



ENTANGLEMENTS

Weaving Our Futures

SIMON WESTERN



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Simon Western



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*To Lily and Albert
Weaving beautiful futures*



*With gratitude
to Megan and Martyna for their work to produce this book
to Agata for sharing a beautiful journey with me
to colleagues & friends of the Eco-Leadership Institute
for the soul-work we do together*

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About the author

Dr Simon Western is Founder and CEO of the Eco-Leadership Institute, a global think tank advancing innovative leadership practices through action research, development programmes, and cultural change work. He works with diverse organisations including humanitarian NGOs, global manufacturing, finance and global technology companies. Simon's work integrates theory and practice, drawing on psychoanalysis, critical and anarchist theory, theology, and social movement perspectives. His work transcends the university, and is grounded in extensive lived experience (see Chapter 1). He is the author of influential books including *Leadership: A Critical Text* (SAGE, 3rd edn) and *Coaching and Mentoring: A Critical Text*. Formerly, Simon led the Masters in Organisational Consultancy at the Tavistock Clinic and was Director of Coaching at Lancaster University Management School. A past President of the International Society for the Psychoanalytic Study of Organizations (ISPSO), he has trained over 600 coaches worldwide in his research-based Eco-Leadership Coaching System. He writes regularly on Substack and hosts the popular Edgy Ideas podcast, both focusing on what it means to live a good life and to create the good society.

Introduction

Messy entanglements are at the heart of human relationships, and our social and cultural lives are entangled with our non-human companions on this planet. There is an interdependence that has long been ignored or marginalised. This book aims to explore these entanglements, not with the aim to untangle or simplify, but to add something not previously considered, to provoke thinking that lies outside our normal way of seeing a situation. We live in a moment in time where we share a broad societal predicament. Our challenge is how to transition away from a twentieth-century modernist way of being, where a good society is perceived as being ordered, stable, hierarchical, and boundaried. The modernist way of being is underpinned by a faith in science, rationality, and hierarchy alongside excessive individualism and constant ‘progress’ driven by growth that is based on extractive economics. This has led to the environmental crisis and societal inequities that undermine social solidarity.

We have entered a new era, the Precarious-Interdependent Age (P-I Age).¹ The P-I Age reflects that polycrisis and precariousness have become the norm. Our interdependences on each other, on our multi-species companions, and on planet Earth itself have become unsettlingly obvious. The P-I Age undoes the status quo, and our task now is to learn

how to live well in a world of environmental, technological, and social disruption. How do we live well in an unstable and increasingly entangled, fluid, interconnected society? Modern mindsets extract humans from the environment, creating a social imaginary that separates culture and nature. Nature became an object to exploit, a resource to use for power and pleasure.

To make the transition from modernity to the P-I Age means to relate differently to our lived-in worlds. Humans belong to a dynamic and fragile ecosystem, a web of life made up of people, technology, and the natural environment. There are no separate parts, only interconnections and interdependencies. This transition ignites tensions between those who recognise our independencies, who press for a collaborative engagement, and those in retreat, building walls in our minds based on fear.

The purpose of the book is to support the transition towards a dynamic and collaborative existence. One that embraces our entangled, lived-in worlds and discovers a richness within them. Drawing on psychoanalysis, social critique, and personal experience, the book observes what moves beneath the surface. The aim is to glimpse insights beyond the obvious, which may open us to engage with our entangled lives in more creative and dynamic ways.

The book weaves together social threads harvested from a series of short essays written over the past seven years. These stand-alone essays were written to search for diverse meanings, to take ethical stances, to identify unconscious dynamics lurking within our social imaginations, and to make connections between deep personal experience and the political and social worlds. Each essay was written at the time a particular event or cultural theme took place, bringing the book immediacy and aliveness.

Each event and theme is explored through the lens of looking awry. As a movie director moves and changes the angle of filming to reveal a new reality, we too change our gaze, using a critical and curious lens in order to see something fresh that adds a new dimension to our understanding. This work is done with a psychoanalytic sensibility to gain access to the unconscious and emotional content of social events and themes. I take a meta-position, to gain insights into how events and themes have symbolic and signifying meanings that get lost in

day-to-day responses. I also bring a micro-position, a personal and subjective perspective. In my work as a coach and therapist, I work with the concept of the ‘self-as-an-instrument’, where my clients and I use our emotions, thoughts, and body experiences as data that tells us something about the wider system we are part of. Bringing our deepest human experience to the work of building a good society is at the heart of this book. There are three parts:

Part I: Dislocating events. These chapters address powerful events that have had a dislocating impact on society. I begin with the Covid pandemic that shook the world and move to the invasion of Ukraine and the conflict in Israel and Palestine. These two wars provoked me to question where do I/we stand and what can I/we say in the face of such horror and violence. I then reflect on the death of Queen Elizabeth II, which marked a significant moment and raised questions about institutions and power. This theme continues in a different way, exploring the rise of populism through the lens of Brexit and Donald Trump’s first presidency.

Part II: Rising tides. The chapters in Part II are not about specific events but about social themes that have gained prominence and reveal the shifting sands of our cultural landscapes. Taken-for-granted norms are challenged, such as how therapy culture and positive thinking have become pervasive in westernised culture. They address dominant social themes that spoke directly to my experience. The themes I have chosen are those that left me troubled, because of the way they polarise, entrap, and influence us. The environmental emergency, political culture wars, diversity, therapy culture, the positivity trap, and the digital age all create rising tides of emotions and tensions. I finish this section with three chapters on re-enchantment. These focus on making personal soul connections with everyday living and creating a link to Part III.

Part III: Weaving our futures. This section finishes the book with two chapters: one offering a meta-view of the new paradigm we face, which I call the Precarious-Interdependent Age. The final chapter weaves together some of the themes that occur throughout the book and presents thoughts on our futures.

This book was born from the entanglements that emerged when these singular essays were first looked at as a collective. Written as stand-alone polemic commentaries on particular events as they happened, a retrospective overview reading them collectively revealed interconnected and entangled threads. These threads, when woven together, create patterns that offer insights into how we might weave together better futures.