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On Bookchin's Social Ecology and its Contributions to Social Movements

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Murray Bookchin was a leading theoretical progenitor of the many currents of left ecological thought and action that emerged from the 1960s, and his voluminous and many-faceted work has continued to influence theorists and activists to this day. Marcel van der Linden of the International Institute of Social History, based in the Netherlands, has described Bookchin's collection of sixties-era essays, *Post-Scarcity Anarchism*, as "definitely . . . one of the most influential works on the international generation of 1968."[1] His magnum opus, *The Ecology of Freedom*, was placed by the *Village Voice* "at the pinnacle of the genre of utopian social criticism."[2] Numerous concepts that became common wisdom among ecological and left libertarian activists in the sixties and beyond were first articulated clearly in Bookchin's writings, including the socially reconstructive dimension of ecological science, the potential links between sustainable technologies and political decentralization, and the evolution of class consciousness toward a broader critique of social hierarchy.

Bookchin authored more than 20 books and countless articles and pamphlets, seeking to offer a coherent theoretical underpinning to the work of a generation of ecological and anti-authoritarian activists.[3] Bookchin also revived and updated the tradition of social anarchism, which had fallen rather dormant by the early 1960s, but later renounced his tie to anarchism and sought to articulate a new libertarian socialist synthesis, which he termed "communalism."[4] Nonetheless, his sweeping condemnations of Marxism from the late sixties through the eighties drew the antipathy of many traditional leftists. As independent Marxists grew toward a more environmentally sensitive outlook in the 1970s and eighties, prominent figures often overlooked Bookchin's contributions, even as they appropriated many of his ideas and elements of his language.

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[1]Marcel van der Linden, "The Prehistory of Post-Scarcity Anarchism: Josef Weber and the Movement for a Democracy of Content (1947–1964)," *Anarchist Studies*, 9, 2001, p. 127.

[2]Quoted at http://essentialbooks.com/id50.htm.

[3]A partial bibliography is available at http://dwardmac.pitzer.edu/Anarchist_archives/bookchin/bookchinbiblio.html.

[4]Bookchin's evolution from anarchism to communalism is described in Janet Biehl, "Bookchin Breaks with Anarchism," *Communalism*, 12, October 2007, at http://communalism.net/Archive/12/bba.php. Also see note 26 below.

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This paper represents the contribution of someone who met Murray Bookchin in the mid-1970s, came to Vermont to work and study with him in 1980, and participated in many of the movements and projects that were influenced by social ecology. I have been involved in the many activities of the Institute for Social Ecology since the 1980s and have been a core faculty member since the early nineties. Through periods of close collaboration, and also when we vehemently disagreed, Bookchin's ideas profoundly influenced my own writing and political praxis. This work is offered in a spirit of heartfelt appreciation and lasting gratitude.

Social Ecology

Murray Bookchin was raised in a leftist family in New York City during the 1920s and thirties, and often told of his expulsion from the Young Communist League at age eighteen for openly criticizing Stalin. He briefly identified with Trotskyism while working and organizing in the auto foundries around Mahwah, New Jersey in the 1940s, and was associated with a group of like-minded former Trotskyists around the journal *Contemporary Issues* from the late forties through most of the fifties. The *Contemporary Issues* group was critical of the increasing political accommodation and corruption of organized labor, and moved toward a politics centered in the substantive democratic renewal of communities.[5] Bookchin's first published article, "The Problem of Chemicals in Food," appeared in *Contemporary Issues* in 1952. During this same period, Bookchin also encountered a group of anarchist veterans of an earlier generation of labor struggles that was affiliated with the Workmen's Circle and Libertarian Book Club in New York. His subsequent identification with the social anarchist tradition was sustained until the final decade of his life.

Bookchin's theory of social ecology emerged from a time in the mid-1960s when ecological thought, and even ecological science, were widely viewed as "subversive." Even relatively conventional environmental scientists were contemplating the broad political implications of an ecological world view, confronting academic censorship, and raising challenging questions about the widely accepted capitalist dogma of perpetual economic growth. In a landmark 1964 issue of the journal *Bioscience*, the ecologist Paul Sears challenged the "pathological" nature of economic growth and inquired whether ecology, "if taken seriously as an instrument for the long run welfare of mankind [*sic*], would . . . endanger the assumptions and practices accepted by modern societies . . ."[6]

Bookchin carried the discussion considerably further, proposing that ecological thought is not merely "subversive," but fundamentally revolutionary and reconstructive. With the world wars and Great Depression of the 20th century appearing to

[5]van der Linden, *op. cit.*
[6]Paul B. Sears, "Ecology: A Subversive Subject," *BioScience*, 14, 7, July 1964.

have only strengthened global capitalism, Bookchin saw the emerging ecological crisis as one challenge that would fundamentally undermine the system's inherent logic. His first book, *Our Synthetic Environment*, was issued (under the pseudonym, Lewis Herber) by a major New York publisher, Alfred A. Knopf, and cited by authorities such as the microbiologist Réne Dubos as comparable in its influence to Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*.[7] *Our Synthetic Environment* offered a detailed and accessible analysis of the origins of pollution, urban concentration, and chemical agriculture.

In 1964, in an article titled "Ecology and Revolutionary Thought," Bookchin stated:

> The explosive implications of an ecological approach arise not only because ecology is intrinsically a critical science—critical on a scale that the most radical systems of political economy have failed to attain—but also because it is an integrative and reconstructive science. This integrative, reconstructive aspect of ecology, carried through to all its implications, leads directly into anarchic areas of social thought. For, in the final analysis, it is impossible to achieve a harmonization of man [*sic*] and nature without creating a human community that lives in a lasting balance with its natural environment.[8]

Over the next four decades, Bookchin's social ecology emerged as a unique synthesis of utopian social criticism, historical and anthropological investigation, dialectical philosophy, and political strategy. It can be viewed as an unfolding of several distinct layers of understanding and insight, spanning all of these dimensions, and more.

At its most outward level, social ecology confronts the social and political roots of contemporary ecological problems. It critiques the ways of conventional environmental politics and points activists toward radical, community-centered alternatives. Bookchin always insisted that ecological issues be understood primarily as social issues and was impatient with the narrowly instrumental approaches advanced by conventional environmentalists to address particular problems. The holistic outlook of ecological science, he argued, demands a social ecology that examines the systemic roots of our ecological crisis while challenging the institutions responsible for perpetuating the status quo.

This critical outlook led to many years of research into the evolution of the relationship between human societies and non-human nature. Both liberals and Marxists have generally viewed the "domination of nature" as a fulfillment of human

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[7]René Dubos, *Man Adapting* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1965), p. 196.

[8]Murray Bookchin, "Ecology and Revolutionary Thought," in *Post-Scarcity Anarchism* (Berkeley: Ramparts Press, 1971), p. 58. *Post-Scarcity Anarchism* was reprinted by Black Rose Books (Montreal) in 1986 and by AK Press (San Francisco) in 2004.

destiny and human nature—or more recently as an unfortunate but necessary corollary to the advancement of civilization. Bookchin sought to turn this view on its head, describing the "domination of nature" as a myth perpetuated by social elites in some of the earliest hierarchical societies. Far from a historical necessity, efforts to dominate the natural world are a destructive byproduct of social hierarchies.

In *The Ecology of Freedom*, Bookchin examined the anthropological literature of the 1970s and 1980s, seeking principles and practices that emerge from our understanding of non-hierarchical "organic" societies. These core principles included interdependence, usufruct, unity-in-diversity, complementarity, and the irreducible minimum: the principle that communities are responsible for meeting their members' most basic needs.[9] Complementarity for Bookchin meant disavowing the oppressive inequality of supposed "equals" within contemporary societies, instead invoking traditional communities' ability to compensate for differences in ability among members. Technology has never been an end in itself, nor an autonomous principle of human evolution, but rather a reflection of an evolving "social matrix."[10] Bookchin's historical and anthropological investigations affirmed his belief that any truly liberatory popular movement must challenge hierarchy in general, not just its particular manifestations as oppression by race, gender or class.

His explorations of the persistent role of social hierarchies in shaping social evolution and our relationships with non-human nature led Bookchin further toward a philosophical inquiry into the evolutionary relationship between human consciousness and natural evolution. He sought to renew the legacy of dialectical philosophy, abandoning popular oversimplifications and reinterpreting dialectics from its origins in the works of philosophers from Aristotle to Hegel. Bookchin's dialectical naturalism emphasizes the potentialities that lie latent within the evolution of natural and social phenomena, and celebrates the uniqueness of human creativity, while emphasizing its emergence from the possibilities inherent in "first nature." It eschews the common view of nature as merely a realm of necessity, instead viewing nature as striving to actualize its underlying potentiality for consciousness, creativity and freedom.[11]

For Bookchin, a dialectical outlook on human history compels us to reject what merely is and follow the logic of evolution toward an expanded view (challenging Hume and others) of what could be, and ultimately what ought to be. While the realization of a free, ecological society is far from inevitable—Bookchin was not the teleologist his critics sometimes caricatured him as—it is the most rational outcome of four billion years of natural evolution. This dialectical view of natural

[9]Murray Bookchin, *The Ecology of Freedom* (Palo Alto, CA: Cheshire Books, 1982), especially Chapters 2 and 3. *The Ecology of Freedom* has also been reissued by both Black Rose (1991) and AK Press (2005).
[10]*Ibid.*, Chapters 9, 10.
[11]The fullest elaboration of these ideas appears in Murray Bookchin, *The Philosophy of Social Ecology: Essays on Dialectical Naturalism* (Montreal: Black Rose Books, 1990 [Revised 1995]).

and social evolution led to the controversial claim that nature itself can be viewed as an objective ground for a social ethics.

While continuing to develop and clarify his philosophy of nature, Bookchin also developed a distinct approach to political praxis, one aimed at realizing the ecological reconstruction of society. Bookchin's libertarian municipalism draws on what he viewed as a fundamental underlying conflict between communities and the state as well as on historical examples of emerging direct democracies from the Athenian *polis* to the New England town meeting. Bookchin sought a redefinition of citizenship and a reinvigoration of the public sphere, with citizen assemblies moving to the center of public life in towns and neighborhoods and taking control of essential political and economic decisions. Representatives in city councils and regional assemblies would become mandated delegates, deputized by their local assemblies and empowered only to carry out the wishes of the people.

Confederation is also a central aspect of libertarian municipalism, with communities joining together to sustain counterinstitutions aimed at undermining the state and advancing a broad liberatory agenda. Unlike many ecologists writing about politics, Bookchin embraced the historical role of cities as potential sites of freedom and universalism and viewed the practice of citizenship in empowered neighborhood assemblies as a means for educating community members into the values of humanism, cooperation, and public service.[12] The stifling anonymity of the capitalist market is to be replaced by a moral economy in which economic, as well as political relationships, would be guided by an ethics of mutualism and genuine reciprocity.[13]

Libertarian municipalism offers both an outline of a political strategy and the structure underlying social ecology's long-range reconstructive vision: a vision of directly democratic communities challenging state power while evolving in harmony with all of nature. This vision draws on decades of research into political structures, sustainable technologies, revolutionary popular movements, and the best of the utopian tradition in Western thought. Bookchin spent his last decade or so intensively researching the history of revolutionary movements in the West from the Middle Ages to the middle of the 20th century, drawing out the lessons of the diverse, often subterranean, popular currents that formed the basis for revolutionary movements in England, France, the U.S., Russia, Spain, and beyond.[14]

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[12]Murray Bookchin, "A New Municipal Agenda," in *Urbanization Without Cities* (Montreal: Black Rose Books, 1992 [republished by Cassell in London, U.K. in 1995]). Also see his earlier *Limits of the City*, originally published by Harper & Row in 1974 and in an expanded edition by Black Rose Books.

[13]Murray Bookchin, "Market Economy or Moral Economy?," in *The Modern Crisis* (Philadelphia: New Society Publishers, 1986).

[14]Murray Bookchin's *The Third Revolution: Popular Movements in the Revolutionary Era* was published in four volumes, the first two by Cassell and the latter two by Continuum, and are dated 1996, 1998, 2004 and 2006.

Social Ecology and Social Movements

The influence of this body of ideas upon popular ecological movements began with the underground distribution of Bookchin's essays during the 1960s. Ideas he first articulated, such as the need for a fundamentally radical ecology in contrast to technocratic environmentalism, were embraced by the growing ranks of ecologically-informed radicals. Bookchin and his colleagues, including Institute for Social Ecology co-founder Daniel Chodorkoff, also participated in some of the earliest efforts to plan for the "greening" of cities and bring alternative, solar-based technologies into inner city neighborhoods.

By the late 1970s, social ecology was playing a much more visible role in the rapidly growing movement against nuclear power. Utility and state officials were identifying rural communities across the U.S. as potential sites for new nuclear power plants, and the movement that arose to counter this new colonization of the countryside united rural back-to-the-landers, seasoned urban activists, and a new generation of radicals who only partially experienced the ferment of the 1960s. Following the mass arrest of over 1400 people who sought to nonviolently occupy a nuclear construction site in Seabrook, New Hampshire in 1977, decentralized anti-nuclear alliances began to appear all across the U.S. These alliances were committed to nonviolent direct action, bottom-up forms of internal organization, and a sophisticated understanding of the relationship between technological and social changes. They were captivated by the utopian dimension of the emerging "appropriate technology" movement for which Bookchin and other social ecologists provided an essential theoretical and historical grounding. Over a hundred students came to the Institute for Social Ecology (ISE) in Vermont every summer to acquire hands-on experience in organic gardening and alternative technology while studying social ecology, ecofeminism, reconstructive anthropology, and other political and theoretical topics.

New England's anti-nuclear Clamshell Alliance was the first to adopt the model of the affinity group as the basis of a long-range regional organizing effort.[15] Murray Bookchin introduced the concept of *grupos de afinidad*—borrowed from the Spanish FAI (Iberian Anarchist Federation)—into the U.S. in an appendix to his influential 1968 pamphlet, "Listen, Marxist!"[16] Bookchin initially compared the revolutionary Spanish affinity groups to the countercultural collectives that were appearing in cities across the U.S. during the late 1960s. Quaker activists initially advocated the formation of affinity groups as a structure for personal support and security at large demonstrations at Seabrook. But after the mass arrests and two weeks of incarceration in New Hampshire's National Guard Armories,

[15]At least one earlier mass action, which was aimed at shutting down Washington, D.C. to protest the Vietnam War in the spring of 1971, was organized on the affinity group model, but Clamshell activists were the first in the U.S. to make this the underlying structure of their organization.
[16]Reprinted in Murray Bookchin, *Post-Scarcity Anarchism.*

participants began to view the affinity groups as the basis for a much more widely participatory, directly democratic form of social movement organization than had ever been realized before.

Bookchin's original "Note on Affinity Groups" was distributed widely in the lead-up to the planned follow-up action at Seabrook in June of 1978, and activists in Vermont, Boston, and elsewhere in New England worked hard to make the Clamshell Alliance live up to the most profoundly democratic potential of this organizational model. Anti-nuclear alliances across the U.S. followed the Clamshell in taking their names from local species of animals and plants that were endangered by the spread of nuclear power and adopted affinity groups and spokescouncils as their fundamental organizational and decision-making structures.[17]

The euphoria of affinity group-based internal democracy was to be short-lived in the Clamshell, however. Protracted debates over the appropriateness of various tactics within a framework of organized nonviolence led to a growing polarization throughout the organization. When most of the original founders of the Clamshell Alliance acceded to a deal with New Hampshire's Attorney General that led to the cancellation of the 1978 Seabrook occupation in favor of a large legal rally, activists at the ISE, in Boston, and elsewhere helped expose the anti-democratic nature of that decision and pressed for a renewal of affinity group democracy. The Boston area chapter was completely reorganized around affinity groups and neighborhood-based organizing collectives, and a new organization, the Coalition for Direct Action at Seabrook, picked up where the Clamshell left off. Bookchin's writing of this period helped sustain the anti-nuclear movement's powerful utopian impulses and encouraged the grassroots resistance to the betrayals of the movement's self-appointed "leaders."[18]

These events largely bypassed the often retrograde Marxist Left of the 1970s. Marxists of the period had little use for a resolutely anti-authoritarian ecological movement; many remained wedded to the increasingly farcical myth of advanced "socialist" nuclear power in the U.S.S.R. Bookchin redoubled his critique of Marxism, which he had launched with the colorful polemic, "Listen Marxist!," issued on the eve of Progressive Labor's 1968 takeover of SDS. In a series of in-depth theoretical articles originally published in the journal *Telos*, Bookchin advanced the view that Marxism was incompatible with a distinctly ecological approach to politics and social ethics.[19]

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[17]A sympathetic, but factually flawed description of the libertarian and feminist roots of this movement, on both the east and west coasts, is available in Barbara Epstein, *Political Protest and Cultural Revolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991).

[18]See, for example, "Open Letter to the Ecology Movement," in Murray Bookchin, *Toward an Ecological Society* (Montreal: Black Rose, 1980), pp. 73–83.

[19]These essays were adapted and updated in *Toward an Ecological Society*.

In his late seventies writings, Bookchin characterized Marxism as "the most sophisticated ideology of advanced capitalism," incapable of addressing the full extent of social domination, and fatally wedded to archaic myths of technological progress and economic determinism. "The entire theory is captive to its own reduction of ethics to law, subjectivity to objectivity, freedom to necessity," Bookchin wrote.[20] Even the Frankfurt School, which Bookchin read exhaustively, did not sufficiently question the roots of domination and the "historical necessity" of capitalist development. Later in his life, however, in response to the rising popularity of New Age mysticism and anti-organizational "lifestyle anarchism," Bookchin reassessed his theoretical indebtedness to the Marxist tradition and became increasingly scathing in his critique of anarchism.

Green Politics and Beyond

By the early 1980s, Bookchin and other social ecologists began to closely follow the emergence of a new Green political movement in West Germany and other European countries. Social ecologists became excited about this new "anti-party party" that initially functioned more as an alliance of grassroots "citizen initiatives" than a conventional parliamentary vehicle. In the early 1980s, European Greens were running for office as delegates from various social movements, decisions were made primarily at the local level, and those elected to public offices or internal positions of responsibility were obliged to rotate their positions every two years. Greens in Germany and other countries were articulating a sweeping ecological critique in all areas of public policy, from urban design, energy use and transportation to nuclear disarmament and support for emerging democratic movements in Eastern Europe. Translations of Bookchin's writings played an influential role in the development of this new Green political agenda.

Staff members of the ISE played a central role in organizing the first gathering (in St. Paul, Minnesota in 1984) aimed at constituting a Green political formation in the U.S. One significant bloc of participants at that meeting were pushing for a national organization through which self-appointed representatives of various issue-oriented constituencies would form a national organization, relate to other NGOs on the national level, and perhaps create a national Green Party within the year. The model that prevailed, however, was that of a more decentralized, grassroots-based movement, rooted in Green locals empowering regional delegates to make confederal decisions following locally debated mandates. Social ecologists in New England had already begun to form a confederation of Green locals on that model, and the idea once again spread across the country. By the first national conference of the U.S. Greens, in Amherst, Massachusetts in July of 1987, there were already over a hundred grassroots Green locals spread across the country. Ideas from social ecology

[20] *Ibid.*, p. 200.

and activists based at the ISE played key roles in the development of the first national Green Program between 1988 and 1990.[21]

The early 1990s saw a growing tension between Greens committed to grassroots democracy and a municipalist politics, and those advocating for a U.S. Green Party that would field candidates for national office. Bookchin and other social ecologists in New England circulated a call for a Left Green Network in 1988, and similarly-minded activists in the San Francisco Bay Area developed a Radical Green caucus. As Greens across the U.S. collaborated on the development of a national program, policy positions advocated by the Left Greens were adopted by three consecutive national gatherings, much to the chagrin of those promoting a more mainstream agenda.[22] Ironically, many Left Greens and other grassroots activists began losing interest in the Greens at this point. Green moderates went on to form a separate national organization, based exclusively on state-certified Green Parties, while the Left Green Network continued holding educational conferences and publishing educational materials largely independent of any other Green entity.

During the same period, a group of recent ISE students formed a youth caucus in the Greens, which eventually became an independent organization known as the Youth Greens. The Youth Greens attracted a significant base of young radicals largely from outside the Greens and joined with the Left Greens to initiate a major direct action to coincide with the April 1990 twentieth anniversary of the original Earth Day. On the day following the official commemorations—a Sunday filled with polite, heavily corporate sponsored events—several hundred Left Greens, Youth Greens, ecofeminists, environmental justice activists, Earth First!ers and urban squatters converged on Wall Street seeking to obstruct the opening of stock trading on that day. Activists based around the ISE in Vermont had prepared a comprehensive action handbook, featuring a variety of social ecology writings and helped create a broad, empowering coalition effort. The next day, columnist Juan Gonzalez wrote in the *New York Daily News*,

> Certainly, those who sought to co-opt Earth Day into a media and marketing extravaganza, to make the public feel good while obscuring the corporate root of the Earth's pollution almost succeeded. It took angry Americans from places like Maine and Vermont to come to Wall Street on a workday and point the blame where it belongs.[23]

Meanwhile, in Burlington, Vermont, Bookchin and other social ecologists formed the Burlington Greens to develop positions on urban issues and run

[21]For a fuller account of the U.S. Greens and the role of social ecologists, see Brian Tokar, "The Greens as a Social Movement: Values and Conflicts," in Frank Zelko and Carolin Brinkmann (eds.), *Green Parties: Reflections on the First Three Decades* (Washington, D.C.: Heinrich Böll Foundation North America, 2006).
[22]See, for example, articles by John Rensenbrink and Charlene Spretnak in Zelko and Brinkman, *ibid.*
[23]Juan Gonzalez, "Getting Serious about Ecology," *New York Daily News*, April 24, 1990.

candidates for local office. The Greens opposed the commercial development of the city's Lake Champlain waterfront and argued that the neighborhood assemblies established by the Progressive city administration for planning and administrative purposes should become the basis for a more empowered model of democratic neighborhood governance. The Burlington Greens gained national headlines in 1989 when the Greens contested several City Council seats and a Green candidate challenged the city's Progressive mayor in a citywide election.

During the 1980s and nineties, social ecologists also played a central role in the development and elaboration of ecofeminist ideas. Ynestra King's ecofeminism classes at the ISE during the late 1970s were probably the first to be offered anywhere, and annual ecofeminist colloquia were organized by Chaia Heller and other social ecologists during the early 1990s. Ecofeminist activists played a central role in initiating two Women's Pentagon Actions and a women's peace camp alongside the Seneca Army Depot in New York State, however ecofeminism evolved through the 1990s as a predominantly cultural and spiritual movement that social ecologists became increasingly wary and critical of.[24] Self-identified ecofeminists with a rather eclectic mix of political outlooks also played a central role in the evolution of Green politics in the U.S.[25]

In the later 1990s, activists connected to the Institute for Social Ecology played a central role in the rapidly growing movement to promote global justice and challenge the institutions of capitalist globalism. Social ecologists raised discussions around the broad potential for direct democracy as a counter-power to centralized economic and political institutions and helped further the evolution toward a longer-range reconstructive vision within the movement that came of age on the streets of Seattle. A few ISE students were centrally involved in the organizing for the WTO shutdown in Seattle, and several others formed an affinity group to participate in and document the actions. After Seattle, the ISE booklet *Bringing Democracy Home* highlighted the writings of various social ecologists on potential future directions for the movement. Global justice activists from across the U.S. attended programs at the ISE in Vermont during the early years of this decade to further their political analysis and join Bookchin and other faculty members in wide-ranging discussions of where the movement might be heading.

The rising popularity of anarchist ideas and anti-authoritarian organizational forms in the aftermath of Seattle was not sufficient, however, to assuage Bookchin's rising concern about the limits of anarchist theory. The popular anarchist press had not taken kindly to Bookchin's libertarian municipalism, especially his advocacy of municipal electoral engagement and revolutionary counterinstitutions. Anarchist writing and youth culture in the 1990s was increasingly centered in New Age

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[24]See Chaia Heller, *Ecology of Everyday Life* (Montreal: Black Rose Books, 1999); also Janet Biehl, *Rethinking Ecofeminist Politics* (Boston: South End Press, 1991).

[25]See Greta Gaard, *Ecological Politics: Ecofeminists and the Greens* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998).

spirituality, punk-inspired disdain for organization, and "green anarchist" fantasies of the impending "end of civilization."[26] In response, Bookchin rose in defense of such unpopular notions as reason, civilization, historical continuity, and the philosophical legacy of the European Enlightenment. Facing an increasingly hostile audience in the anarchist-inspired youth scene, Bookchin cast aside his once-ringing defenses of the libertarian communist tradition of Kropotkin and the Spanish anarcho-syndicalists. Encouraged by international colleagues, particularly in the Scandinavian countries, he articulated a new framework, which he called "communalism," and redoubled his focus on the need for sustained political engagement and revolutionary organization.[27]

Bookchin in his later years was also more forthcoming about his theoretical debt to Marxism, describing it as "the most comprehensive and coherent effort to produce a systematic form of socialism."[28] Marxism, however, remained imbedded in the world view of early industrial capitalism, much as classical anarchism could be seen as a product of an even earlier "peasant and craft world." The anarchist tradition, according to the later Bookchin, was fatally rooted "in a strong commitment to *personal* liberty rather than to *social* freedom" [emphasis in original], and hence stagnated within an essentially liberal ideological framework. Communalism, he argued, required a "new and comprehensive revolutionary outlook" drawing on the best of Marxism and the libertarian socialist tradition and rooted in an expansive view of a confederal, municipally-centered democracy developing non-statist counterinstitutions capable of contesting political power on a broadly revolutionary scale. Speaking of his new communalist synthesis, Bookchin wrote:

> From Marxism, it draws the basic project of formulating a rationally systematic and coherent socialism that integrates philosophy, history, economics, and politics. Avowedly dialectical, it attempts to infuse theory with practice. From anarchism, it draws its commitment to antistatism and confederalism, as well as its recognition that hierarchy is a basic problem that can be overcome only by a libertarian socialist society.[29]

During the same period, the ISE's Biotechnology Project pioneered the use of New England's Town Meetings as a primary organizing vehicle to express

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[26]The most comprehensive statement of the latter tendency, increasingly popular among self-identified anarchists, is John Zerzan, "Future Primitive," online at http://www.primitivism.com/future-primitive.htm.

[27]See Biehl, 2007, *op. cit.* Bookchin's 2002 essay, "The Communalist Project," appeared in the short-lived social ecology webzine, Harbinger (http://www.social-ecology.org/index.php?topic=harbinger), and is currently available at http://communalism.net/Archive/02/tcp.html, as well as in the newly edited volume, *Social Ecology and Communalism* (Oakland: AK Press, 2007). The communalism.net webzine was established in 2002 by social ecologists in Norway.

[28]Quotes in this paragraph are all from "The Communalist Project," *Social Ecology and Communalism*. On Bookchin's re-evaluation of Marxism, see also his *Anarchism, Marxism and the Future of the Left* (Oakland: AK Press, 1999).

[29]"The Communalist Project," *op. cit.*

opposition to the genetic engineering of food. In March of 2002, residents in 28 Vermont towns voted for labeling genetically engineered (GE) foods and a moratorium on GE crops.[30] Eight towns took the further step of discouraging or declaring a moratorium on the planting of GE crops within their town. By 2007, 85 Vermont towns and 120 across New England had passed similar resolutions. At a time when efforts to adequately regulate GE products at the national level had become hopelessly deadlocked, this campaign reinvigorated public discussion of GE issues in the region and across the U.S., gained international attention, and articulated a broader analysis of the social and ecological implications of genetic engineering and the commodification of life. It also revealed the limits of town meeting organizing absent a broader municipalist consciousness. A majority of those who worked to bring the issue to their towns were content to view their resolutions merely as a means to lobby legislators and other state and federal officials rather than as part of a broader strategy to reclaim municipal political power, a problem that continues to be debated and theorized by social ecologists today.[31]

Social Ecology and the Future

During the first half of the current decade, the traditional environmental movement in the U.S. was rocked by an internal crisis of confidence, one that came into popular view in 2004 with the wide distribution of an extended essay provocatively titled "The Death of Environmentalism."[32] Responding to the dramatic rollback of environmental regulation under two Bush administrations and the failure of policy advocates in the U.S. to adequately address the impacts of global climate disruption, the essay (authored by two public relations consultants with close ties to the foundation world) echoed radical critiques of environmental praxis, while mainly seeking to unite big business and organized labor in a "New Apollo Project" for the development of renewable energy technologies. In 2005, a group of prominent environmental justice advocates circulated a response titled "The Soul of Environmentalism," which sought to reclaim the social movement roots of environmentalism in early civil rights struggles and urge more attention to

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[30]On the evolution of resistance to genetic engineering in the U.S., see Brian Tokar, "Resisting the Engineering of Life," in Brian Tokar (ed.), *Redesigning Life? The Worldwide Challenge to Genetic Engineering* (London: Zed Books, 2001). For a more theoretical treatment, see Brian Tokar, "Biotechnology: Enlarging the Debate," *Z Magazine*, June 2001. On the Vermont and New England town meeting campaigns vs. GMOs, see the pamphlet "Vermont Towns vs. Genetic Engineering: A Guide to Reclaiming our Democracy," available from biotech@social-ecology.org.

[31]The most comprehensive paper on this topic is Ben Grosscup, "Town Meeting Advocacy in New England: Potentials and Pitfalls," presented at the 2007 Social Ecology Colloquium, Marshfield, Vermont.

[32]Michael Shellenberger and Ted Nordhaus, "The Death of Environmentalism: Global Warming Politics in a Post-Environmental World," online at http://www.thebreakthrough.org/images/Death_of_Environmentalism.pdf.

"big issues," community building, and "deep change."[33] This response effectively critiqued the narrow assumptions of "The Death of Environmentalism" and reaffirmed vital historical and practical links to other social movements but was relatively sparse in its specific proposals for moving forward.

Meanwhile, a flowering of popular movements for land rights, for community survival, and against the privatization of public services has arisen in recent decades throughout the global South. From the Zapatistas in Chiapas, Mexico to "water wars" in Bolivia and India, widespread land seizures by displaced farming communities in Brazil, and the activities of radical farmers in South Korea, among others, these movements have increasingly captured the imagination of global justice advocates, even those who initially seemed to take ecological matters for granted. These movements offer a profound challenge to environmental politics, as it is commonly practiced in the North, and have also helped provoke a broad critique of traditional Northern approaches to land conservation as practiced by transnational NGOs such as the Nature Conservancy and World Wildlife Fund. While some authors have appropriately cautioned against the automatic labeling of indigenous, land-based movements as ecological,[34] the resurgence of interest in these movements has furthered the evolution of global justice activists' outlook on ecological matters. It has also encouraged thoughtful urban youth to broadly identify with the world views of those whose livelihoods are still derived from the land.

Today, with a growing awareness of global warming and the profound social and ecological upheavals that may likely be upon us, environmental politics once again appears ascendant. But most often it is the same narrowly instrumental environmentalism that Bookchin critiqued in the 1960s and seventies. "Green consumerism," which first emerged as a national phenomenon around the 1990 Earth Day anniversary, has returned with a vengeance, incessantly promoted as the key to reducing our personal impact on the climate. Market-based trading of carbon dioxide emissions, a transparently false solution first proposed in the late 1980s, has been advanced as the most politically acceptable policy option for reducing greenhouse gases.[35] Public debates range from fruitless controversies over whether or not human-induced climate change is real, to narrow prescriptions for establishing a market price for carbon dioxide that might induce corporations to reduce their emissions. Even well-known radicals, such as the popular British columnist

[33]Michel Gelobter, Michael Dorsey, Leslie Fields, Tom Goldtooth, Anuja Mendiratta, Richard Moore, Rachel Morello-Frosch, Peggy M. Shepard, and Gerald Torres, "The Soul of Environmentalism: Rediscovering Transformational Politics in the 21st Century," Redefining Progress, Oakland, CA, 2005, available online at http://www.rprogress.org/soul/soul.pdf.

[34]Larry Lohmann, "Visitors to the Commons," in Bron Taylor (ed.), *Ecological Resistance Movements* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995).

[35]For an historical overview, see Brian Tokar, *Earth for Sale* (Boston: South End Press, 1997), Chapter 2; for a detailed examination of the consequences of present carbon trading policies, see Larry Lohmann, *Carbon Trading: A Critical Conversation on Climate Change, Privatization and Power*, *Development Dialogue*, 48, September 2006 (Uppsala: Dag Hammerskjold Center).

George Monbiot, often focus on demonstrating the feasibility of a "least painful" lower-energy scenario, rather than posing a fundamental ecological challenge to the further destructive development of global capitalism.[36]

In this disturbingly constrained political and intellectual environment, what is the future for ecologically-minded radicals? Will capitalism finally come to terms with the environmental crisis? Or does the imperative of responding to the threat of catastrophic climate change still present a fundamental political challenge and a hope for a genuinely transformed future? To address these questions, it is useful to consider some of the particular ways that social ecology may continue to inform and enlighten today's emerging social and environmental movements.

First, social ecology offers an uncompromising ecological outlook that challenges the supremacy of capitalism and the state. A movement that fails to confront the underlying causes of environmental destruction and climate disruption can, at best, only superficially address those problems. At worst, capitalism offers false solutions—such as carbon trading and the worldwide production of so-called biofuels to replace gasoline and diesel fuel—that only aggravate problems in the longer term.[37] Ultimately, to fully address the causes of climate change and other compelling environmental problems requires us to raise visionary demands that the dominant economic and political systems will likely prove unable to accommodate.

Second, social ecology's 40-year evolution offers a vehicle to better comprehend the origins and the historical emergence of ecological radicalism, from the nascent movements of the late 1950s and early sixties to the eco-saturated present. Over four decades, the writings of Murray Bookchin and his colleagues reflected upon the most important on-the-ground debates within ecological and social movements with passion and polemic, as well as with humor and long-range vision.

Third, social ecology offers the most comprehensive theoretical treatment of the origins of human social domination and its historical relationship to abuses of the earth's living ecosystems. Social ecology has consistently pointed to the origins of ecological destruction in social relations of domination, in contrast to conventional views that an impulse to dominate non-human nature is a product of mere historical necessity.

Fourth, social ecology presents a framework for comprehending the origins of human consciousness and the emergence of human reason from its natural context. Dialectical naturalism reaches far beyond popular, often solipsistic notions of an

[36]George Monbiot, *Heat: How to Stop the Planet from Burning* (Boston: South End Press, 2007). For a comprehensive review of more radical solutions to the climate crisis, see the "Less Energy" series in the Green politics journal *Synthesis/Regeneration*, beginning with the Winter 2007 issue, No. 42, available at http://www.greens.org/s-r.

[37]See Brian Tokar, "The Real Scoop on Biofuels," online at http://www.4report.com/node/2864; also Eric Holt-Gimenez, "The Great Biofuel Hoax," online at http://www.alternet.org/environment/54218.

"ecological self," grounding the embeddedness of consciousness in nature in a coherent theoretical framework with roots in classical nature philosophies. It offers a philosophical challenge to overturn popular acceptance of the world as it is, and to persistently inquire as to how things ought to be.

Fifth, social ecology offers activists an historical and strategic grounding for political and organizational debates about the potential for direct democracy. Social ecologists have worked to bring the praxis of direct democracy into social movements since the 1970s, and Bookchin's work offers a vital historical and theoretical context for this continuing conversation.

Sixth, at a time when the remaining land-based peoples around the world are facing unprecedented assaults on their communities and livelihoods, social ecology reminds us of the roots of Western radicalism in the social milieu of peoples recently displaced from rural, agrarian roots. Bookchin's four-volume opus, *The Third Revolution*,[38] describes in detail how revolutionary movements in Europe from the Middle Ages to the Spanish Civil War often had cultural roots in pre-industrial social relations, an understanding which can serve to historicize and deromanticize our approach to contemporary land-based struggles. Rather than an exotic other, vaguely reminiscent of a distant and idealized past, current peasant and indigenous movements offer much insight and practical guidance toward reclaiming both our past and our future.

Seventh, social ecology offers a coherent and articulate political alternative to economic reductionism, identity politics, and many other trends that often dominate today's progressive Left. Bookchin polemicized relentlessly against these and other disturbing tendencies, insisting that our era's ecological crises compel a focus on the general interest, with humanity itself as the only viable "revolutionary subject." Social ecology has helped connect contemporary revolutionaries with the legacies of the past and offered a theoretical context for sustaining a coherent, emancipatory revolutionary social vision.

Finally, Bookchin insisted for four decades on the inseparability of oppositional political activity from a reconstructive vision of an ecological future. He viewed most popular leftist writing of our era as only half complete, focusing on critique and analysis to the exclusion of a coherent way forward. At the same time, social ecologists have often spoken out against the increasing accommodation of so-called "alternative" institutions—including numerous once-radical co-ops and collectives—to a stifling capitalist status quo. Opposition without a reconstructive vision leads to exhaustion and burnout. "Alternative" institutions without a link to vital, counter-systemic social movements are cajoled and coerced by "market forces" into the ranks of non-threatening "green" businesses, merely serving an elite clientele with "socially responsible" products. A genuine convergence of the oppositional and reconstructive

[38]See note 13 above.

strands of activity is a first step toward a political movement that can ultimately begin to contest and reclaim political power.

Defenders of the status quo would have us believe that "green" capitalism and the "information economy" will usher in a transition to a more ecological future. But, like all the capitalisms of the past, this latest incarnation relies ultimately on the continued and perpetual expansion of its reach. All of humanity, from urban centers to remote rural villages, is being sold on a way of life that can only continue to devour the earth and its peoples. Today's hi-tech consumer lifestyles, whether played out in New York, Beijing, or the remotest reaches of human civilization, defies all limits, raising global inequality and economic oppression to heretofore unimaginable proportions while thoroughly destabilizing the earth's ability to sustain complex life.

The corrosive simplification of living ecosystems and the retreat into an increasingly unstable and synthetic world that Murray Bookchin predicted in the 1960s has evolved from a disturbing future projection to a global reality. Our survival now depends on our ability to challenge this system at its core and evolve a broad, counterhegemonic social movement that refuses to compromise on partial measures. Hopefully such a movement will embrace and continue to expand and elaborate the revolutionary and reconstructive social and political vision of social ecology.

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