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### Book review: "Webs of Power: Notes from the Global Uprising"

Caryn Mirriam-Goldberg

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Notes on Starhawk's *Webs of Power: Notes from the Global Uprising*  
New Society Publishing, 2002

It was an all-too-familiar scene: my group, a bunch of well-meaning white people planning a continental ecological gathering, had just spent three long meetings discussing how to involve people of color in our event. After reviewing all the ways our group had tried, and failed, to diversify in the last twenty years, and after studying more about the struggles many of our local African-American, Latino and Native American friends and colleagues, we sat in the living room in a stupor.

Such moments have probably taken place in thousands of living rooms, community centers, churches, restaurants and other places where people involved in social change movements from the 60s antiwar efforts to the current antiglobalism demonstrations. Starhawk, in her new book *Webs of Power: Notes from the Global Uprising*, labels such a moment as “activist paralysis.” “The workshops, the consciousness raising, and the soul searching have not noticeably increased the racial diversity among many of the groups in question,” she explains, noting that our failure to forge truly multi-cultural social change organizations has sometimes dissolved into a kind of paralysis.

In light of this, she asks of the global justice movement, largely a white movement in North America, “How can we go where no social movement has gone before?” And she implores us to move beyond seeing any members of color as “Black Woman, or Validation On the Hoof” and beyond being hostage to “the language police,” the people in groups who hover “like a praying mantis, rubbing their hands in anticipation of a mistake they can pounce on.” (191)

While Starhawk goes on to offer some thoughtful approaches to breaking this paralysis and to truly building alliances and coalitions with people of color, her essay on “Building a Diverse Movement,” like many such essays in this combination field guide to global activism and memoir on life in the movement, raises questions that ripple into more questions. And that, as much as the very useful information she imparts on what G8, WTO, FTAA and other acronyms mean, is the value of this important guide for those already on board with a certain world view contrary to the mainstream: that increasing globalism is destroying the lives of many economically disadvantaged people on the planet and the life of the planet itself. As Starhawk explains:

“The whole ideology of ‘efficiency’ and ‘integration’ is aimed at shoring up an economic system in which no region is self-sufficient, in which the resources of the entire globe are available without restraint to corporations that wish to exploit them, and in which the entire world is one huge market open to all.”

The overall effect is a book that passionately and unabashedly preaches to the choir, but then again, such preaching on a regular basis keeps the choir in tune and ready to perform. That’s an important distinction in this book because those not already convinced of the importance of global activism would probably be hesitant to read a two-year-history of the movement’s beginning from protests in Seattle to current dilemmas over how to fight global corporate control in the post-9-11 world. Even though already familiar and comfortable with the intent of the global justice movement, which is what Starhawk renamed the antiglobalism protests. But what Starhawk offers here, from an insider perspective, complete with references to black-clad anarchists and witchcraft, is a multiple of wise and provocative discussions of global justice issues, and the general

and specific group process informing how people in the movement respond to these issues.

The first half of the book, “Actions,” composed of emails Starhawk wrote while in the trenches, tells of activism in Seattle, Washington, D.C., Prague, Brazil, Quebec City, Genoa, and in light of 9-11 is filled with urgency and passion. While Starhawk goes on, in the second half of the book, “Visions,” to discuss topics as our relationship to nature, how to practice and reinvigorate democracy, and why we need to rethink nonviolence as we practice it, it’s the actions taken – often conveyed in vivid vignettes – that provides the main juice here. Hearing what it was like to be pressed against a chain-link fence while getting tear-gassed in Quebec or, more alarming, hiding, as Starhawk and some comrades did, in sleeping bags while colleagues around them were beaten by the Italian police in Genoa communicates volumes about some of the specifics of this movement, and moreover, how movements in general gather steam and start rolling.

But what makes this half of the book so engaging is not just the subject matter; it’s the memoir-esque perspective Starhawk offers, sharing anecdotes and inner musings with as much ease as she discusses how she implored thousands of fellow activists to sit down while confronted by a herd of police on horses so that the horses wouldn’t trample them.

Starhawk, already well-known for her (BIOGRAPHICAL INFO), didn’t seek out the global justice movement. As a self-defined middle-aged Pagan, Witch, feminist, anarchist, and someone whose previous books have expounded the connections between spirituality, sexuality and political action, she writes,

“I went to Seattle reluctantly. I had more than enough commitments at home, both political and personal, to keep me busy. I went with somewhat the same attitude with which I used to go to synagogue as a child – thinking I would fulfill a somewhat unpleasant duty, feel absolved of my guilt for a little while, come home, and resume my life” (5).

Once there, she found herself swept into something that would unfold into many more trips, including one to Washington, D.C. (SET STAGE). There, she (EXPLAIN CIRCUMSTANCE) moments with a bit of whimsy and magic too:

“ ‘I must be a Witch,’ I said to Wilow after she finally found us toward the end of the morning. ‘I just disappeared eighty people!’ ” (40).

Balancing such moments are confrontations with real violence, despair and doubt, especially after 9-11 (EXPLAIN)

“‘Another World is possible!’” is the slogan created at the World Social Forum in Brazil in 2001. Another world is also necessary, for this one is unjust, unsustainable, and unsafe. It’s up to us to envision, fight for, and create that world, a world of freedom, real justice, balance, and shared abundance, a world woven in a new design.” (9)

Perhaps also another world where the struggle for diversity is replaced with an understanding of unity, and where the group in the living room can finally start to move toward changing themselves as they strive to change the world.

“The counterspell is simple: tell a different story. Pull back the curtain, expose their story for the false tale it is. Act ‘as if’ ....” – 155

Quotes:

“The stages could not be higher: at a time when every life support system on the planet is under assault, they may well include our own survival. I write in faith that we will marshal the creativity needed to move forward, and that a chronicle of the movement’s first two years will be of value” (4)

“I went to Seattle reluctantly. I had more than enough commitments at home, both political and personal, to keep me busy. I went with somewhat the same attitude with which I used to go to synagogue as a child – thinking I would fulfill a somewhat unpleasant duty, feel absolved of my guilt for a little while, come home, and resume my life” (5)

“The articles in the first section of this book were mostly written with a sense of immediacy and urgency. They were what I felt people needed to hear in the moment. They were written on airplanes, in spare moments of time between other events, late at night or early in the morning” (left them unedited) (6)

“The chapters in the second section of the book are my attempts to do deeper thinking about some key questions confronting the global justice movement” (7)

“But the word ‘power’ itself comes from a root that means ‘ability.’” (7)

“Identifying as a Pagan, feminist, Witch, and anarchist is possibly a way to alarm great segments of the general public, but at least it keeps me from sinking into a boring and respectable middle age” (8)

alphabet soup at beginning

“Seattle was a once-in-a-lifetime, world-changing event. It energized a whole new movement, radicalized thousands of new activists, and opened a whole new chapter in the history of resistance to corporate globalism.” (15)

“Seattle was only a beginning.” (21)

“Tom Hayden was quoted as saying (at height of Seattle), ‘A week ago, nobody knew what the WTO was. Now – they still don’t know what it is, but they know it’s bad.’” (21)

examples of what WTO does – 22

“But we know it is not enough to name the connections and identify the problems. It’s not enough even to put our bodies on the line to stand against injustice. We must work magic. We must hold a vision.” (31 – “Hermana Cristina’s Well”)

“This is a modest and possible vision. It requires no unknown technologies or new inventions. We already have the knowledge, the skills, the resources we need to make it come true.” (33)

example of

what tears movements apart – splintering – 42

reply to Molly Mayhem

list of what we need to do – pp. 61-62

living river in Quebec

tearing down fence – 87

“‘This action itself is a training ground. We’re just beginning’.” (89)

“There’s an ethic and strategy about nonviolence that’s clear and easy to understand: that violence begets violence; that if we resort to violence we will become what we’re fighting against; and that a nonviolent movement will win us more popular support, gain us legitimacy, heighten the contrasts between our movement and what we oppose, and perhaps even win over our opponents.



That's a powerful and persuasive set of values that I've held to for many years.  
But they're not the only values I sympathize with" (94)

diversity of tactics – 95

"I'm not suggesting some middle ground between the Gandhians and the black bloc. I'm saying that we're moving onto unmapped territory, creating a politics that has not yet been defined." (96)

lists – what we're trying to do, what empowered action might look like

"A Woman is Dead is Padua" – 115

actions effective – 117

"Almost anything. Anything except backing away from the struggle." (119)

need full spectrum – 123

"How do we create a political space that can hold these contradictions, and still survive the intense repression directed against us? How do we go where no social movement has ever gone before?" – 124

communication, solidarity and creativity – 124

“To me, the Goddess is not so much a personality as a great force of regeneration acting through the cycles of birth, growth, death and rebirth” – 129

“I went to Genoa.....” – 131

holding the vision – 137

call for justice – 140

we each have our direct line to power – 141

“And if we tell our own stories with enough intensity and focus, we’ll start to believe them, and so will others. We’ll break the spells that bind us. We’ll start to want the other world we say is possible with such intensity that nothing can stop us or deny us. All it takes is our willingness to act from vision, not from fear, to risk hoping, to dare to act for what we love.” – 158

power-with, now called power-among instead of power-over – 174

“The dichotomizing of oppression necessarily made it hard for women of color to identify with a movement that downplayed the racism that was a prime feature of their daily existence.” – 183

“But after a decade and a half of separation-based politics, followed on centuries of racism, we didn’t have the contacts, the channels of communication, and the personal relationships that would have allowed us to easily become allies.” – 185

“We opposed racism and sexism and all the other related isms not just because we’re in solidarity with someone else, but because we realized how all of those syndromes are interconnected.” – 187

racism creates blank spots in us – 189

“People of privilege do not need to learn about the cultures of the oppressed in order to function.” – 195

“Pamela might like to walk into the Convergence Center, and feel seen, as the warm, funny, brilliant, and beautiful woman she is, not just as a Black Woman or as Validation On the Hoof.” – 197

instructions on building alliances – 199

after 9-11 – 207

how do we define violence – 210

“But nonviolence is not about avoiding violence; rather, it’s the refusal to inflict violence.” – 211

others in movement – 214

nonviolence people “Not Real Fun People” – 215

Ghandi’s rejection of sexuality and it’s problems – 218

story of masks donated to 9-11 – 226-227