

An Anarchist in the Hudson Valley

Peter Lamborn Wilson with Jennifer Bleyer

Jennifer Bleyer

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It's been nearly ten years since Peter Lamborn Wilson—née Hakim Bey—looked at the pitifully state-bound, rule-bound world around him and asked: “Are we who live in the present doomed never to experience autonomy, never to stand for one moment on a bit of land ruled only by freedom?” In a slim, rattling volume called *Temporary Autonomous Zone*, Wilson intoned that, in fact, freedom is already here. Autonomy exists in time, he said, rather than space. It's in times of wildness, revelry, abandon and revolution that for even just one brief jail-breaking moment, as sweet as honey to the tongue, one is freed of all political and social control.

Wilson rightly became celebrated as a kind of urban prophet. It was an identity to add the others he bears seamlessly and without contradiction: anarchist, poet, public intellectual, psychedelic explorer, artist, social critic, Sufi mystic. Six years ago he moved upstate from the East Village to New Paltz, New York. The setting is different, but the ideas have only deepened—notably his critique of global capital and “technological determination.” In his green wood-frame house, trees rustling overhead and birds chirping outside, we drank tea and talked.

Jennifer Bleyer: You left New York City six years ago and moved upstate to New Paltz. There's a lot of art happening here and in the Hudson Valley in general, which seems pretty cool.

Peter Lamborn Wilson: The fact of it happening anywhere makes it more interesting than a kick in the face. But the fact of the matter is that America doesn't produce anything anymore. A couple of years ago, we passed the halfway mark from being a so-called productive economy to a services economy. What are services? You tell me. Whatever it means, we don't make pencils. We don't make cement. We don't make ladies garments or roll cigars. We don't even manufacture computers. In other words, we don't make anything,, especially not around here. There are a few cement factories left up in Greene County, but basically, industry died here in the fifties. It was a long slow death, certainly over by the seventies. There was a depression, so artists, who are certainly blameless in this, discovered low real estate prices and low rents, and they started to move up here. And the gap between the artists and the real estate developers has gotten very small in our modern times, down to where it's almost nothing.<

So for a few years the artists and their friends came up here and got bargains and moved in, and now artists' studios in Beacon sell for a quarter-million dollars. And we're talking about a one-room building on a half-acre lot. You want a house? Half-a-million. Do you know any artists who can afford that? The point is that there's a lot of boosterism for the arts in the Hudson Valley

because there's no other economy. It's either that or "green tourism," which in my mind is a disgusting term and something that I don't want to see promoted in any way. It's a commodification of nature, turning nature into a source of profit for the managerial caste in the Hudson Valley. That's not the solution I'm interested in.

We have all these knee-jerk phrases that in the sixties sounded like communist revolution, and now are just corpses in the mouths of real estate developers. "Sustainable development"—that means very expensive houses for vaguely ecologically conscious idiots from New York. It has nothing to do with a sustainable economy or permaculture. They talk about agriculture, they get all weepy about it, but they won't do anything for the family farms because family farms use pesticides and fertilizers, which is a terrible sin in the minds of these people. So they're perfectly happy to see the old farms close down and build McMansions, as long as they're green McMansions, of course, with maybe a little solar power so they can boast about how they are almost off the grid. This is just yuppie poseurism. It's fashionable to be green, but it's not at all fashionable to wonder about the actual working class and farming people and families that you're dispossessing. This is a class war situation, and the artists are unfortunately not on the right side of the battle. If we would just honestly look at what function we're serving in this economy, I'm afraid we would see that we're basically skills for real estate developers.

Bleyer: Which is really the case in Beacon, I suppose.

Wilson: Oh, absolutely. Dead Hudson Valley industrial towns reinventing themselves as prole-free zones and calling it art. Now, everyone I know is involved in the arts, and I'm involved in the arts, so what I'm saying here is a bit of a mea culpa. I don't think that we can consider ourselves guiltless and not implicated in all this because we're creative and artsy and have leftist emotions. Where are our actual alternative institution-building energies? Where are our food co-ops? Where's our support for the Mexican migrant agricultural workers? Most people here are not interested in that.

Bleyer: So where should people who consider themselves radical be directing their energies?

Wilson: I think that a radical life is not something that depends on Internet connections or websites or demos or even on politics, like having Green mayors. This may sound dull to people who think that having a really hot website is a revolutionary act. Or that getting a million people to come out and wave symbolic signs at a symbolic march is a political act. If it doesn't involve alternative economic institution building, it's not. As an anarchist, I've had this critique for years, and experience has only deepened it. Here, there are people who are very concerned with trying to preserve whatever natural beauty and farmland exists in this region, and my heart's with them. But I think it's done by and large without any consciousness that this is already a privileged enclave. We're saying that this is our backyard and we don't want any cement factories. However, we're not saying that we volunteer to do without cement. What we're saying is cement is fine, as long as the factories are in Mexico.

Bleyer: Or in Sullivan County.

Wilson: Or Sullivan County. Although Sullivan County is fast reinventing itself, too.

Bleyer: You mentioned hot websites. I'm curious about your thoughts on the web now, because ten years ago you seemed optimistic about its potential.

Wilson: Well, I wouldn't say I was an optimist. I was curious and attempted an anti-pessimist view. I went to about 25 conferences in Europe in seven years, and in all that time, I never had a computer or was on the Internet myself. I never have been. So I went to these conferences as the voice of caution, the one guy who doesn't own a computer. Little by little, my talks at

these conferences would become more and more Luddite, sounding the knell of warning about mechanization of consciousness and alienation and separation. There was a time when everything was so confused and chaotic that it was easy to believe that this technology would be an exception to all the other technologies, and instead of enslaving us, it would liberate us. I never actually believed that, but I was willing to talk to people who did. Now I'm not willing to talk to them anymore. I have no interest in this dialogue. It's finished. The Internet revealed itself as the perfect mirror image of global capital. It has no borders? Neither does global capital. Governments can't control it? Neither can they control global capital. Nor do they want to. They've given up trying, and now they basically serve as the mercenary armed forces for the corporate interstate—the 200 or 300 megacorporations that actually run the world. Fine. But let's not call this radical politics, and let's not call this liberation, and let's not talk about cyberfeminism or virtual community. Basically, I'm a Luddite. Certain technologies hurt the commonality, as they used to say in the early 19th century. Any machinery that was hurtful to the commonality, they took their sledgehammers out and tried to smash. Direct action. That's the Luddite critique—you do it with a sledgehammer. What it means now to live as a Luddite seems to me to involve a strict attention to what technologies one allows into one's life.<

Bleyer: And I guess the Internet has really come to be the pinnacle of this hurtful technology, in our age.

Wilson: Yes. You're slumped in front of a screen, in the same physical situation as a TV watcher, you've just added a typewriter. And you're "interactive." What does that mean? It does not mean community. It's catatonic schizophrenia. So blah blah blah, communicate communicate, data data data. It doesn't mean anything more than catatonics babbling and drooling in a mental institution. Why can't we stop? How is it that five years ago there were no cell phones, and now everyone needs a cell phone? You can pick up any book by any half-brained post-Marxist jerkoff and read about how capitalism creates false needs. Yet we allow it to go on.

Bleyer: But isn't there something to be said for the subversive use of technologies?

Wilson: We believed that in the '80s. The idea was that alternative media would allow us the space in which to organize other things. Even in the '80s I said I'm waiting for my turkey and my turnips. I want some material benefits from the Internet. I want to see somebody set up a barter network where I could trade poetry for turnips. Or not even poetry—lawn cutting, whatever. I want to see the Internet used to spread the Ithaca dollar system around America so that every community could start using alternative labor dollars. It is not happening. And so I wonder, why isn't it happening? And finally the Luddite philosophy becomes clear. We create the machines and therefore we think we control them, but then the machines create us, so we can create new machines, which then can create us. It's a feedback situation between humanity and technology. There is some truth to the idea of technological determination, especially when you're unconscious, drifting around like a sleepwalker. Especially when you've given up believing in anti-capitalism because they've convinced you that the free market is a natural law, and we just have to accept that and hope for a free market with a friendly smiling face. Smiley-faced fascism. I see so many people working for that as if it were a real cause. "If we have to have capitalism, let's make it green capitalism." There's no such thing. It's a hallucination of the worst sort, because it isn't even a pleasurable one. It's a nightmare.

Bleyer: I'm curious if you think we're hallucinating more now than ever before—if the psychic energy for liberation is gone.

Wilson: The answer would have to be extremely complex, because I don't have any snappy aphorisms to explain this. You might say that it wouldn't matter if every government in the world was taken over by screaming green socialists tomorrow morning, they couldn't reverse the damage. I don't know. It seems clear that in human society, despite the best intentions, technology has alienated people to such an extent that they mistake technological and symbolic action for social/political action. This is the commodity stance. You buy a certain product, and you've made a political statement. You buy a car that runs on salad oil. It's still a car! Or make a documentary. Where did we cross that line where we forgot that making a documentary about how everyone would like to have a food co-op is not the same as having a food co-op? I think some people have lost that distinction. Now, about art in the service of the revolution: There is no art in the service of the revolution, because if there's no revolution, there's no art in its service. So to say that you're an artist but you're progressive is a schizo position. We have only capital, so all art is either in its service or it fails. Those are the two alternatives. If it's successful, it's in the service of capital. I don't care what the content is. The content could be Malcolm X crucified on a bed of lettuce. It doesn't matter.

Bleyer: But what about the growing protest movement of the past five years, which really does seem significant?

Wilson: You mean people who are building puppets and going around the world being radical tourists?

Bleyer: The perhaps one million people coming to the streets of New York to protest the RNC in August, for example.

Wilson: Well, make it two million. It can be like the biggest anti-war marches ever held, they were forgotten five minutes later. All they're doing is assuaging their conscience a little. At best, it's symbolic discourse and it never goes beyond that. Especially in North America. It's not going to save the world to dump Bush and these people are deluded.

Bleyer: What do you think about Burning Man and other events that are in essence Temporary Autonomous Zones (TAZ) but don't necessarily dismantle the power structures of global capital?

Wilson: I've never been to Burning Man, but that's just accidental, because I've given up travel. As far as I can tell it's a lovely thing. I call those things "periodic autonomous zones." The thing about the TAZ is I didn't invent it, I just gave it a name. I think it's a sociological reality that groups of people will come together to maximize some concept of freedom that they share as naturally as breathing. When all the potential for the emergence for a TAZ is maximized, either because you've helped to maximize it or because your local situation has arrived at a certain point where it becomes possible, you'll do it. Like I've said before, a TAZ is anywhere from two to several thousand people, who for as little as two or three hours or for as much as a couple of years manage to keep that mood going. And it's incredibly vital. It's vital that every human being should have some such experience, or else they'll never know that another world is possible. So Burning Man is a kind of periodic autonomous zone. As soon as the first hint of commercialization or tiredness appears, then I would think the best thing to do is to close it down. Move on, reappear somewhere else. And ultimately, I do believe that another world is possible and that permanent changes could be made. But that's different. That's a revolution.

Bleyer: You lived abroad for about 12 years, mostly in the Islamic world. What's your perception of Islamic fundamentalists, "terrorists" and otherwise?

Wilson: Certainly, these Islamic fundamentalists are of no interest intellectually. They have no ideas, they're not anti-capitalist; they love technology and money. Ideologically, they're not offering any alternatives to anything. By and large, they're an imagistic froth that has very little to do with most people's experience of Islam. In their manifestations as tiny terrorist groups, they don't have much of a social role, only as symbolic figureheads, and that's why their actual support in the Muslim world is rather shallow. Right now it depends largely on the fact that the Bushies have made the name of America stink forever in the nostrils of the world. When I was traveling in the East, I was always amazed at the unearned reservoir of goodwill toward Americans. It existed everywhere. Now I reckon they'd throw rocks at you.

Bleyer: And do you think that's irreparable?

Wilson: Almost irreparable. Even the Vietnam War, which was still going on when I began my travels, never aroused this much hatred and unpopularity.

Bleyer: Is there anything you could see altering the current course of the American empire?

Wilson: Yes. If all our emotion for resistance could somehow pull us together instead of apart. This is the brilliant thing they've managed to do—set us all at each other's throats. If I think of the anarchist movement, we spend all our time screaming at each other over various sub-sectarian impurities we perceive in each other's writing. That is what anarchist activity now boils down to. But it's not entirely our fault—when there's no movement, there's no movement. But a new coherence could appear. Frankly, I think it would have to be of a spiritual nature. It would have to involve a kind of fanaticism that would involve real sacrifice—sacrifice of comforts, sacrifice of cell phones, sacrifice of this privileged life in the belly of the beast that we all acquiesce in. There's a lot of symbolic discourse, but no action. I suppose that could come back, which is why I'm ready to cut slack for spiritual movements, which have nothing necessarily to do with religion.

Bleyer: I'm curious about this intersection between the political and spiritual.

Wilson: There are those of us who are usually called spiritualist anarchists. I'm willing to accept that label if I can have other labels as well. It's a well-known fact that there's no secular Luddite community anywhere. The only Luddite communities are Anabaptists—Amish, Mennonite, seventh day Baptists, all those kind of Germano-Anabaptist groups that originate in Pennsylvania. I guess it's religious fanaticism. Well, we need some equivalent of that. I can only see that coming from what people would identify as a spiritual movement. Nowadays it would probably have to have a neo-pagan shamanic quality to it, but I think it would also have to keep the door open to people in the established religions who are rethinking their positions, including some Catholics. It would have to be very inclusive, non-dogmatic, and not involve any central cult of authority. It would have to be a spontaneous crystallization of all the pagan-LSD stuff we've been going through since the sixties. It will have to crystallize and provide this psychic power for self-sacrifice.

Bleyer: Are you still a Sufi?

Wilson: That's a hard question to answer. No, I'm not a practicing Muslim. I don't spend a lot of time saying my beads, but I don't consider myself utterly broken away from all that. In fact, I have very good friends and allies within the Sufi movement.

Bleyer: Who among other anarchist thinkers do you admire?

Wilson: Rene Riesel in France is an admirable character. He's faced with a jail sentence now in France for a heavily militant action—destroying genetically manipulated crops and possibly other things as well. Some of his followers are engaged in blowing up electric power lines. And Jose Bove, the farmer from the south of France, has done a lot of interesting stuff.

Bleyer: What are you studying now?

Wilson: I'm very interested in early Romanticism now. To me, the Romantics were the first people to consciously deal with these issues. Some of the most interesting aspects of this come from the early Romantic movement in Germany around 1795. The early German Romantics have been forgotten as a source for our movement, especially from an artistic point of view. They informed all the art movements since then, the ones that tried to do what Hegelians call the "suppression and realization of art"—suppressing art as an elitist consumption activity of the wealthy, suppressing it as something that alienates other people who aren't artists and makes them less important or less significant, and somehow universalizing it. That's the realization of art, so that somehow or another everyone is an artist or some sort, fully free and encouraged to be as creative as possible. There's no privileged position to the art that ends up in galleries or museums. That would be the suppression and realization of art, and that was basically a Romantic program and a program of every avant-garde art movement since then. They've all begun by saying, "We hate art as alienation, we want to restore it somehow to the kind of universal experience that we sense, for example, among a tribe of pygmies, where everyone is a singer and no one leads the singing." That goal has been there for every single art movement since Romanticism.

Bleyer: What have you experienced personally of TAZ realities, lately?

Wilson: A lot of people tell me that they have enjoyed or benefited from my work, for which I'm naturally very pleased. But in a lot of cases they have very different tastes than I do. I'm a sixties guy. I don't like industrial music or even rock 'n' roll. I am willing to accept rock 'n' roll as an orgiastic music, but I think it's disgusting that I have to have orgiastic music spewed at me from every single orifice of modern civilization, all the time, nonstop, to make me buy more products and lose my intellectual acuity and start shopping. I also don't like the drugs that they use—I prefer mushrooms and pot. I don't enjoy raves. The ravers were among my biggest readers—they're now getting a little old themselves. Personally, I don't enjoy those parties. This is a matter of taste. I'm happy that they're happy, but I don't want to go to the party. I'm not 20-years-old anymore, I get tired. But fine for them. Terrific. I wish they would rethink all this techno stuff—they didn't get that part of my writing. I think it would be very interesting if they took some of my ideas about immediatism and the bee. Small groups should do art for each other, and stay out of the media as much as possible, and this will eventually cause a buzz and make people want to be part of it. I'm waiting—maybe before I die there will be a hip Luddite movement. I'll probably like their parties and go to them. But it's not happening. Most of the people interested in TAZ tend to be very techno-oriented. But as I say, if they're having a good time, God bless them. Allah bless them. Goddess bless them. Just bless them. I think that's terrific. It's important to have those TAZ experiences. If you didn't, you wouldn't know what there is to struggle for.

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