Joel Bakan

An Interview by Mark Laver¹

Mark Laver: To begin with, we're taking a broad definition of improvisation in the ICASP project in general, and with this project in particular. We're looking at the ways in which improvised musical practices subtend the kind of non-hierarchical structure; ways which involve deep listening and dialogue within members of the group, between, and across members of the group. Improvised musical practices have been of some interest to management theorists because of some of the same things that we talk about in ICASP: fluid leadership, listening, dialogue, all this kind of stuff—this is where a lot of the improvising business theorists are coming from. So, in the e-mail correspondence we had about a year ago, where I sort of floated this improvising business idea by you, I was intrigued by your suggestion that corporations shouldn't be trusted to improvise, but rather that they should be given detailed scores, and held to detailed scores. I'm wondering if you could elaborate on that version of the musical metaphor.

Joel Bakan: Sure. I'm not that familiar with the management theory writing on improvisation, but generally management theory is about how you can better manage an enterprise, a corporation—how you can better serve the goals of the corporation. And, I think there's no question that the kind of skills that improvising trains a person in—listening, working collectively, organic intuition that extends across a number of people, dialogue—all of that probably does work very effectively within some corporate structures, and it would be my guess that it's the more innovative corporations that are trying to use this. I think the mistake is to believe that this is necessarily a progressive development. That this necessarily is going to lead to the vindication and realization of progressive norms of justice, or equality, or freedom, or any of that. I think what it *does* do is that it helps the corporation do its job better, which means it helps the corporation serve its constituencies better, which means that, arguably, it actually helps the corporation wreak more havoc in the world, be better at exploiting others, and cause more harm, because by making an institution more effective at what it's doing—when its mission is to create wealth for its shareholders, regardless of the consequences for others—making it better at doing that, is not going to lead to progressive results. Quite the contrary.

I guess one way of looking at it is that, if you're up on the stand improvising over 'I got rhythm' changes, or you're engaged in free-form improvising, basically, regardless of what you're doing, you're doing a really cool and great thing, and it's an amazing endeavour, but it's all happening on the stand, and the audience is all sitting in their seats watching it. In much the same way I suppose, the externalities—the groups outside the corporation, who might be affected by its actions, whether it's the environment, or various social groups, or it's workers' interests—they're not participants in that improvisation. The improvisation is happening independently of anything that they're doing. At best, they're observers of that improvisation. And when that's happening within corporate decision-making, there's no real concern about what that improvisation is doing vis-à-vis those folks, and vis-à-vis those interests that lie outside the corporation.

ML: One of the things that we've talked about within the ICASP field is the ways in which improvisation democratizes social interactions, generally speaking. This is obviously not consistently the case in improvising ensembles, but the goal in a lot of cases, and the ideal as most of us agree, tends to be a situation in which every stakeholder gets an equal voice in the equation. So, certainly the reason that a lot of management theorists are interested in that kind of mode of interaction is that it is perceived to facilitate creativity and innovation. So there's lots of writing on corporations like 3M and Google and Apple. I was reading Jonah Lehrer's book yesterday, and he talks about "horizontal sharing" or something like this, particularly in the case of 3M, in which innovators are encouraged to share and dialogue about their ideas across the employee base, with unexpected people in unexpected ways, with the ultimate goal of "integrative thinking," as Roger Martin's crew at the Rotman School of Management call it, where you bring unexpected people together to produce unexpected results. But, what I've been interested in doing with this project is to look at that kind of dialogue in terms of ethics ... and to consider the ways in which an ideally non-hierarchical dialogue might break down some of the monolithic values of the institution.

JB: But I don't see those monolithic values necessarily responsive to new management strategies, however innovative. I'm coming at it as a lawyer, and I can't help but see the corporation for what it is, which is, a set of legal relationships. It's not simply a cultural phenomenon of hierarchy. It's a very scripted—enforced by courts, and, if necessary, prisons, the military, and lawsuits—set of legal relationships that are very particular. When I use the metaphor of a psychopath in my work to describe the corporation as an institution, it isn't some sort of hyperbolic statement. It is what I consider an apt, analytical metaphor, for describing an institution that is actually programmed by the law to always serve its own interests. So, if you want to break down that framework, that is a task and a job for citizens of the country, or the community ... not within the corporation because that's already been created by our governmental institutions, and enforced by the coercive apparatus of the state. So, once that's in place, perhaps the

kinds of more egalitarian relationships within the firm that improvising might create, may in fact bring out a bit more humanity, and may then lead to trying to push the envelope, but the envelope is there, and it's not defined by the corporation, it's defined by the state, by the society, and it's legally enforced.

You can have a kind of a flattened hierarchy; an egalitarian approach to trying to understand what a company should do—and that can lead to real innovation. So, if you're a weapons manufacturer you can come up with better forms of napalm. If you're 3M, you can come up with more creative ways of avoiding environmental regulations. So, innovation in and of itself isn't necessarily a good thing. In fact, we're living in a world where we actually, for the first time, face the possibility of a human-created end to the planet as a result of innovation over the last hundred years in new products like plastics, internal combustion engines, nuclear weapons. So, you have to step back and say, "OK, well, even if we could say that this egalitarian, democratized decision-making within the corporate structure will lead to innovation" ... is that necessarily a good thing? And then we have to be aware of the fact that the corporation itself is not necessarily a fluid vessel in which to improvise. Rather, it's like having a fairly scripted symphonic piece where, in the middle, you have room to improvise. This is a legal structure that is very well defined, established, and enforced by the state. As I say, I'm all for the ethos that says, "Let's try to flip hierarchies, let's try to promote inclusive egalitarianism in decision making." But, I think the proper site for that is within the democratic polis—that's where we need to act if we're going to change the corporation.

ML: So you're suggesting that, basically, the legal relationships of a corporation will always trump the social relationships within a corporation.

JB: I think they will create a framework in which those social relationships happen, which will create an envelope that can be pushed, but not necessarily broken.

ML: So, I guess to some degree, is it fair to say that the kind of score that you're talking about in terms of regulating corporate behavior is, in a way, a score that's composed by the state? In the form of a more robust regulatory legal framework in which corporations can operate?

JB: Yes. Well, it seems we have a choice. We're at kind of a "fork in the road" in our social order now, where I think it is very much on the map of public consciousness and political consciousness to suggest that the state should not be involved, or as involved, in protecting public interests through the mechanisms of law and regulation, but that we should try to humanize corporations, promote social responsibility, and try to promote a kind of ethical form of corporate enterprise that will enable our market system to operate in a way that is socially responsible. I think we're really there, in an important, and a profound way. There's a way in which promoting state regulation now seems kind of old, and unimaginative, and undemocratic, and all of that which, I think, is unfortunate and profoundly misconceived.

The corporation is created by the state. Markets are created by the state. Property rights are created by the state. Contract rights are created by the state. There is no market without the state. So, we're always talking about the state. If we're talking about a corporation, as opposed to some other form of business, it's because the state has provided personhood, limited liability, and a whole apparatus of legal relationships, including protection of property rights, in order to enable that [business] to be a corporation. So, we're not just talking about any business. We're talking about a corporation. And so all these people who are talking about the market and corporations becoming responsible—including some of this kind of work on ethics through more egalitarian structure—all of that is basically saying that the state should get out of the business of creating these regulatory scripts to try to protect public interests, but stay in the business of creating corporations, property rights, and markets ... and then hoping, and trusting, and trying to find ways of doing this, to enable the market—that is created and enforced by the state—to operate in an ethical and socially responsible way. So, in that narrative, I say, "Why would we do that? Why shouldn't we continue the project, if we're going to use the state to create the market, why should we not use state power to vindicate the rights and interests of the people, which include their health, well-being, their economic security, their imaginations through culture, state funding of the Guelph Jazz Festival, or whatever. Why should the state only be involved in serving the needs of the market, and then we leave it to chance and luck and hope, that the market will work in a way that's ethical? Why shouldn't we require the market to work in a way that's ethical through our democratic citizenship, through public laws and regulations?

ML: You get into this a little bit in your books ... this discourse of market-based solutions to ethical problems, and that the market, through—

JB: Through its shareholders.

ML: —through shareholders, and stakeholders, and consumers and this kind of thing, right? Especially in that the age of the internet has created much greater potential scrutiny for corporate activities: we've seen this, for example in the case of the exposé of the Apple factory in China.

JB: True.

ML: So, some business ethics scholars have made the argument that we're currently living in a golden age of business ethics because of the kind of scrutiny that the internet permits. How would you respond to that?

JB: Well, I do in the book. I basically talk to one of those business scholars—a fellow from the Harvard Business School, Ira Jackson—and I address his argument. And the basic argument is that if we're going to rely on underfunded, non-governmental organizations [NGOs] with no enforcement power, with no inspection power, to put that information on websites that people may or may not see ... if that's going to be our way of regulating these powerful, state-created, and state-endowed entities with rights and powers ... I think we're deluding ourselves. The virtue of regulation is that you actually have well-funded organizations that have the wherewithal and the resources to research things—that have a right, and an entitlement and an authority to go into a plant and see what's going on, to go into a mine and see what's going on, to go into the tar sands and actually inspect, to actually enforce orders that are passed under legal regulations. That seems to me more desirable than leaving it to a corporate-run media, for the most part, which has the resources to shine the spotlight on some corporate misdeeds, or to NGOs which are for the most part underfunded; unlike state regulation agencies, they have no tax base to draw upon, but have to rely upon charitable donations from already-strapped potential fellow travelers—and they aren't going to be getting big grants from the corporations that they're investigating, so to get money they have to go to somebody like Bill Gates—whose foundation is only going to support *this* and not *that*. So, it seems almost silly to say that this is going to replace the structure of taxpayer-funded regulatory agencies operating under defined and clear legal norms, with the powers to inspect and enforce.

ML: I agree with you completely, and I present that argument partly as a straw man. But isn't there a clear inconsistency in representing the corporation as being, in some ways, something that is created and sustained by state regulations, but in other ways shouldn't be regulated by those regulations once it starts to exist?

JB: But the way that that works in the public imagination is that the corporation isn't seen as a product of the state. And markets aren't seen as a product of the state. They're seen as free and pre-political. If you make that move successfully, and can say that corporate capitalism is pre-political, and that it's only politics when you're trying to regulate it ... well then, you win the argument.

ML: Yes. I'm also wondering: nation-states have had a similarly deleterious impact on humanity as well at different points in time; I'm thinking about colonialism in the broadest possible sense. So what makes the state a more credible regulator than the corporation?

JB: The fundamental difference is that, if you believe in democracy, and if you actually have a democratic system—and by that I don't just mean majority rule, I mean all of the principles of equality, and protection of freedoms, all of that—then the notion is that the government in a democracy is supposed to be acting in the public interest, as defined by the public. That's the ideal. Do we meet or come anywhere close to that ideal? No. We don't. Have we seen examples of countries that do? Maybe. Maybe some northern European countries can be held out as examples of countries that have come closer than we have. Is it possible? I believe it is. So, it seems to me that this is the crossroads I'm talking about. We can look at this scenario and just say, "OK, let's give up on the project of the state being the protector of the public interest." In doing that, we're not necessarily going to a no-state situation because, as I mentioned, if we go to the market and corporations, that's still the state—that's an institution created and enforced by the state. You can't have the market, you can't have corporations without a very powerful state. So it seems to me that the issue in advanced capitalist nations is to try to find a better balance between the market-sustaining functions of the state, and the public interest-protecting functions of the state. I'm not saying that we're anywhere close to that balance, but I guess I hold out the ideal because I think it's better than any other ideal around: that we can actually create societies where we can have democratic governance, including democratic governance of the economy, and democratic governance where, institutionally, the government's main and only purpose is to serve and protect the public interest (in reflection of what the people themselves think the public interest is), and through mechanisms, through democratic institutions that are actually set up in such a way that they can reflect that.

The bottom line is that the corporation is constituted by the state to serve its own interests, and to exploit others in order to serve those interests. That is its institutional structure. So that institutional structure is never going to lend itself to being able to serve public interests. The *best* that it can do is to strategically say that it's pursuing some social responsibility then, in order to serve its own interests, whether by warding off regulators, or attracting customers, or

whatever, but social responsibility is always a strategic measure. Ethics are always a strategic measure within its institutional mandate to create wealth for those who compose it, namely its shareholders. So, at a very abstract level, what's the difference between the state in a democracy, and a corporation in a democracy? Well, the government in a democracy has an obligation to reflect what the people want, and to protect the public interest. A corporation in a democracy has an obligation to advance its shareholders' interests without concern for any other interests, or any other constituency. I mean, that is a fundamental institutional difference.

ML: Maybe this is a cynical question, but evidently, we're living at a point in history where there are all-time lows in voter turnout and all-time highs in terms of voter disenfranchisement ... whereas, there's a great deal of engagement within the citizenry with corporations. This idea of voting with one's dollars seems to be more popular, for lack of a better word, than voting with one's ballot.

JB: Well it's an illusion. It's an illusion. It's a delusion, I mean, God only knows we've gone through numerous periods in history where people are deluded. And they're deluded because those who control the production of knowledge in society have done a good job of deluding them. It's hard not to believe corporations are benevolent, compared to governments, when all you see on television, and all you read in the newspaper, is how nice corporations are: they provide nice products, their tar sands are fantastic, they're providing jobs ... just turn on your television: cancer is being fought by Enbridge, the northern gateway pipeline company. It's all *great* because we operate in a media culture that is run by companies for profit, and that depends, in terms of its model of monetization, on creating a positive environment for corporations to do what they do. We are going through a period in which corporations are working very hard, and investing very hard, in creating positive public images, through the corporate social responsibility movement, and I don't believe it's entirely insincere in terms of the actual employees of those companies. I believe many of them really believe in what they're doing. They believe it's great to do these things. *But*, what is happening, as you point out, is that we are in a moment where people have become very disaffected with the possibility of government. They don't trust government any more. And there are good reasons for that. But, partly, and this is the irony of it all, it's because government has become so beholden to serving the interests of capital and corporations that they're not trusted anymore. I mean, it's a bizarre ideological place that we're in, but that is the place that we're in, and it doesn't detract from the truth: that the corporation is what it is. That it's constituted to be what it is. That this creates profound limits on what it's likely to do vis-a-vis ethics, social responsibility, and saving the world. And that governments are at least putatively, though not always actually, designed to be democratic, and designed to serve the public interests. I mean, those are institutional realities.

But as I say, we've gone through many periods in history where the actual institutional realities at play are very much obscured by the pumping out of ideological products. And we live in a culture where the pumping out is very easy, because people are tuned into media, mainly corporate media, 24/7. Facebook is a for-profit corporation. Twitter is a for-profit corporation. These are vehicles that are used for marketing, including the social marketing of companies' images. So, to me the ultimate cynicism is giving up on what I consider to be some fairly conservative ideals, among them, that we should have public agencies that are accountable to the people, and that are required both by expectation and law to serve the people's interests. That seems to me to be an almost reactionary position these days, but that is my position. And that is a position ... when you stack it up beside what you see on television every night, in terms of how benevolent, wonderful, and socially-minded corporations are, and how bad and tax-hungry governments are ... it's very hard to hold on to that idea. But I do think that it's the right idea, and the true idea.

ML: I guess there are a couple of recommendations that you make in terms of reinvigorating citizens' faith in democratic institutions ... one of which is introducing proportional representation as an electoral system, and another of which, as I understand it, is diffusing regulatory power to local levels of government in different ways. So you talk about making trade unions for one, but also school and park boards for others ... giving them some say in terms of how regulations are meant to develop. So I'm wondering if you could go into a little more detail, for the purpose of the journal at least, as to what that would look like versus what we have now.

JB: I think it's really interesting that one of the reasons I see local government as potentially a vehicle, not only for achieving strong social results, but also for reactivating people's sense of citizenship, is that the notion that we always hear in terms of democracy as IS "we the people" ... that is not an abstract notion when you're talking about local government. The "we the people" are actually the folks that you live with for the most part. They're the people in your neighbourhood, in your community, in your city. So there's a way in which, when you bring it down to the local level of parks boards and city councils and what not, you kind of have the most tangible connection between the ideal of democracy—of the collective group presence of a community—and the actual possibility of it, when you're actually living with, and rubbing shoulders with, your fellow citizens, rather than being 4,000 km apart strewn across an entire country, or a province. That is interesting to me, because it means that, as a citizen, you can actually feel connected to what you're doing as a citizen.

I think that there are two things to be said that run in contradictory directions: one is that probably voter turnout is lowest in city elections and municipal elections. So, there is the least amount of interest at some level, which runs directly counter to what I'm saying. But, what I would say to that is that I think this is a place ... I mean, it's all about where we work. We're living in a society in which the notion of democracy is purely notional. We still *do* have institutions that are, at least at a formal level, democratic, but systemically we're living in a very eviscerated democratic culture. So, it's all a question of where you work, to try to restore some kind of actual democracy to the putative democracy that we live in. And I think working at the civic level is an interesting idea—not only for trying to achieve concrete results in your own community, but for organizing dissent and mobilizing progressive politics.

And we're seeing some really interesting examples. There's a firebrand mayor in the town of Smithers, in British Columbia, who's basically using City Council to pass resolutions against the Northern Gateway pipeline. Now, you know, that's not something that he, as a city politician, has any jurisdiction over, but it's a way of giving an official kind of stamp to a democratic sentiment. And cities: more than a hundred cities in the United States have passed resolutions to amend the constitution in order to overturn the "Citizens United" decision, which says that because corporations are persons, they can donate as much as they want to political campaigns. And there are many, many more examples of local governments actually acting in a way that's outside their jurisdiction to coalesce, and bring together, and mobilize political action. I think that's really interesting, in terms of activating people's sense of citizenship.

ML: What's the role of central government, then, in this model?

JB: One of the issues I teach in at the law school is federalism, which is all about the relationship between federal jurisdiction and provincial jurisdiction and, to some extent, municipal jurisdiction. And I think it's a very complicated question, as to how exactly you organize your distribution of governmental authority from national to provincial, or state to regional. It's not a question I can answer in the abstract. I think the way we operate as a federal state is quite interesting, because we have a lot of overlap in terms of jurisdiction. And I think that's not a bad thing. It used to be the case that the courts took a very bright-line view of jurisdiction, of provinces, and national governments. And as a result of that, you ended up with this weird constitutional law that prohibited both the feds and the provinces from regulating in certain areas because neither could find a footing within the constitution. And that played into a kind of deregulatory ethos, but more modern jurisprudence basically says that we're going to be very flexible. We're going to allow for both levels of government to regulate on different things, in different ways, as long as they don't conflict with each other, which is a broader and more permissive approach to regulation, and I think that's positive. And, what it means when you do that, is that the precise way that you distribute powers between the different levels of government, isn't as much of a be-all and end-all. There's flexibility in the system. And I think flexibility is good, so that people can live out their citizen lives at the national level, at the provincial level, and at the city level without it being an either/or proposition. So, that's what I think, to answer a very abstract question in a somewhat abstract way. That's kind of the approach that I think we should take.

ML: To make it even a little bit more abstract, and to tie it back to the improvisation issue, it strikes me that this kind of shuttling back and forth of jurisdictional authority between levels of government, based on local needs, is a kind of improvisational jurisprudence. Does that make sense?

JB: Absolutely! As a jazz musician, I always favour modes of political organization that encourage listening. I mean, to me, listening is the thing that is most absent from our lives, from our politics, from our social relations. It's a real art. And, to me it is *the* art to successful, communal relationships, and to successful communities. And, when you look at how people listen, it becomes fairly clear that people are trained much better in speaking than they are in listening, for the most part. And I see the two as corollary. You can't speak intelligently if you aren't able to hear others, and if you aren't able to empathize with others as listeners. I mean, both of those are necessary. So I totally agree that improvisation, this is the key to it. At least, good improvisation, in my view, is that you're really hearing. You're hearing the changes. If you're soloing, you're hearing what the piano player, [the] guitar player is doing with the changes ... the chord player is hearing what the bass player is doing, what the drummer is doing. So there's this incredible complex thing going on, in which what everybody is doing is affecting what everybody else is doing, and it works beautifully when it works. And it's also happening, generally, within a structure, unless you're playing, complete free improvisational music. But even there, generally, you have a time structure that you're working within. So, I mean usually you're working within a harmonic structure, a melodic structure, a temporal structure, and even when it appears to be structureless, there's some kind of inchoate structure going on. And if there isn't a deliberate structure, there's the structure of what all the improvisers share in their imaginations, because they all grew up listening to Bird and Diz, even though they now say, "Oh, that's so old school, and we're going beyond that," and they listen to Ornette Coleman. You know, they've all grown up in the same vocabulary, to some extent. So, even if it appears structureless, those inchoate, unconscious structures of having listened to roughly the same liturgy are structuring what's going on, and how you're each listening to each other.

You know all this more than I do, because I don't study improvisation. But, just on the basis of actually doing it, that's how it appears to me. So that's an incredibly powerful model for promoting listening. My only concern, and it goes to back to what we talked about at the beginning, is, what are you using that as a means towards? I mean, when I'm playing jazz, I use it as a means towards having that incredible experience on the bandstand, and hopefully providing a great experience for the audience. When you're in a corporation, you're using it as a means towards trying to make the corporation do what it's programmed to do better. And if it's programmed to exploit in order to create wealth—and I'm using exploit in the technical way, like exploiting resources, or exploiting labour—if it's programmed to exploit in order to create wealth for its shareholders, and improvisation is a means to helping to do that better, then I'm not sure improvisation is very progressive. So that takes us back right to the first point.

ML: There's a lot of writing about stakeholder theory, and the idea that the consumer can regulate the marketplace by demanding that corporations listen to the consumer base, right? And that corporations must be responsive ... must use sort of a deep listening practice to respond to consumer needs in order to both fulfill the ontological, or definitional needs of the institution, and at the same time fulfill the needs of their consumer base. So there's this sort of rhetoric about, what's good for GM is good for America. What's good for the institution is good for the consumer base. So is there something, in your view, ontological about the corporation that prevents the corporation from doing the type of listening that we're talking about?

JB: Well, I mean ... it's more a question of what it's going to hear. And if what it's supposed to hear is what is best for the consumer, then you have to ask, "What does that mean?" What is best for the shareholder? What does that mean? Generally, when we operate in the world—and this is an ontological point as well—when we operate in the world, we operate in different roles. I mean, we're a worker, we're a consumer, we're a husband, we're a father. We are a citizen. And, when we're in our consumer role, our basic concern is to get a product that we like, or that we've been trained to like through marketing, for a decent price. Now, does that mean consumers only think that ... well, no, they'd also like to know that Starbucks is being nice to coffee farmers, and they'd like to know that GM is putting out an electric car, even though they're not buying that particular car. So, in a kind of interstitial, and somewhat incidental way, the consumer imagination is interested in certain kinds of social behaviours, or at least *the image* of those behaviours. Because most consumers don't go much further than that (including me, as a consumer). So, in our role as consumers, I think our imaginations are somewhat limited by our primary concern. I mean, Coca-Cola? Listen to consumers? You know: "Be nicer to the environment." "Make a product that tastes better than Pepsi." "Don't charge me too much, and don't make me too fat if I drink your product." Right? Well, I mean if Coca-Cola were really listening to what consumers *really* need, they would go out of business, because they're producing a product that doesn't really serve any good in the world, and that is unhealthy when drunk in any kind of quantity. It doesn't *do* anything useful for the world. The socially responsible thing for Coca-Cola to do is not make its product anymore—I mean, from one perspective. But if you're a consumer of Coca-Cola, by definition, that's not your perspective. And it can't be, it doesn't make sense. But as a *citizen*, you might say, "You know what, I think Coca-Cola you should be restricted in some ways ... we should ban supersize portions, it shouldn't be marketed to children," or whatever.

So, part of the whole problem in all of this and it gets back to everything we've been talking about ... is, why should I give up my "citizen-self" for my "consumer-self?" Because I don't think my consumer-self can really do what my citizen-self can do. And why should I conflate all my citizen concerns into my role as consumer? Why can't I have another place to go, where I am a citizen of that polis? Where my polis isn't the Coca-Cola company or GM? And so, even if the corporation can listen in that way, what it's listening to is part of an entire sort of grammar, and ideology, and nexus of interests, and legal constraints, that will cause those who are speaking to it to speak in a particular way, and to hear in a particular way. So, it really gets back to all of those other issues.

ML: I've written a little bit elsewhere about the ways in which corporate social responsibility discourse invites the consumer to advocate her or his own citizenship and self, specifically in terms of global responsibilities and ethics. That, you know, by shopping at Starbucks, or shopping at Wal-Mart, now that Wal-Mart has their new sustainability regulations in terms of their suppliers, or by drinking Coca-Cola now that they're sponsoring their polar bear project ... this kind of thing. As a consumer, you no longer need to worry about these issues because you can have faith that the corporation is taking care of them for you on your behalf. So, with that in mind, it seems to a certain degree, that the corporation *is* fulfilling a need in a sort of globally disinterested consumer base.

JB: Yeah, it is fulfilling a need. As a consumer, it's consuming a sense of feeling good about consuming. Because the consumer feels that by going to Starbucks instead of Blenz they're doing something virtuous. And, you know, it's not unlike on your Facebook page, "liking" some cause. It's an entirely passive role. It's one that makes you feel good, in much the same way that the product itself. I mean, it's another appeal to human emotions ... which are real. Which is, "I'd like to have a better world ... I'm not going to necessarily work too hard as a consumer to get it, but if this company is saving polar bears, and this one is promoting sustainability, that's great! I can actually feel good! And I can consume more!"

Let's just look at that example of Wal-Mart and its sustainability practices; it's not unlike the Coke example that I just mentioned. When Wal-Mart says "sustainability," they don't say "sustainability" in a way that would work against their own interests. So, what that means is, the very concept of sustainability has to be reinterpreted, or interpreted, or put in a context that is consistent with what Wal-Mart does. What Wal-Mart does is try to expand consumerism. Wal-Mart wants to sell more t-shirts and more television sets. In Wal-Mart's hands, sustainability, as a concept, is never going to say, "Don't sell more t-shirts. Don't sell more television sets." Sustainability is going to be consistent with the growth of production and the growth of consumption. So, Wal-Mart says we're being sustainable by ensuring that our suppliers use green practices. So, those who source us have to use green practices. So, ergo, we are producing what we are producing in a way that is more sustainable than it used to be. But does that mean that we should produce less of it? God no. Does that mean we shouldn't grow our markets? No. So, if you take the view as a citizen, that sustainability actually means reducing growth, which is a totally plausible view, and many sustainability experts say that's exactly the case, then the self-interested narrowing of the concept of sustainability is something to regret.

The point I'm making is that through this kind of move towards corporate social responsibility, the very question of "what is good?" is being re-interpreted—the very question of social good, of the good society, of the meaning of sustainability, of what it means to be an environmentalist. That, as corporations take on these causes, they re-interpret what those causes are, and, by necessity, they re-interpret those causes and those ideals, and those ambitions, and those social goods in terms consistent with their fundamental mission. And, by definition, they therefore *narrow* those terms. So, sustainability, in the hands of Wal-Mart, is a very different concept than sustainability as I would see it. Yet, Wal-Mart has a lot more firepower than I do in terms of propagating and proselytizing that notion of sustainability. So they win both ways! They win by being the flag-bearer of sustainability, and they win by proactively narrowing the concept of sustainability so it won't really hurt them.

ML: So, in a situation where this is becoming increasingly commonplace, are these problems that can be corrected simply through regulation, or is there a broader cultural shift that needs to happen to re-focus social responsibility and global ethics onto the consumer as citizen? Or the individual as citizen, I guess?

JB: Well, there is a broader shift because in our current ideological context there is the idea that we will collectively, through our democratically elected governments, impose regulations that properly balance the production of goods and services, and consumption, against broader public goods like health, and welfare, and equality, and justice, and sustainability. But we've become dysfunctional in terms of our ability to do that. And a result of that dysfunction is that many of us have said, "We're just giving up on the project, and praying and hoping and trusting that corporations will do it on their own." So, in order to restore the notion of public governance—which is really what I think we're talking about: public, democratic, governance—we need a broad cultural shift. How we go about creating that shift, I think, is the big question of the day, and of the time. And as I suggested before, I think mobilizing people's sense that democracy, public governance, citizenship is actually key to having a future as a society ... that actually being able to define collectively our future as a society ... not leaving it to corporations to do it, or unaccountable governments, or authoritarian dictators, but to actually believe in the project of self-governance. I'm not sure how we get from here to there, because I think we've lost that belief. But as I've suggested before, as I look across the democratic landscape, it's actually at the local level that I see some of the most progressive momentum, and some of the most sustaining momentum, in terms of people's sensibilities, in terms of what's possible within public institutions.

ML: So I guess, one more question on that note then: if optimism is to be found in these kinds of improvisatory local movements, and local political structures ... how then, can that kind of momentum be translated to address what is essentially a global problem? Part of the logic I guess, or the rhetoric, of neoliberal deregulation is that deregulation is necessary in order to attract corporate investment on a national scale. So, if your nation doesn't have the appropriate amount of deregulation then you'll lose the corporate investment to another nation-state. So it becomes a capital competition.

JB: Right, battle to the least. And we do that within nations as well, as between states and provinces. All I can say is that, if our task is to try to create a world that's sustainable, a world that's just, a world where human rights are protected, a world where people have access to clean water and to food, where there's a certain level of safety and security, where we have jobs that are meaningful and sustaining, where we have education, where we have cultural goods and capital that help us become better human beings, that help us flourish, that tap into our higher, and more curious selves ... if we're trying to create that world, then the neoliberal agenda is not getting us there.

The neoliberal agenda basically makes its determinations on the basis of numbers: how much wealth is created, how much GDP there is, how much GNP there is, and how those numbers work. On how much efficiency there is, meaning how cheap it is for companies to produce. There are a whole set of standards out there that the neoliberal agenda implies—and explicitly states—that are the standards of what it means to have a good society. And somehow, you know, it doesn't add up in terms of the numbers ... but even putting that aside, the very criteria, of

what a good society is, is *seriously* warped, and doesn't have anything to do with all those things that I was just talking about. The best that neoliberalism will say is something like, "As a consequence of serving the needs of capital mobility, and increasing production, and increasing growth, as a consequence of that, maybe there will be more access to clean water and jobs and all that stuff." But those things can never be ends in themselves ... the goal in the end is always to increase production, increase growth, push down the costs of production, regardless of the consequences for all of those other values. So, a thousand years from now people will look back and say, "Well, those two things clearly don't match up: the criteria by which neoliberalism says a society is good, versus what the people want and need."

But we operate in a world of ideological delusion. That's not to say that we're duped and that we're not intelligent. We operate in a world where the glut of information—what we take for granted, what we believe can't be questioned, what we believe is inevitable, what is hegemonic—is crafted, it's built, it's there, and it's real! And it's all we have to go on. It's very hard to know how you break out of that cycle. How do you form these kinds of revolutionary movements of thought and imagination? I don't know; I don't know how we get from here to a place where we better serve the values of humanity and the values of a sustainable planet. But I do see—and this is what worries me—a kind of co-optation of all of those values by institutions, by corporations, that really do not have the institutional capacity to genuinely pursue those values. That's one way of describing where we're at, and it's quite a dangerous place.

ML: So in terms of the stuff you've talked about with local movements and local political maneuvers as being the site and the source of optimism: is it just a question of generating momentum across localities into a global movement?

JB: It is in part. I'm not saying we shouldn't be working at the national and the provincial level. I am a supporter of the New Democratic Party, and I think that we will get closer to what we're trying to realize if, in the next federal election, or the next provincial election in British Columbia, or both, if that party wins, rather than the Conservatives, or, in British Columbia, the Liberals. So, I think you have to work on all fronts. I guess what I really believe is that, if we actually took seriously—for a certain amount of time every day, maybe taking some time away from Facebook, and the Shopping Channel—if we actually took seriously not just the rights of being citizens in a public polity, but actually the *duties* of doing that, and thought about, "What does that mean?" I mean, does that mean that I write a letter to the editor? Does it mean I write a letter to a political representative? Does it mean I join a political party? Does it mean I become involved in the Canadian Center for Policy Alternatives? Or some other new NGO? What does it mean? Aside from what it means in the marketplace, in other words, whether I should buy a Starbucks or a Blenz, but what does it mean in terms of my engagement with the domain of public democracy? And what can I do?

And I guess my view is, if we have those thoughts, and we do something ... and we all do that ... I mean this sounds very naïve, but that if we can re-occupy our citizen-selves—I don't care if it's on the national, provincial, local level, I don't care if it's an NGO—if we occupy that place of actually seeing ourselves as part of a community, as having responsibilities for the governance and constitution of that community ... and then we act ... I think only good can come of that. What worries me about our current society is that we are being pulled away from that, and into our consumer-selves as a totalizing kind of self, where even our ambitions for our community and our society get wrapped up in how and when and what we consume. And *that*, to me, is the kind of profoundly revolutionary moment we're at, and it's not a good revolution. It's that we're actually seeing a takeover of our citizen-selves by our consumer-selves. Anyway, that's one way of describing it, I suppose.

ML: Well, it seems that there's a note of an optimistic call to action in there that might be a good place to end the discussion, at least for the time being.

JB: Yes, occupy your citizen-self; be skeptical of your consumer-self and the hegemony that sustains it. I think that the ultimate act of optimism is to be skeptical of the world you inhabit, because it means you believe in the possibility of a better world. I think too often skepticism and cynicism are confused. They are absolute polar opposites.

Notes

¹ Thanks to Daniel Kruger for transcribing this interview.