Murray Bookchin: The Man Who Brought Radical Ecology and Assembly Democracy into the Left

by Janet Biehl

Murray Bookchin (1921-2006) understood earlier than almost anyone that an ecological crisis was not only looming but posted a challenge to capitalism and the whole social order. In the 1950s and 1960s, before most people even knew what ecology was, he was proposing fundamental solutions. Being ahead of his time, however, meant that his ideas were either ignored or condemned when they were first published; they remain insufficiently recognized today.

Bookchin joined the American Communist movement at the age of nine, during the Great Depression; disillusioned, he was a Trotskyist—a member of the Socialist Workers Party (Fourth International)—from 1939 to 1947. He thereafter abjured political Marxism but remained committed to advancing the project of anticapitalist revolution. He would rethink revolutionary politics, find a new framework for it. He dedicated the rest of his life to theorizing, inspiring, and trying to organize a revolution that would be not only socialist but (unlike Marxian socialism) antihierarchical, democratic, and ecological.

Starting in 1952, Bookchin began writing about "the problem of chemicals in food" for the New York-based journal *Contemporary Issues*. He argued that the use of pesticides, herbicides, and other chemicals in agriculture was having toxic effects on human health. To reduce the need for them, he advocated a marriage of town and country—that is, producing food near where it is to be consumed, sowing, maintaining, and harvesting crops locally. He criticized the use of monocultures and called for crop diversity; he condemned the exhaustion of topsoil and called for crop rotation; he denounced large-scale, centralized agriculture, which reduced farmers to laborers, and called instead for small-scale farming, in which the those who worked the land maintained a valued connection to the natural world. Overall, he condemned the absorption of agriculture into the capitalist system, where it served the imperative of maximizing profit, and instead called for organic farming, integrated with rather than separated from human settlements. On a philosophical level, he criticized the alienation of humanity from nature.

But during the 1950s, when Americans were busy celebrating "better living through chemistry," few wanted to hear about health hazards of those chemicals, or the psychosocial hazards of capitalism.

In those days, the U.S., locked in an arms race with the Soviet Union, was testing nuclear weapons in the Pacific. Gradually a movement emerged to oppose the testing. Bookchin was part of it, raising the alarm that fallout was also harmful to human health. Unlike other members of the emerging 1950s peace movement, he criticized not only weapons testing but also "atoms for peace"—nuclear power. In

1963 Con Ed proposed building a nuclear reactor in Ravenswood, Queens, in 1963. Bookchin joined the fight against it, which was the first community struggle against nuclear power—which successfully killed the project.

In the early 1960s new threats to human health appeared to be everywhere. Giant cities were sites of mounting air and water pollution; poisoned air and water too were giving rise to physical illness. Just living in oversized cities was a source of unremitting stress, and stress (it was just coming to be understood) had negative health effects.

Huge cities—megalopolis—were causing another, longer-term problem. They were depended on the use of fossil fuels. But fossil fuels, he wrote in 1965, were producing something called the greenhouse effect: "This growing blanket of carbon dioxide, by intercepting heat radiated from the earth into outer space, will lead to rising atmospheric temperatures, to a more violent circulation of air, to more destructive storm patterns, and eventually to a melting of the polar ice caps (possibly in two or three centuries), rising sea levels, and the inundation of vast land areas. Far removed as such a deluge may be, the changing proportion of carbon dioxide to other atmospheric gases is a warning of the impact man is having on the balance of nature."

Such a planet was not a place where people could survive. Ordinary people, Bookchin was convinced, would not stand for it. They would not tolerate these widespread and systematic assaults on their health, on the integrity of their bodies. They would not stand for the destruction of the environment by the greenhouse effect. In the interests of sheer survival, they would rise up against the system that was producing all these effects. The limit to capitalism was not, as Marx had argued, the immiseration of the proletariat; it was the erosion of human health.

A society without capitalism would be one that was humanly scaled, in which town and country were integrated; in which farming was local and part of everyday life.

And it would be free of fossil fuels.

Large cities, he pointed out, depend on large centralized energy systems. Since the 1950s, he pointed out, scientist at MIT had been experimenting with new, alternative sources of energy: the sun, the wind the tides. These forces of nature could be be harnessed virtually anywhere. Unlike fossil fuels, which are integral to massively scaled conurbations, these alternative sources of energy lend themselves to decentralized generation and ownership. They can be used at a community scale in solar panels and wind turbines, in small hydro, geothermal plants. Starting

in the early 1960s, Murray argued that solar, wind, and tidal energy were suited to a small-scale, self-managed, decentralized of self-managed communities.

But social ecology, as he soon called this body of ideas, did not mean a return to benighted medieval-style peasantry. Thanks to modern manufacturing technology—which Bookchin saw as mostly positive--labor and toil could be eliminated. People would not have to work, because machines would do the work. They would be free to be creative.

In 1962 he published these ideas in book called *Our Synthetic Environment*. A few months later Rachel Carson published Silent Spring, which wholly upstaged him, and also put the critique of pesticides in a framework that was compatible with capitalism.

But in the long run Bookchin was right that the problem was system. While Carson deserves credit for sparking the modern environmental movement, Bookchin—with his more radical critique--deserves credit as the father of the radical ecology movement. His 1964 "Ecology and Revolutionary Thought" was the first manifesto of radical ecology.

In the mid-1960s, he and his political group—the New York Federation of Anarchists--went to demonstrations carrying signs that called for "ecology and community" people said, "what's ecology?" He tried to convince major figures in the New Left that ecology should be a basic issue for them. But they were too preoccupied with emulating Che Guevara and Mao Zedong and Ho Chi Minh and mounting international Marxist revolution. They considered concern for the environment and chemicals to be petty bourgeois and some mocked Murray as "Smokey the Bear."

But with Earth Day 1970 and the onset of the environmental movement, his ideas were suddenly timely. In 1974 he co-founded a school in Vermont—the Institute for Social Ecology—that gave thousands of baby boomers their first exposure to organic farming and solar and wind energy.

If this developing set of ideas had been Bookchin's entire contribution, he would deserve a place in radical history. But there was more. He was the first to make assembly democracy part of the socialist project.

Abandoning Marxism also meant abandoning Marxian ideas about revolutionary institution. Rethinking the revolutionary project meant determining new revolutionary institutions, indeed the political structure of the new society, in a way that would not recapitulate Marxist authoritarianism. There must be no more Stalins, no more Robespierres. The new revolutionary movement would have to be

free of tyranny--libertarian. And instead of leaving it to a vanguard Politburo to make decisions, it would make decisions democratically.

Starting back in those same 1950s that were so creative for him, he became an advocate of face-to-face democracy. He realized that the ancient Athenians had managed a whole society collectively, through citizens' assemblies. If it could be done once, it could be done again. Indeed, now that advanced technology reduce the need for manufacturing labor, society could potentially equal or surpass the ancient Athenian democracy.

Starting in the late 1970s, Bookchin tried to convince the left that this was the best course to take. The Marxists of the New Left were not interested, but anarchism, under his auspices, underwent a revival and embraced his call for community self-management in an ecological society. Some anarchists mocked him as an "institution freak," but he understood that it was the responsibility of a revolutionary movement to provide a framework for the new society.

For revolutionary movement organization, he began (in 1969) advancing the affinity group as the fundamental unit. A student and historian of 1930s revolutionary Spanish anarchism, he discovered that these libertarians had organized themselves as *grupos de afinidad,* bands of small, close-knit activists working together on common projects. It was Bookchin who brought the name and the idea from Spanish anarchism into the American context. The antinuclear movement Clamshell Alliance (in which he participated) took up the affinity group as it unit of organization in 1976-78. Affinity groups have since become basic to leftist movement organizing, up to the 1999 anti-WTO Seattle protests and beyond.

If the affinity group was for movement organization, the institutional unit for the new society would be the face-to-face democratic citizens assembly. The antidote to social control by large impersonal forces, to hierarchy and domination, to the market economy and to the market society, and to the commodification of all aspects of social and individual life is to face-to-face association from the bottom up—to build an ethical movement against capitalism, and a communal democracy. ."We desperately need a decentralized society," he would tell audiences, "a revitalization of community, a re-empowerment of our citizens, a vital public sphere in which people can recover contact with each other and take control of their own destinies."

When environmentalists argued that the fabric of life could be preserved by curbing the excesses of capitalism with legislation, like Clean Air and Water acts, Bookchin denied it, calling such views reformism; only (social) ecology, he argued, by working to eliminate capitalism, could get at the root cause of the ecology crisis. He insisted against all comers that the root causes are social, as opposed to, say, biological. Some tried to pin the to blame asocial factors—overpopulation (Paul

Ehrlich), technology (Theodore Roszak)—while others (primitivists, deep ecologists) are misanthropic enough to argue that humans are of no greater value than any other organism in the biosphere.

He denied it all, affirming that the problem lies not in our bedrooms (overpopulation) or in our technology (most of which will actually contribute to liberation) or in our DNA but in our social arrangements: in a the grow-or-die market economy in which businesses must compete to undersell each other and to maximize profits, an imperative that is tearing down the planet. His argument is a hopeful one: if the problem really lay in human nature, then we would surely be doomed; but since the problem is a social arrangement, and social arrangements are malleable, then people an create a new one, replacing capitalism with a cooperative socialist system.

He argued for an ethical revolt against capitalism, appealing to disgust with the emptiness and meaninglessness of a life organized around commodities. "Detrivialize yourselves," he would tell students at the Institute for Social Ecology, which he cofounded in 1974 and where he taught the rest of his life. The school educated thousands in organic farming, aquaponics, renewable energy, food justice, and revolutionary social theory. Students went on to become climate change activists, social workers, environmental attorneys, community organizers, organic farmers, and Green activists.

He gave this ideology of assembly democracy several names: libertarian municipalism, communalism. He tried unsuccessfully to build it into the Green movements that emerged internationally in the early 1980s. Today the Kurds of Anatolia have embraced it, under the name "democratic confederalism," as a path to liberation. His writings on the subject remain a blueprint for those elsewhere who may aspire one day to turn that social potentiality for freedom into an actuality.

Perhaps his most influential book was *The Ecology of Freedom* (1982; reprint 1992), which wove together ideas from anthropology, revolutionary history, biological science dialectical philosophy, and more to create a coherent outlook.

Equally important, in my view, is *The Rise of Urbanization* (1986), which recounts the history of conflict between towns and cities, on the one hand, and nation-states on the other. The venue for revolutionary action was not the factory (as the Marxists had it) but the city, where concentrations of people makes possible a popular media, repeated encounters, neighborhood action, popular assemblies, and revolutionary ferment. The great movements of revolutionary history, when closely examined, turn out to be urban.

And examine them he did. Another reason he wrote the history of popular movements in revolutionary eras was to keep the revolutionary tradition alive and to bring its lessons into the present. *The Spanish Anarchists* (written in 1969, published in 1977), covering the movement from its nineteenth-century founding up to 1936, was an extended argument that anarchists could, contrary to all stereotypes, be organized. His magisterial four-volume work, *The Third Revolution* (1996-2005), recounts the tradition on which revolutionary movements base themselves.

He was a fervent champion of the Enlightenment's values of reason and humanism. As a humanist, he opposed misanthropy in the ecology movement. It became fashionable to blame human beings as such for destroying nature. Bookchin argued that on the contrary, we depend on human ingenuity and creativity to find solutions to the crisis.

In a world that no longer values coherence, Bookchin dared to be coherent. As a result, his ideas have an internal logic. As a developed social outlook with a broad critique of hierarchy, capitalism, and the state, it points to a utopian alternative and reminds us what a good society could look like, and the social generosity of which human beings are capable. The ethical revolt against capitalism speaks to a craving for meaning and appeals to virtuous human agency.

Possessed of the idealism and moral imagination to power change, he kept the long-range end steadily in sight. Combustible and ebullient, he cared more for the big picture, the large goals, than for the details. In a risk-averse society, he cared nothing for risking his reputation. He didn't desire to impress or fear the disapproval of others. Despite massive countervailing social forces, he sustained the utopian temper. He understood that while success could not be immediate, the choices we face are apocalyptic. He transformed Rosa Luxemburg's maxim "Socialism or barbarism" into "Ecology or annihilation": or better still, "Be Realistic do the impossible, because otherwise we will have the unthinkable."

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