

Economic Watersheds

A speech to the Ella Baker Center for Human Rights' Solutions Salon, May 19, 2006, Oakland, California.

By Paul Hawken

My grandmother told me that when she was a girl in Santa Clara Valley, she would walk nine miles to the convent to go to school and between her house and the convent there was only one other house. So the Bay Area, like the entire continent, has gone through an amazing amount of change in a very short period of time.

Take a look back. Within one hundred and thirty years of Columbus' arrival in 1492, ninety-five million people who were the indigenous inhabitants, who had learned to make this an incredible North American, South American and Meso-American landscape, were gone. They died due to violence, slavery and disease.

And because they killed off the first set of people, the European settlers went to Africa to bring another indigenous people in to do their work. We forget all that. People say, "Ah well, it was back then."

It is not back then. It is now, because the same mindset that informed that conquest is present today. It's subtler, now. Majora Carter from Sustainable South Bronx calls it the top-down mentality.

When we look at communities like the South Bronx, or when we look at cities like Oakland, we are seeing a long historical trail. The social dislocation and injustice didn't just happen after the Second World War and it didn't happen by accident. It wasn't neighborhoods that were redlined. Whole communities were redlined.

And we are doing it right now in Ecuador, Bolivia, and the Amazon. Texaco, Chevron, Occidental have gone there and destroyed people's homes and uprooted them. It is the same pattern that has occurred for five hundred years. With oil prices at \$70 a barrel, with copper at a thirty-year high, gold at a thirty-year high, corporations are going to the last untouched places of the earth. Indigenous people control 19 per cent of the landmass of the earth. And that's where the companies are going.

Two Different Watersheds

What we see both in urban North America and South America is a consistent pattern of capitalization and decapitalization. A small group of people goes into a place, a land, a region and extracts the capital out of it, leaving a larger group of people who are decapitalized. That is to say their water, their homes, their land, their resources are polluted or they are poisoned. This happens consistently, again and again.

When you look at an American city, you see the world. You have one group of individuals and businesses that are concentrating financial capital: they have good lives, nice homes, nice neighborhoods, and good cars. They tend to elect the politicians, they tend to have control of the PACs, they tend to influence legislation, they tend to write the laws, they tend to get the earmarks in Congress that are passed in the budget. And then you have another group of people who experience being redlined in every sense of the word. They lead lives where money is taken out of their community, and sometimes the best and brightest people are removed from the community.

What you are seeing in America is two different watersheds. And what you see in the poor sections of American cities is what I call unhealthy economic watersheds. A healthy watershed – what does it do? It absorbs water quickly and releases it slowly into the environment. The retention of moisture, streams and lakes in an environment maintains and creates the conditions for life. And what is a sick watershed? It's a clear cut. It absorbs water very slowly, and it runs off very rapidly. You see exactly the same economic

phenomenon in cities. Cities have become unhealthy economic watersheds. The money comes in, it's gone. If you go shop at a big box retailer, 95percent of the money is in London the same night. The rest of it goes to staff and employees. And it is not just Wal-Mart. It is every big box retailer, every small national retailer too. In/out. Bye. See you later.

Green Cities

When we are talking about re-imagining a green city we are actually talking of making it a healthy economic watershed. What is it that we can do so the money that comes in stays for awhile? A healthy city plugs the leaks and closes the loops. It has to map what's coming in and what's going out. What's coming in isn't just goods and services. Molecular garbage is coming in. Disease is coming in. Pollution is coming in. All sorts of things are coming in. And where is it going? When does it leave?

Each city has its unique character and challenges, but there is one fact that remains consistent. What you'll find is huge sections of each town being decapitalized. What green cities offer is a way to start to change that.

Chattanooga Parking Lots

The city of Chattanooga faced a situation where they were polluting the Tennessee River and violating clean water standards. The solution on the table was an \$80 million dollar federally mandated secondary wastewater treatment plant. The city turned to a group of people knowledgeable about green issues and asked them what they could do.

A little background: Chattanooga is like a lot of cities. The planners went in the 1960s and tore down old historic buildings and put in parking lots in the hope that more people would come. To the contrary, it destroyed the downtown and people moved to the suburbs because the city became unsafe at night with virtually nobody there.

About this time there was going to be a re-development project where the city was going to take a brownfield site and turn it into a botanical garden in an industrial part of the city.

To pay for the plant, the city was going to charge companies a tax based on the square footage of their

roofs and parking lots. It was a difficult situation because the city wanted to attract business, not push it away with higher taxes. The group of consultants came up with a different solution, suggesting that businesses be taxed by the gallon of runoff. That kind of tax would provide an incentive for companies to control their runoff.

They suggested that the city should take all the parking lots and turn them into Park-ing lots. Instead of having the water run off into the street, put in permeable paving so that the water goes where it is supposed to go—into the ground. Then, take the most botanically diverse place in the United States—Tennessee, and plant and make the parking lots the botanical gardens of the city.

In the medians, put in trees to cover the cars so that you don't have the sun soaking into the hoods and pavement and the macadam acting as heat islands. Instead of spending \$80 million on secondary wastewater treatment plants, digging up all these streets and putting in PVC pipes, float a \$12 million dollar bond issue. Take income from that, and pay disadvantaged youth to maintain the parking lots and in the process learn to care for their native flora.

It was calculated that making the parking lots into parks for cars would lower the downtown temperature in Chattanooga during the summer. Downtown building owners would save \$4-5 million a year in utility costs. Meanwhile, the second wastewater treatment plant that would have cost \$5 million a year in energy to process the water wouldn't have to be built at all. That's a net saving of close to \$10 million a year in energy costs.

Even though this didn't get implemented in Chattanooga, (although something similar was done in Canada) it demonstrates the kind of thinking we need to do.

Do you create a secondary water treatment plant, or make more parks? Who benefits? Do you send money to Fluor or Bechtel, in which case, you employ 12 people, you spend a lot of money on energy, and the city is no better off? Or do you go green and create hundreds of jobs, new parks, pleasant cityscapes, less energy use, and clean water?

Plugging the Leaks

You've got to start thinking of all these flows as



resources, even the ones you don't want. Basically Oakland is leaking, the Bronx is leaking. It's leaking energy, leaking money and resources. Those resources belong to Oakland. They don't belong to transnational corporations. They don't belong in the Bay. They don't belong to the rich. I remember a friend of mine who ran a school for so-called "children at risk" and I asked him how they did. He replied that they do well, but that his biggest problem was that many of the students didn't want to be there. I assumed he meant they didn't want to be at school, but he said no, they don't want to be here. Here... on earth. They want to leave. Essentially we have an economic system that is telling a lot of young people in this country and all over the world that their only value is as a consumer. Otherwise they don't have any value. And we wonder why they act that out.

What a green economy does is give families dignified, respectful jobs. And that's going to do more than anything you can possibly give in terms of social welfare programs. This earth needs to be

restored, and the people who have caused the harm—it's time for them to step aside. I'm glad when a corporation becomes responsible, but it's too late. Big institutions have had their time; they have had their stage. They have failed us.

I don't believe that much in capitalism, but I do believe in people doing business. Commerce is ancient. And as Gorbachev said once, commerce is an invention of civilization. Corporations were an invention of an oligarchy. Big difference.

The fact is grassroots movements are emerging in this country and all over the world. The only way we can restore the earth and green the economy is from the bottom-up. It's the way the body organizes, it's the way nature organizes, it's the only way we can organize something that will sustain and endure. The only way we can do it is through connectivity of small groups that are on the ground that care. That is the source of renaissance.

Paul Hawken is the author of numerous books including Natural Capitalism and The Ecology of Commerce.

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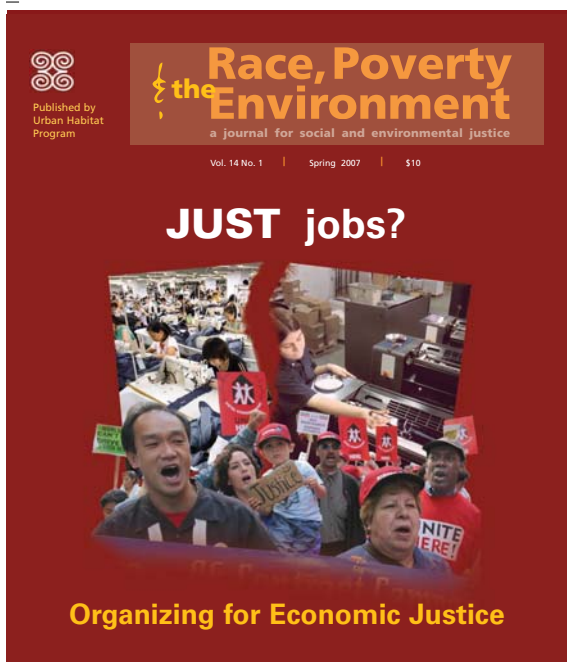
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