiency and division of labor in a global economy, and

objective 2. Ecological and social capital formation, through the fostering of what McKibben [3] has referred to as a “deep economy” based on biological principles and community relationships.

(v) *Social capital*: According to Zeleny, the “enabling infrastructure of institutions and values” in any society is a prerequisite for an accumulation of financial, human and ecological capital. BU makes a rather different claim: that the “value” of distributive justice (a component of social capital) and the formation of ecological capital “must” always go hand in hand.¹ According to Hawken, “the only way we are going to put out the (environmental) fire is to get on the social justice bus . . . because . . . there is only one bus” (p. 190) and this is essentially because “*how we treat one another is reflected in how we treat the Earth*” (p. 2). Hawken also diligently points out that this equation of social and environmental activity is by no means new. He cites the book *Silent Spring* by the biologist Rachel

¹ Despite the different emphasis and priorities, HSM would concur with BU that corporations should not fund “so-called think tanks” such as the *American Council for (financial) Capital Formation* that he says “work diligently to . . . corporatize how science is perceived” (p. 65) and hence upset efforts to achieve an optimum.

Carson (1962) who “stood firmly in the tradition of the demand of social and environmental justice that extends back to concerns about . . . health during the industrial revolution”.

(vi) *Live capital*: Hawken also considers that “business rights are illegitimate if they . . . extirpate . . . forms of life. HSM does not say much about rights *per se* but there is implicit agreement to the extent that “live capital” formation is mandated. This is the re-invested monetary earnings of a productive “living” enterprise (arguably also a contribution to ecological capital), or the incremental assets used by an enterprise to co-produce its future-self and its (properly valued) market offerings. In contrast “dead” capital “has as its main purpose payments to owners” and it includes profits from speculative trades and manipulations. HSM and BU agree that these ought to be discouraged.

(vii) *Purpose of enterprise*: HSM and BU are also in complete agreement that the purpose of enterprise is twofold; that is, self-production (through the sustenance and co-production of a support network) and service to society. However, the interpretation of “service” is significantly broader in BU, in line with its emphasis on social and environmental justice.

(viii) *Ideology*: Hawken notes a common misunderstanding that “movements” only exist when they have an ideological or religious core. The Movement differs from previous ones, because it does not have any ideology (p. 6). There is no manifesto nor any doctrine. The member organizations “craft their own goals” without reference to any orthodoxy (i.e. they are purposeful systems, in Ackoff’s terminology). Likewise, according to Zeleny, “HSM is *not an ideology*”. It describes a natural and spontaneous productive system² that “comes to life when ideological pressures and limitations cease”.

(ix) *Heritage*: In BU, as in HSM, the Economists Freidrich Hayek and Kenneth Boulding have received special mention. Hawken endorses Hayek’s views that viable social institutions have to co-evolve (i.e., without expressing ideology) and that “information and the right to make decisions” ought to be co-located because this provides society with “a remedy for . . . the totalitarian impulse” (p. 157). These views remain highly relevant to the structure and (sometimes totalitarian) conduct of transnational corporations. With that in mind, Hawken once asked some U.S. managers to

‘design a spaceship’ (Boulding introduced the concept of *Spaceship Earth* in 1965). In the course of this exercise, they formed the opinion that it was “unacceptable” to have a few inhabitants of the spaceship owning a large percentage of the resources on the “ship”. Previously, they had all regarded that arrangement on Earth as having “nothing to do with environment” (p. 176) or as a justified defense against Communism.

2. Divergence

HSM has applied the above ideas to a system of competitive enterprise, whilst BU relates them squarely to distributive justice and the environment. The book accordingly complements and completes the HSM project (cf. Singer [5]). Throughout, BU places greater emphasis on the moral dimension, that is, the exercise of imaginative sympathy and the stretching of benevolence. Indeed, there are several philanthropic “real billionaires in the movement”, duly acknowledged. This distinction between BU and HSM is perhaps most apparent in their treatments of the concept of culture, where BU writes at length about the plight of indigenous peoples around the World.

BU regards indigenous cultures in much the same way that HSM regards modern enterprises. They are valuable expressive achievements and they ought to be protected and encouraged. They are also, in a sense, alive, as in an ecology-of-culture. In *Indigene* (p. 96) Hawken quotes with disapproval the well-known historian (and former chancellor of Oxford University) Hugh Trevor Roper, who once wrote that “the function of native cultures . . . is to show to the present an image of the past from which history has escaped”. Hawken (p. 99) takes exception to this, suggesting instead that “indigenous cultures may show us an image of the future by which we can escape our present”. That is, they can teach the industrialized world how to live in a more sustainable and communal way.

The story of the *Bagyeli* pigmies in Cameroon are amongst several such lessons. Their tribal way of life has been heavily damaged (by several accounts) by the construction of an oil pipeline through “their” native forests. This episode of “value-destruction” is held up in BU as a prime example of *non-ecological* commerce: the type generally associated with the global extractive industries, or more pointedly with “resource-hungry corporations . . . destroying . . . sanc-

²Although HSM and BU both advance some tenets that resonate with existing ideologies (cf. Singer [5]).

tuaries of life in the lands of indigenous cultures” (p. 7). Zeleny’s “dead” capital thereby becomes *deadly* capital and there is a corresponding sense throughout BU of the more oppressive aspects of globalization (e.g., Pilger [4]; Klein [1]). For example, BU mentions the “Association of Human Rights and Tortured Defenders” in Cameroon, a member (or node) of *The Movement* that is not mentioned in the somewhat sanitized Business Ethics textbooks.

3. Wreckage

It seems a bit unfair to blame corporations *per se* or their managers for all such violations. One might argue that more emphasis needs to be placed in BU (and HSM) on the destructive behavior of billions of consumers around the World, specifically their (our) inability to narrow the gap between expressed preferences and longer term well-being (this being one of the standard limitations of market based systems, as well as a prominent theme in Utilitarian moral theory). Arguably, this “gap” is what’s really causing the “one bus” to sputter along or stall.

It would be exciting to read more from Paul Hawken about this, in the future. Meanwhile, I would venture to suggest that, given a choice between eating (i) a \$1 double-cheeseburger (from the “value” menu) and (ii) half a \$1.99 stick of broccoli from a farmer’s market, most people, indigenous or itinerant, would freely choose the former, even when fully informed. So it is slightly uncomfortable to read Hawken’s “story of fast food” that tells of:

... a path of wreckage that starts with chemical factory shipments to the farm, proceeds through inhumane slaughterhouses to ... factories churning out uniform buns ... to numbed minimum wage workers, and ends up in hospital in the form of obesity, diabetes and heart attacks – an allegory of modernity (p. 155).

Given the situation on the ground and in the cities, does not fast food also trace a path of affordable hunger relief? As McKibben [3] has implied, up to a certain level of income the well-being conferred by cheap food (and the like) is some compensation for the harms that are caused along the way. Indeed, loss-leaders like the \$1-double might be described as a kind of food-aid, made possible by carefully crafted efficiencies along a global value chain, rather than any stretching of benevolence. Under that description, the case against fast

food is not so cut-and-dried (or fried). As with sweatshops, critics need to do something about the “mute testimony of lines of job applicants” (cf. Maitland [2]).

In this sense, arguably, globalization helps the poor. In “*Deep Economy*” Bill McKibben [3] estimated the relevant level of “poverty” at around \$10k p.a., far above the \$2 a day mark. Even for those with high incomes, well-lit fast food restaurants often function as reasonably pleasant and productive social venues, something that Paul Hawken would approve of in sustainable contexts. Few, however, would now disagree with his insights that “*Business unchecked becomes criminal*” and that “commerce requires (government and civil society) to make it pay attention (p. 135)”.

The question remains as to how to re-align Adam Smith with Paul Hawken, so to speak. How can a global low-cost economy be nudged into a symbiotic or synergistic relationship with ecology and community? As a speculative thought, might it be possible to re-cast the hyper-competition model of business strategy into the social or “welfare” sphere? One can envision a few hyper-efficient well-regulated global producer entities serving the real needs of the “more is better” segment (which includes everyone ‘for a limited time’). *The Movement* and swarms of small eco-businesses then strive to establish a symbiotic relationship with the entities, like the fish that eat parasitic worms off the body of a docile shark in complete safety.

4. Conclusion

Early on in *Blessed Unrest*, the story is told of a 2500 year old giant Sequoia tree in the USA that was felled in 1852. “The trunk was later made smooth and was used as a bowling alley” whilst “the stump became an outdoor dance floor that could comfortably accommodate sixteen couples” (p. 38). It is evidence of general moral progress that this could not be done do now, although BU makes it clear that there is still a very long way to go. With couples and moral progress in mind, readers of BU from the UK and Europe might not fully appreciate the significance of the first word “Blessed” in the book’s title. Being blessed is still a very big deal in the USA, where a recent sea-change in attitude amongst evangelical Christian leaders (as well as many businesses) is seen by environmentalists as a giant step forward for mankind. The evangelicals are now calling for “massive efforts to address

climate change”. Hawken points out that a professor of atmospheric physics at Oxford University, Sir John Houghton is an evangelical Christian who co-chaired a working group that reported recently to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. Nonetheless, in the UK more generally and in Europe (if not Asia) a more culturally-sensitive title such as “*Ecology without Ideology*” might be even more effective in maximizing the readership, which is a most worthwhile objective.

References

- [1] N. Klein, *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism*, Metropolitan Books, New York, 2007.
- [2] I. Maitland, The great non-debate over international sweatshops, *BAM Annual Conference Proc.*, 1997, pp. 240–265.
- [3] B. McKibben, *Deep Economy: The Wealth of Communities and the Durable Future*, Holt, New York, 2007.
- [4] J. Pilger, *Hidden Agendas*, New Press, New York, 1999.
- [5] A.E. Singer, Human systems management and the advancement of humane ideals, in: *Knowledge and Wisdom: Advances in MCDM & HSM*, Y. Shi, ed., IOS Press, Dordrecht, 2007.
- [6] M. Zeleny, *Human Systems Management: Integrating Knowledge Management and Systems*, World Scientific, New Jersey, 2005.

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