

REVIEW ESSAY

Can We? The Audacity of Environmental Hope

Review by Michael M. Bell



Friedman, Thomas L. 2008. *Hot, Flat, and Crowded: Why We Need a Green Revolution and How It Can Renew America*. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux.

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



For anybody other than the oil companies and the pipework of interests they support, the Bush-Cheney years were a dark time. Especially so for environmentalists: As readers of *Nature and Culture* will know all too well, George Bush had a chainsaw-and-brush view of the environment, there only to be cleared for business. And even more so for American environmentalists: After the glory years of the 1960s and 1970s, in which the Federal government and the individual states passed one landmark environmental act after another, the lamplight of environmental progress started running out of wick in the 1980s and 1990s, and guttered to a flicker during the two Bush-Cheney administrations. American environmentalists could only look with envy at the way governments elsewhere embraced the reality of climate change, launched nationwide efficiency initiatives, ramped up schemes for greening agriculture, maintained at least modest support for public transit and good urban planning, made genuine efforts to bring justice and sustainability together, and took international cooperation seriously.

These two widely read books—eco-entrepreneur Paul Hawken’s 2007 *Blessed Unrest* and *New York Times* columnist Thomas Friedman’s 2008 *Hot, Flat, and Crowded*—try to shake this dismal mood. Hawken is more the preacher, inspiring the faithful with motivational and sometimes quasi-religious language about the virtue of the “peo-





ple who want to save the entire sacred, cellular basis of existence—the entire planet and all its inconceivable diversity” and “the living intelligence that creates miracles every second, carried forth by a movement with no name” (2007: 8, 190). Friedman is more the marketer, peppering his pages with slogans and cute catchphrases seemingly intended to appeal to an audience of suburban-living business people suffering from iPhones, short-haul flights, children’s soccer games, and other attention deficit disorders. He used his favorites for chapter titles like “Green Is the New Red, White, and Blue,” “Global Weirding,” “The Energy Internet: When IT Meets ET,” “If It Isn’t Boring It Isn’t Green,” and “The Stone Age Didn’t End Because We Ran out of Stones.” In either tonality, the main effort is to find the same resonance that President Obama sounded so masterfully in his election campaign, with its famous motto “yes we can,” and in his books, *Dreams from My Father* and *The Audacity of Hope*. Hawken attempts it through a you-are-not-alone optimism, underscored by his claim that environmentalism represents “the largest social movement in history,” as the book’s subtitle proclaims, composed of at least a million environmental organizations worldwide, he estimates. Friedman seeks it through an America-the-land-of-opportunity boosterism that he morphs into environmentalism-the-land-of-opportunity, calling for “America to get its ‘groove’ back” and take up the mantle of world leadership in creating the ethical, innovative new technologies that will lead to a sustainable future—and a more profitable one, he constantly reminds his readers. For “America is always at its most powerful and most influential when it is combining innovation and inspiration, wealth-building and dignity-building, the quest for big profits and the tackling of big problems” (5–6). In either articulation, call it the audacity of environmental hope.

I am all in favor of environmental hope, and of audacity. I am all in favor of grassroots environmental groups here, there, and everywhere. I am all in favor of reminding business people that ecology and economy should be united, as the British sociologist Raymond Williams (1980) observed many years ago, and that sometimes you really can make money doing good. I am also all in favor of encouraging pride, however real or false, in American creativity and of trying to direct it toward better ends. But as I write, the coming of the Obama administration makes both books feel already dated.

On the one hand, we have shed the carapace of Bush-Cheney. Hawken’s plea to hold on because we’re with you now seems unnec-

essary. The U.S. elected a president who links climate change, energy security, economic prosperity, and world peace in his speeches, and whose wife promptly planted an organic garden in the White House lawn. No less, Obama is a former community organizer who in the 1980s did some of the early work on environmental justice issues, before it was called that, helping the tenants of the Altgeld Gardens housing project in Chicago with a grassroots campaign to get officials to remove the asbestos from their homes. He is also a former university law professor—not a former oil company executive or even a former businessman. Friedman’s exhortation for America to get “its identity back, not to mention its self-confidence” and to be “again leading the world on the most important strategic mission and values issue of the day” (25) likewise feels somewhat after the fact. The American electorate in the fall of 2008 did something that no other rich nation has done or thought possible: elected a black man as its head of state and government. In the process, the country scrambled not only the old racial hierarchies but also those of religion by electing a candidate with a Muslim father and a Muslim name to the highest office in a land in which three-quarters of the population self-identifies as Christian. This is world leadership, and it is my sense at this moment—I am writing in the summer of 2009—that the center of American public opinion feels it to be exactly that. We are proud of what we did.

On the other hand, although the conditions for environmental progress seem more auspicious than they have since the first two years of the Clinton-Gore administration (when an avowed environmentalist sat as vice president and a Democratic majority held both houses of Congress with almost exactly the strength of what Obama now enjoys) there is reason to worry that once again little will come of it. True, the science wars seem over in the Environmental Protection Agency, the Goddard Institute for Space Studies, and other environmental branches of the US government. True, it seems that environmental civil servants are now being allowed to do their jobs. True, the flow of Federal grants for environmental research is picking up once again. These are changes in both political climate and environmental substance that all environmentalists applaud, and are a huge relief. Yet they represent restoration more than advance. Forward motion still depends on navigating the complex shoals of interest politics.

The climate change bill narrowly passed by the House of Representatives on 26 June 2009, is, as I write, the most notable case in point—the American Clean Energy and Security Act of 2009, or ACES,



as it is officially known, which proposed a modified cap-and-trade system for U.S. emissions of greenhouse gases. In order to pick up its 219 to 212 vote margin in the House, the bill's promoters wound up giving away 85 percent of the pollution credits for free. Even though Obama stated on the campaign trail that all of the credits in a cap-and-trade system should be auctioned rather than given away, he did not insist on this standard during the House debate. After the bill passed, Friedman (2009) wrote in his *New York Times* column that "It is pathetic that we couldn't do better. It is appalling that so much had to be given away to polluters. It stinks. It's a mess. I detest it." This view was widely shared in the environmental community, at least privately. Publicly, though, most of the major organizations held their noses and supported the bill. So did Friedman, who went on in his column to say "Now let's get it passed in the Senate and make it law. Why? Because, for all its flaws, this bill is the first comprehensive attempt by America to mitigate climate change by putting a price on carbon emissions."

When this article appears, the debate in the Senate will likely be over, and probably some kind of bill will have been passed there, made it through conference committee to the president's desk, and now be law. And it is not unreasonable to hazard a guess that the final outcome of the legislation will still leave environmentalists feeling largely disappointed—still feeling that it was, as Friedman put it, "pathetic that we couldn't do better."

Hawken, I think, would respond much the same way, for both books share another characteristic, one that is common in environment writing, especially environmental writing directed at a broad readership: a gushing idealism that lapses easily into political naïveté. "We need to redefine green and rediscover America and in so doing rediscover ourselves and what it means to be Americans," writes Friedman in his final paragraph. "We are all Pilgrims again. We are all sailing on the *Mayflower* anew" (412). For Hawken "to salve the world's wounds demands a response from the heart." In his view, "It is our nature to cultivate life, and this movement is a collective kindness produced over the course of four million millennia" (188–89). Both books are clearly meant to be political, with Hawken's use of the words "unrest," "social movement," and "justice" in his title and subtitle, and Friedman's use of "revolution" and "renew" in his. But rediscovering ourselves and collective kindness, however worthy these passions may be, do not strike me as effective political strategies, at least on their own.

There is an old observation among sociologists: people often profess something quite different from what they do. Attitudes and behaviors frequently match up rather poorly. This is a common observation not just among sociologists but among people arguing with each other about the affairs of family, friends, and work, or puzzling over the course of current events in the news. When we are aware of a mismatch in ourselves, ideological discomfort is the common result. The campaigner for a cause tries to promote such discomfort either by pointing out a mismatch or by changing attitudes to create a mismatch where one did not previously exist. The campaigner's intent is that behavior will soon change to relieve the discomfort. Of course, cynics among us will quickly observe that the opposite can often happen, and perhaps more frequently than the converse: that we change our attitudes to fit our behavior, or rapidly drop the new attitudes suggested by the campaign or cause, with the same result.

Given that we all live amid the many conflicting constraints of our particular context, changing what we do often isn't easy. You can't take the bus to work if there isn't one, or safely ride your bike if you don't live in a city that accommodates bikes on the road or if you haven't acquired the skills and equipment to create that accommodation on your own. A few may make the push to get those skills and equipment. But most will find a way to explain their need to drive a car. For there are plenty of reasons, compelling enough in specific circumstances. Those drivers will soon find themselves stuck in the traffic jam of interests advocating for roads, biofuels, and control of the world's dwindling petroleum supplies, all to help them deal with those same specific circumstances.

Ideologically, the hang-in-there optimism and sober good cheer of Hawken and Friedman provide solace for the mismatch of attitudes and behaviors. It's alright to have a mismatch, they imply, because it is not your fault. And change is coming, if we work together. Then none of us will have these mismatches and we will all live ecologically sound lives.

As I said before, I am all in favor of environmental hope. Now let me add attitude change and working together to the list. I'm in favor of them, too. But the idealist leaves the politics at that. Hawken and Friedman want people to do the right things for the right reasons. They want people to believe in what they do. And they want people to pull together for common purpose. The trouble is the real world of human politics isn't like that. People don't always work well together. There



is disagreement. There is conflict. There is compromise. There is manipulation. There is power.

For my part, I will be content if people do the right thing environmentally for whatever reasons, right or wrong—or, more precisely, if they do what I regard as the right thing for whatever reasons. I will be content if others do the right thing environmentally not because they are trying to be good citizens of the world but because the circumstances of their lives are such that the right thing is the most convenient, economic, safe, or fun thing for them. I will be content if others take the bus not because they are trying to limit damage to the climate and the land, but because my city is organized so that this seems to the people to be the most sensible way to go about their day. I will be content if they install energy efficient lighting and consume food that is benevolent for animals and the land not because of a feeling of virtue but because that is all the stores sell. Rather than an environmentalism of virtue, this would be what I call *virtual environmentalism*: being environmentally good without having to be environmentally good (Bell 2009).

So how do we get there? The politics of virtual environmentalism does not require that we all agree about environmental problems. When many of us do agree, and culturally identify with a cause, that sure does make it a lot easier to bring about constructive change. Attitude change is indeed good, and I hope that Hawken's and Friedman's books help cultivate more environmental awareness and passion. But if in four million millennia of life on the planet we have only come this far in agreeing on what collective kindness is, can we really expect to complete the task anytime soon—even with the work of today's one million environmental organizations? The good news of virtual environmentalism is that we don't need to agree. We can do the same thing for different reasons, which may always be the case anyway.

In other words, virtual environmentalism is not virtual politics. It's the real article, with all the strange bedfellows and strange pillow talk politics entails. It's about not only trying to convince others to agree to what you want on your terms, but on theirs too. If either set of terms works, then great. Yes, it is extra great if you can convince them on your terms, and you should try. But if you are an environmentalist, then your terms also tell you that we don't have time to insist on convincing them that way. Human and environmental suffering is not something we have only a few years to save us from. It is here already.

So here's what you say: I have a way to make this easy, cheap, secure, enjoyable, or otherwise attractive. And you'd better really have a way.

You don't necessarily have to be nice about it, however. Suburban polite agreement alone won't save the planet. Call it the Chicago approach to environmental politics. When Saul Alinsky in the 1930s organized the people of the Back of the Yards district in inner city Chicago to fight for the clean-up of their run-down neighborhood, polluted by the Chicago stock yards, he wasn't advocating courteousness and gentleness. As he wrote in *Rules for Radicals*, "Only in the frictionless vacuum of a nonexistent abstract world can movement or change occur without that abrasive friction of conflict" (1971: 21). But the successful Chicago-style environmentalist also chooses the battles to fight, carefully analyzing the opportunities presented by the alliances and disjunctures that make up any political situation. My colleague, the community sociologist Randy Stoecker, calls it the "honey and vinegar" approach (cited in Bell 2009). I call it the *double politics* of prudently mixing consensus building and conflict building, making nice and making not nice, good cop and bad cop (Bell 2007, 2009).

I would have liked these two books better if Hawken and Friedman had spent some time analyzing the political opportunities for a double politics of virtual environmentalism. To his credit, Friedman does understand the power of government standards, regulations, and policies to guide people into riding the bus, installing energy efficient appliances, eating benevolently, and other boring aspects of being green, as he aptly puts it. And to both their credit, we do need a committed group of like-minded people with a strong environmental vision in order to have an environmental politics. Their books I do not doubt helped enlarge that group and helped the already committed gut it through a seriously rough patch. But democracy is much more complex than consensus building alone, or even than majority rule. As Obama put it during his campaign, "I'm from Chicago. I know politics. I'm skinny but I'm tough" (Kaufman 2008). Audacious environmentalists need to be skinny and tough too—even with Obama himself.



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