

Sakhra-l'Assal Interviews Peter Lamborn Wilson

Sakhra-l'Assal

March 2002

SA: Can you tell us something about the current state of affairs in the USA? What do you make of this general idea that the “world will never be the same”?

PLW: That’s practically the first thing I heard on Sept. 11th — “Everything has changed — now, everything’s going to be different.” Everyone was saying that (except me, I wasn’t saying that...) I’m still not convinced that that’s true. I mean obviously, in some way it’s true, it has to be, it’s a big event, so things change. But in a broader sense, a philosophical sense, if you want to put it that way, in a philosophy of history sense, is anything different? Has anything changed? It’s not clear to me that it has. For example we can say that in 1989 and ’91, with the fall of Communism, that history came to a stop. This is the expression of people both on the left and the right who saw the dialectic of the social as essentially synonymous with history. So when that came to an end, history came to an end. Alright, let’s accept this for a moment as a hypothesis and ask — I mean, obviously there’s some truth to it, whether you take it literally or not, *some* sort of history came to an end — so, let’s look at the event of 09/11 and ask whether history begins again. As someone said to me, ‘Oh, I guess you’ll agree that history has started up again.’ No, I’m not sure I do agree.

You can take this from two perspectives: The first would be not just to look at the event. You saw a fascinating thing for a few weeks, where people in the advertising industry, the fashion industry, the media industry and so forth and so on all began to get worried that what they were doing was irrelevant and perhaps even tasteless, stupid, pointless and evil. Just some two days after the event there was an interview with somebody from the fashion world saying, “Oh, I’m not sure that what I do means anything anymore, I’m not sure I can go back to work.” At the same time, you had the media saying, “We must get back to normal, you can’t stop buying things, etc. etc.” And this, of course, was obviously their true position — that this moment of self-doubt was not going to last, and it certainly wasn’t going to be encouraged. So it might be true on an individual level — and certainly people have left their jobs, not because they got fired, but because they felt some moral revulsion — but on the social level of course, it couldn’t be true. Because if it were true on the social level, then capital — world, global capital — would be in danger; if people stop buying, if people stop producing meaningless shit for other people to buy, then global capital is in danger. So this could not be allowed to happen, and of course it wasn’t.

Everyone with an agenda thought, Aha, this is a big change, now my agenda will be proven more feasible, but this all turned out not to be so. I wrote a little piece, actually, a week after the event, in which I discussed this, and I predicted that it would not be so. Which was an easy prediction to make.

Then we could look at it from a larger perspective, from a global political perspective, asking whether anything has changed. It doesn't seem to me that anywhere in all of this there's any hope for the movement of the social. Where would the social movement get a kickstart again from these events? Clearly the Islamic extremists have nothing to offer to both camps, certainly not to disaffected governments in the non-Islamic world. There's no movement in a social aspect to the thing at all, except inadvertently. The attack was carried out against a big symbol of global capital, and for a moment some people on the left convinced themselves that this was a blow against global capital, and that somehow — even if it was carried out by a bunch of fascists — somehow it was going to help start socialism again.

SA: Well, for a very short while it did seem to be a wake-up call for a lot of people on the left as well, and that they were going to get over this whole '89 end-of-history thing indeed. But it seems to have petered out very quickly.

PLW: It did, because there's absolutely no structure.

SA: Yes, and it's funny because it seems to be a parallel of how this whole new world order idea has likewise petered out immediately — like you say, nothing's going to change in the world order, or not that I see it.

PLW: No, in fact it seems very clear that globalism comes out of these events stronger than ever, since precisely what globalism lacked was a credible enemy. In other words, where's the element of spectacle? There has to be the element of spectacle. In a single world system, it's hard to have a credible "evil empire," that you can carry out social discipline in the name of struggle against it. So suddenly now, that problem's been solved. Now we have a credible enemy, at least for the next ten years, in the name of which all sorts of discipline can be administered, and *is* being administered. And I don't see that what's going on here, that people talk about their civil liberties, the Bill of Rights and all this kind of thing, yes, that's true but on a deeper level, this is discipline for global capital. Furthermore, the other problem that was solved was America's role. It's clear that, even though there was a lot of talk about it being the last, sole single superpower and the American hegemony and so forth, it's clear that that was the case. In fact, America was losing battles in various world courts and world economic organizations. Just think of Seattle, Quebec, or Genoa. In a certain respect, obviously, there was no real power raid against global capital, but there was uncertainty about America's role. Well, that uncertainty has ended. Now we see that America can have its cake and eat it, too — globalism *and* hegemony. So it all seems hunky-dory and it all seems — if more proof were needed — it seems to be proof that an act of terrorism in the modern world always produces the opposite effect from what it pretends to intend. Terrorism is automatically recuperable, there's no question about it. So, yes, it would be interesting to discuss any possible positive aspects of Islamic extremism, that's an interesting question. But anything even possibly positive has been destroyed by this very act supposedly in favor of the militant struggle, on its behalf. But instead we get the opposite effect. So this is in essence also a destruction of any kind of possibility of a social movement within Islam.

So basically, the global capital structure, especially the American branch of it, took a bad hit and it staggered, but now, yesterday the papers were saying, "Well, it looks like the recession is over, there's never been better Christmas shopping in the last 20 years, everyone seems to be

back out there buying their sports gear and cars, and the gasoline is cheap...” It’s a consumer paradise. Real estate prices have gone down, there’s bargains galore, travel is cheap... I’m being sarcastic, of course.

SA: But it’s also cynical how it seems that no sooner has the war in Afghanistan developed or already we seem to be ready to pull out — “OK, let somebody else sort it out.” There’s already much less of this general indignation and this sense of “We’re gonna police the world” than there was, say, two months ago.

PLW: Well, there’s a lot of talk here about “What happens next?” What’s the next stage of the glorious war on terrorism? For there *has* to be a next stage, if this is going to be the equivalent of the spectacle for the new millennium. I’m not saying that a strictly Situationist analysis will reveal all the workings of this movement, yet I do see some analogies with the Spectacle.

SA: To get back to the left, what are your thoughts on the possible role of the anti-globalization movement, if any?

PLW: It’s difficult to see what kind of role they could play, so much so that we already feel that this movement has been dangerously sidelined by these events. Just how much of this movement was a matter of newspaper articles and soundbites? Because when suddenly all the soundbites are about something else, it seems to have vanished and evaporated. Also, the globalists are taking greater and greater care to make sure first of all that the anti-globalists are equated with terror and with terrorism, and second of all that they move all their meetings to inaccessible places. So in other words, the one tactic that we had, that was working for us, that is to say the broad-based, imaginative protests and actions against meetings of World Trade-type organizations, are already a thing of the past. Have we got the imagination and the strength, the inner strength, to come up with totally new tactics, each time we get a setback like this? In other words, does the anti-global movement have a real strategy or does it just have tactics? That’s the big question. I don’t feel like trying to answer it, but I’d like to emphasize that if we can’t *face* this question, then we might as well just quit now.

SA: You sound very cynical about it. It may be just a matter of recuperation, but it seems that ever since, say, Seattle or more recently Genoa, although the repression is being stepped up, a lot of points seem to have found their way onto the general political agenda. Of course not in the way that we would voice them.

PLW: Such as?

SA: Well there seems to be more mainstream political attention towards the dangers of globalization, albeit it always in a sense of how to protect one’s own market and so on.

PLW: I’d say it’s just part of the strategy. For example in New York, they wanted to destroy rent control. First they come up with a proposal, “We’re gonna destroy rent control *now*, all you little old ladies are *dead*,” you know. And then everyone goes, “Oh, no, you can’t do that!!” and the leftists get out and have marches and the liberals have fund drives and everything and then they say, “Oh, okay, we won’t do that then, we’ll be nice. We’ll only take away *half* your rent control.” “Oh, thank you, thank you.” You know? And something like this works on a worldwide, far more complex scale as well, that you come along with a Milton Freedman or US Federal Bank Alan Greenspan saying, “Kill the poor, eat the poor!” And then when they don’t *really* eat the poor, everyone just feels gratitude — “Oh, oh, okay, we can have globalism with a human face.” And believe me, most of the so-called leftists would fall for that.

SA: But then of course, social movements have always had to face up to this sort of effect.

PLW: Yes, but even more so now, because it's such a built-in mechanism. It's deeply, deeply rooted in the mass media which have succeeded in basically entrancing the masses. A lot of people think they're not part of the masses, that they have critical consciousness, but we're just swamped by the media, and you could see that in the wake of 09/11, that most of the people I know were just hypnotized by the media for two or three or four weeks. Hypnotized. I myself managed to not look at one bit of television the whole time, I didn't see any television coverage. And I did that in a deliberate attempt to keep my brain from dying. I don't know if I succeeded, but that was my strategy, was to absolutely stay away from the neurotic, obsessive, trance-like consciousness it resulted in.

SA: I certainly allowed myself to get absorbed in a mass of "alternative" news, but the effect is exactly the same, it just swamps you.

PLW: It doesn't matter whether you do it on the internet or on commercial television or radio, because the internet just manages to make itself a kind of mirror image of the regular media.

SA: Well, there seems to be a potential of informing one another, but then the sheer overload remains the same.

PLW: Ultimately, all the information in the world — if it doesn't make any difference, it doesn't make any difference. That's a stupid truism, but it's one that very few people seem to grasp. Because mass media and television hypnotics have made everybody believe on the unconscious level that to participate in a media event is to participate in reality.

SA: But then, can one still retreat to an informationless sphere? How can we avoid this?

PLW: Yes, well, I don't know. I wouldn't want to be prescriptive about it. But I would say that I think there really does have to be a refusal of what's called "information" on behalf of what we might call "knowledge," or even "wisdom" if you wanted to use dangerous words. My personal response to this is to refuse the data. You know, how much more do I need to know? Do I really need to know over and over and over again that governments are bad and that human beings are made to suffer? Do I need to know a thousand new details about the ways in which poor humanity is being stepped on once again? Is that really news? It's also a psychological truth that information that you don't work for, that you don't go after, that you don't struggle to get, really doesn't mean very much to you on a deep level. So when you can press a button and get 6,000 hits — and you saw the same thing happening after 09/11, it doesn't take any work at all, not the least bit of effort, not even physical effort — so what is it going to mean ultimately, to the development of your higher consciousness shall we say? I don't think it means very much. In fact I think it can have a paradoxical counter effect, which is that the more of this information you take in, the darker things get. I call it the "lite age" as opposed to the dark ages. A situation where you have all the information all the time — completely accessible — where in other words there are no secrets, or there's a perception that there are no secrets, that there's no information that we can't get. This kind of false omnipotence, this superman of information. It's an image that we all have of ourselves now, in the age where nothing remains, well, secret, where there are no mysteries. In this way, there is also no knowledge: None of these data have any more value than any of the other data. It's never processed into knowledge. And knowledge is never processed into wisdom. So, yes, I think that you do actually have to refuse, or at least to a certain extent. Years ago a friend of mine called it "media fasting." The idea is that in order to overcome the difficulties that certainly the unconscious gets into when you just immerse yourself in this data flow night and day, you just have to stop, at least for some time. My solution in recent

months was to limit myself to print, which is poisonous enough, believe me, really poisonous, and I can only imagine how awful the electronic media must be.

SA: Maybe the written media still allow for a little more time.

PLW: It's simply a question of time, of course. A little bit of distance.

SA: This reminds me of that Sufi technique, to "Halt."

PLW: Yes, that's a Naqshbandi concept.? It's a way of bringing everything to a stop once in a while. I really would strongly recommend it to people on the communication left, like us.

SA: So perhaps people need to get back to a realization that to acquire knowledge requires work, or an effort.

PLW: Yes, you have to make it your own. That's what "appropriation" in the good sense would be.

SA: That brings me to another question: We hear that Hakim Bey, with whom you developed the concept of the TAZ in the 1980's and 90's,? is a little fed up with the whole idea. Secondly, in his *Millennium*, Bey touches on the concept of a local nationalism if you will, not nationalist in the classic sense, but it also refers back to the whole globalization question: are you going to be anti-universalist, or is it possible to stress one's own identity from an autonomous point of view? I believe you also touched on this in your *Escape From the 19th Century*.

PLW: First of all, I wouldn't say that we've discarded the idea of Temporary Autonomous Zones. I think in some ways it's more important than ever. It's just that I see it in a new context. I think that before I was seeing it in a kind of Deleuze/Guattari molecular context, a context which has a deep distrust of strategy; it wants tactics but no strategy, because strategy is authoritarian.

SA: Which is the reverse of what you were saying before, of course.

PLW: Yes, now I see that we're forced into a strategic position, that the disappearance of the spectacle in a divided world forces us into a position where we have to have a strategic response, somehow, magically, without the authoritarianism. That's the problem facing the anti-global movement right now: How to be a global anti-global movement without giving up your particularity, your difference.

SA: But if you start articulating yourself in those terms, wouldn't you run the risk of getting sucked up into that very same spectacle again?

PLW: Well, yes, so that's why there has to be some kind of a new concept. I don't know what that is. I have a feeling that in the broadest possible sense it must be a spiritual concept. It must have to do with a change of consciousness. Not simply with food or economic structures. But you know, how do you separate the spirit from the structure in that case, or rather, how do you *not* separate them or bring them together? That's a big question, and one which I have simply nothing to say about, because it's not happening. There isn't this change of consciousness, it's just not happening. And one of the reasons why it's not happening is because everyone's fucking glued to the tube, or glued to the computer, which is another form of the tube.

SA: Plus, within leftist circles, the old left, and that includes the young old left I believe, would probably be all over you for even mentioning the word "spiritual." It's a mechanism that makes it hard to strive towards something like that.

PLW: Well, I'm not worried about that. But yes, I agree. But I'm not going to hide the fact that I'm some kind of "spiritual anarchist." Because it doesn't do me any good, or good or bad one way or the other, so I might just as well come out with it. There's something — call it consciousness, if we need a politically sound term.

SA: It just seems a hard point to articulate even within your own circles.

PLW: I'm not sure I have circles.

SA: Hakim Bey's *Millennium* featured a somewhat elusive chapter entitled "Jihad." Do you think this was a reflection on the personal, spiritual jihad, as opposed to the fundamentalist concept of the jihad?

PLW: I haven't seen the essay in a long while, but yes, of course it's an interesting question whether Islam can be a social movement, in the sense of taking a historical position against globalism. Maybe at the time the idea was that things were unformed enough — it also seemed probable that so-called fundamentalism was going to fail, much more clearly than it has done so far. Because it is after all a very inadequate response. The fact is, nothing has improved in the Islamic world; fundamentalism hasn't collapsed or failed and it's continued to spread in a certain way, and I would be much less hopeful now than I was five or six years ago about any kind of potential in the Islamic world. Because we don't any longer see the really interesting forms of Islamic socialism or Libyan idealism and so forth; these are no longer the key players, no longer the thin edge of the wedge. Now it's all this Islamism, which is really boring from an intellectual point of view. And I'd have to say that the old Marxist historian, Maxime Rodinson, who wrote the book *Islamic Capitalism*, still remains correct in saying that Islam has never really developed as a whole, as a whole cultural world, much less as a theological structure, and it's never really developed a coherent critique of capital. You can see this in the kind of communiques that Al-Qaeda and these other groups put out. No, absolutely no concept about capital. It's not part of their consciousness even to think about it. They are in fact fascistic, and that's the end of it. Their economics never goes beyond crude fascism. I'm talking about the Islamists now, but in the 60's and 70's and even in the 80's there were plenty of thinkers and activists in Islam who had a much more interesting and broader concept and really were trying to develop some kind of critique of capital. But where are they now?

SA: I was going to ask you that. Have they been defeated? Are they all in jail, or dead, or...?

PLW: I don't know where they are. I guess that's all you can say, is that they're dead. All those people in Algeria, all those journalists and writers and intellectuals who got shot, it's like that.

SA: But that's the end of it then? There's no hope left?

PLW: Well... I don't know. I certainly don't any longer hold out any hope for Islamic socialism. I just don't see any — in the whole series of events and statements and talk and publishing and so forth that have happened since 09/11 I haven't seen one response from this world, this radical Islamic world of the 70's. Those people really are dead, they were killed.

SA: You have no contacts left that provide you with any hope?

PLW: Well, the only thing — you mentioned Sufism before, and there is *some* small Sufi politics. If we look at Chechnya for example — people are laboring under a very dangerous misapprehension about Chechnya when they assume that the resistance there is Islamist or fundamentalist. But historically, it's Sufism, it's the Naqshbandi order. The Naqshbandis are also quite political in Turkey and they try to take a position between the secular army types and the Islamists. They try to offer a politics of Islam that is tolerant and open to a certain extent. Even if it might not be so pleasing to people in the West, but from a Turkish point of view it's quite liberal. They're willing to accept the Kurds, they're willing to accept other religions and other citizens of Turkey. Also in Afghanistan, there were at least two Sufi orders during the mujahedin period. The Qadiri order is still an active militia, the other, the Naqshbandis, I'm not sure about. Pir Jilani is the cur-

rent head of the Qadiri order in Afghanistan and an important player. I think he's been taking part in the recent negotiations.

But Sufism is just not emerging on an Islam-wide basis as a real response to so-called fundamentalism.

SA: But couldn't it? Doesn't it have the potential?

PLW: It seems to me that theoretically it could. I don't know what it will take though; some charismatic leadership or something.

SA: Is Sufism by definition a progressive or liberal force?

PLW: No, I don't think so. Well, more so than Wahhabism, by definition. The thing is about Sufism it can take many different forms. I think if you wanted to make a broad general statement about it, you could say that it has more potential for a liberal Islam in the broadest sense.

SA: But would Central Asians who consider themselves Sufis see themselves as more tolerant, as opposed to fundamentalism?

PLW: Yes, I think they would. Let's not confuse ourselves about the lack of education or sheer ignorance that's out there in the world. But I think a lot of people in the East now have been swept up in what on the surface would seem to be a wave of Islamism, because of the spectacular events that have been occurring and also because Bin Laden has a certain charisma. So probably with a lot of people, say the man in the street in Kabul or Peshawar or someplace, you might find a lot of support for these things and also a lot of resentment against the West, which this gives some focus, some symbol, which they can be rallied around. It doesn't go very deep I don't think, it doesn't mean that all these people are suddenly converted to Wahhabi principles. The Afghans, the way I remember them, if they weren't Sufis, they had respect for Sufism. If they were very orthodox in their practice, nevertheless they were not hateful to foreigners or to Christians, quite the reverse. If they did have prejudices, it was the way you'd expect some hillbilly to be prejudiced, because they didn't know very much. I mean, gosh, lost up in those mountain valleys that haven't changed for centuries. So, generally speaking the Afghan people were always very nice, you know; once you were on their good side anyway, they were nice. And they could be open and tolerant if they wanted. Yet they had a kind of self-assurance and strong character that comes from not being colonized.

SA: Their hospitality is legendary.

PLW: Right. When you haven't been colonized, then you have a more open view toward people who come to visit you. I mean, the conflict with Islam in India was really in large part the fault of British imperialist colonialism. The Moguls had this problem under control. The British let it get out of control because it had economic and political benefits for them to do so. But maybe this is a vast over-simplification.

SA: To get back to Afghanistan, it seems interesting how on the one hand, Sufism seems to play a major role there, while on the other hand, the Taliban are violently opposed to that.

PLW: I've just been writing a little article about this, where I said that it obviously would take twenty or thirty years of sheer hell, of absolute destruction, of oppression and death and murder for people like the Afghans to suddenly start seeing the Taliban as the least of all possible evils. Because in the old days, that kind of attitude would never have gotten off the ground in Afghanistan. I mean, yes, these people were strict, they were orthodox and they were poor, but Jesus Christ, no kite flying? I mean, the Afghans love their sports, you know. They love all those games and animal fights and kite battles and *buzkashi* and all that stuff, so it's unthinkable that a group could come to power on an anti-fun platform. So, to me that's a measure of how utterly

destroyed the Afghanistan that I remember must be, for people like that to come into power, who are really foreigners or were raised outside Afghanistan in the refugee camps during the 80's. So it's something very alien to the Afghan character, or for me anyway.

SA: In his forthcoming book *Jihad. The Rise of Militant Islam in Central Asia*, Pakistani journalist Ahmed Rashid mentions the role the West has played in the rise of fundamentalism in the region, but his emphasis is on the decades of Soviet oppression. Interestingly, he explains how it was exactly this oppression which made Sufism gain in popularity, since with the destruction of the mosques and the ban on Islam and so forth by the Soviets, the traditional wandering Sufi teacher was the only one who was still in a position to spread Islamic teachings.

PLW: Well, yes, the Soviets have been the power on the ground for more than fifty years. America has only played a very minor role in comparison. During the 70's and 80's we used to hear that Sufism was strong in that part of the world, strong and militant. But except for the countries already mentioned, we haven't heard from them yet. We don't know what's going on in those countries. We only know what we hear in the press, who are going to be insensitive to the subtleties of Islamic theology. So I don't know what's become of Sufism in Kazakhstan or Tadzhikistan or Uzbekistan, or what's even more interesting, in Chinese Central Asia.

SA: Apparently China is stepping up its actions against the South West.

PLW: Yes, that's what we hear, but we don't know what the hell is going on. There's no reporters out there, no papers or television. So God knows what's going to happen. I don't know what kind of role Sufism is actually playing right now in those countries, or in Afghanistan. Because it's not being reported, there's no one sensitive enough to these issues to ask the right questions.

SA: It sounds like you'd have to go looking with a candle in the dark.

PLW: Well, maybe that would be a nice task for some younger person to take on. I think I'm getting too old for that, but yes, that would be a nice idea.

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"9/11 and the Crisis of Meaning" (Sept. 18, 2001), appeared on InterActivist Info Exchange, slash.autonomeia.org

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The Naqshbandis are one of numerous Sufi orders. The discussed technique involves all of the participants in a meeting stopping any activities on a sign of the master.

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See Hakim Bey, *TAZ, The Temporary Autonomous Zone, Ontological Anarchy, Poetic Terrorism*, Autonomeia, Brooklyn, NY 1991.

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