COALITION OF THE WILLING
.ORG.UK

Beyond Copenhagen

In December 2009, leaders of state from about the world met in Copenhagen, Denmark to negotiate a historical accord to save the planet from catastrophic warming. The outcome of the summit is a victory for major polluters and the status quo. What happened? How is it that, presented with clear evidence of a looming catastrophe, the international community settled for such a tepid response?

We know that industry strives for profit and governments strive for growth. A full-scale war on global warming calls for industry to drastically reduce its carbon footprint. The short-term result would be rising production costs and reduced profit. Not the best outcome, especially in times of recession.

But the major stumbling block is the enemy involved. A war on global warming needs to be a war on consumerism – the status quo in our developed societies. So really: a war on the mainstream constituency of the capitalist state. Reality check: no government will declare war on its own citizens.

Don't hold your breath for a 'shock and awe' campaign on global warming. Governments today just aren't up to the task.

Fortunately, the war on global warming isn't in the hands of government alone. It's time for a new approach – an approach that mobilizes the creative energies of the global population and turns the way we see the problem on its head. We need to find a way of waking people from their consumerist daze and showing them how empowering a war-effort could be. People could contribute so much more than just turning off the lights.

Back to the 60s

To appreciate the way ahead, we need to look back to the 1960s. When we think of the 60s, we think of the birth of a new individualism. The 60s revolutionaries kicked against the social values that they'd inherited from the decade before. Throwing themselves into the unknown, they conducted radical experiments with new forms of life. They liberated their desires through sexual expression and free-love, threw open the doors of perception through drugs and radical philosophy, and made music and art to celebrate the spiritual transformation of a whole generation. The 60s countercultural revolutionaries shrugged-off the straight jacket of mass-market culture and embraced a new era of individual expression.

However, our perspective on the 60s tends to be overly focused on individualism. This is on account of the way that capitalism adapted itself through the 1970s and 80s.

The 60s caught capitalism completely off guard. How were companies to sell products to a generation that had rejected consumerism? The answer was to tune into the movement and to sell to the 'individual' in everyone. The strategy worked. The marketing machine captured the spirit of 60s individualism and made it its own.

Today this leaves us doubly compromised. On the one hand, we've become used to defining ourselves by the things we buy. Leaving ideology behind, we now derive a sense of personal identity and empowerment from the goods we purchase and consume. We've become revolutionary exponents of 'over-the-counter' culture, fired by the rallying cry: "Go on, break the rules, define who you are – with our sneakers!"

On the other hand, we've inherited an incomplete picture of history. Blinded by individualistic short-sightedness, we've failed to see what the 60s revolution was really all about.

Swarm politics

The 60s was only superficially a decade of individualism. If the countercultural revolution transformed society, it was because individuals, knowingly or unknowingly, acted en masse as a swarm.

The countercultural revolution was a rhizomatic meshwork of loosely-coordinated, loosely-affiliated struggles. The goals of these struggles weren't always complimentary, but the struggles were aligned and together they staged a mass offensive to shatter the status quo.

The real lesson of the 60s is that a swarm offensive can transform cultures and change history in extraordinary ways. It's easy to see how we might bring this insight up to date. Thanks to the internet, the world is networked like never before. We can use the internet to kick-start our own revolution – harnessing the energy of the human swarm, and focusing it on THE problem of our time.

Let's take our lead from Web 2.0 and the strategies of open source culture. It's time to recover the true spirit of the 60s counterculture, with an internet-based swarm offensive aimed at triggering a 21st century culture shift.

Open source culture

The term 'open source' refers to a software development strategy in which the source code is made available to a community. This way everyone can make changes and improvements to the software. An example of the success of this strategy is the globally established computer operating system LINUX, which was created, and is still constantly updated, by contributions from all over the world.

Wikipedia is another famous example of open source culture. It has over 75000 contributors working on more than 10000000 articles in over 250 languages.

The open source approach to collaboration enables people from all over the planet to engage and create together. Since projects aren't managed from the top-down, participants can explore all sorts of different collaborative ventures. Imagine what we could achieve with an open source approach to the war on global warming.

We need the infrastructure to get this started. We need a network of high-profile online destinations that people from all over the world can use to share their knowledge and generate the tools, innovations and social networks that we need to combat climate change.

The network

Imagine a web 2 network comprised of three sites working as a linked system.

The first part of the system is a Green Knowledge Trust. This is a green Wikipedia with a practical focus. The war effort needs more than just facts. We need an online repository of practical knowledge, a 'how to' guide for ordinary people tasked with setting-up functional, low-carbon societies. The Green Knowledge Trust is a place where people share high-quality knowledge on low carbon living. It would be information central for the war on global warming.

The second part of the system is an Open Innovation Centre. Imagine an online research site devoted to environmental problems that is open to input from any-one. Organizations post problems on the site and ask for solutions. Anyone is free to submit ideas and form groups. Together they could work-up genuine concepts. As the projects take shape, they'd attract the attention of experts from about the world, who'd contribute their unique skills to the projects. A swarm can be smarter than any one of us working alone. An Open Innovation Centre would enable us to tap into our collective genius.

To coordinate these sites we need a Catalyst System – a social-networking site designed to crystallize the global movement for change. You're familiar with MySpace and Facebook. Now imagine a social-networking site designed to put you in touch with real-world projects, locally, nationally and all over the planet. There is GPS technology giving you a graphic representation of where projects are located in your region. You can zero-in to find out more about the people involved. Impressed by an idea you got from the Open Innovation Centre and want to try putting it to work? Use the classified feature to find grants and sponsors, then link up with like minded people and not-for-profits campaigning for change.

The challenge

The 60s countercultural revolution revealed how swarm activity can transform the fabric of society. By inspiring and enabling new forms of creative collaboration between activists, experts and ordinary citizens, a network like the one that we've described could spark a swarm offensive for the internet age. This could transform the nature of the war on global warming and trigger a new era of global collaborative culture.

Get ready to change the world. There are millions of others waiting to play their part. All that they need is the infrastructure to make it happen. We have the tools that we need to construct this infrastructure. We have the talent and intelligence to make it a system people will want to use. Lord knows we have the motivation to get busy. So get started, before it's too late. Log on, converge, and swarm.

Written by Tim Rayner & Simon Robson.