

A Note from the Editors:

Since the publication last year of Chuck Morse's essay, "Being a Bookchinite," there has emerged a substantial debate. Much of this debate concerns not only the issues raised in the essay, but also the intellectual rigor of the essay itself; in fact, these two separate strands of the debate help to explain its extent. In the first instance, Morse laid some serious accusations at the foundations of social ecology, as represented in the work of Murray Bookchin and such serious accusations warrant serious attention. In the second instance, the way in which Morse presented his argument seemed to blur the line between theoretical insight and personal recollection, between discussions of Bookchin's perceived theoretical problems and his perceived personal problems. Moreover, these two strands taken together presented a simplistic and unexplained caricature of Bookchin and his work.

In this issue of Communalism, we present a continuation of this debate with two articles that approach separately these two different strands. In the first article, "Closing Down the Debate or Just Getting Started?", Andy Price responds to the three replies posted on Morse's site to his review of "Being a Bookchinite" for Anarchist Studies, and argues that his original critique of Morse's problematic methodology still stands.

In the second piece, "Measures of Failure and Success, Part I," Eirik Eigladd offers a refutation of two of the more serious accusations that Morse made in "Being a Bookchinite" and in doing so, highlights further the problematic nature of the scholarship that marks the original essay.

This further contribution to the debate raises an interesting thought: how can an essay that, as the two pieces claim, is woefully lacking in serious comment on Bookchin raise such a sustained debate? Is this not evidence enough of the importance of the work? Taken together, the two articles presented here hopefully point to something different: that Morse's "Being a Bookchinite" falls below the standard of rigorous theoretical endeavor and in so doing, unwittingly highlights a recurrent problematic approach to Bookchin and the debates that surround him. It is thus the very problems in Morse's essay that have inadvertently allowed for an examination of this approach and the initiation of a more thoughtful look at the fundamentals of Bookchin's ideas and political program.

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Andy Price and Eirik Eigladd

Closing Down the Debate or Just Getting Started?

On Personal Recollection and Theoretical Insight

By Andy Price

In late 2007, I was asked by the journal *Anarchist Studies* to review two new items of Bookchin literature, two of the first items to emerge after his death in 2006. The first was a collection of his essays, favourably introduced by one of Bookchin's long-term colleagues.¹ The essays collected therein

offered a glimpse of some of the fundamentals of the Bookchin programme, uncluttered of the polemics in which Bookchin had become embroiled in the final two decades of his life. The second piece up for review was also from an ex-colleague of Bookchin, Chuck Morse, which recalled the two or three years he spent, as he himself called it, as one of Bookchin's "core disciples" ("Being

1. Murray Bookchin, *Social Ecology and Communalism* (San Francisco and Edinburgh: AK Press, 2007). The essays were edited and introduced by Eirik Eigladd.

a Bookchinite,” hereafter *BAB*).² But this offered something different: it was a more “critical” commentary, which attempted to show the “strengths and weaknesses” of Bookchin’s revolutionary organising.

I set my review up along explicit lines: the two posthumous additions to the Bookchin cannon, in my opinion, neatly reflected two distinct patterns that had emerged over the last two decades in literature on Bookchin (often stemming, like these two, from ex-confidants of Bookchin): the first, open and fair discussion of Bookchin’s *ideas*, both sympathetic and critical, an approach which we accord to most thinkers; and the second, something far more problematic: a body of literature that had, for various reasons, become focussed on Bookchin’s *personal* failings and motivations, and not on the fundamentals of his programme. Hence the title of my review: *Communalism or Caricature: Patterns of Bookchin Critique*, in which I establish, right at the outset, this dichotomy between these two different types of critical engagement with Bookchin³.

Not long after publication, I received an email from the editors at *Anarchist Studies*: Chuck Morse had contacted them and asked for permission to reproduce my review on his blog, in order that he could offer a reply, and they had kindly sought out my permission before agreeing. Naturally, in the name of fostering debate and discussion, I agreed, and looked forward to Morse’s response. Thus far, Morse has in fact offered three different responses via his blog.⁴ In truth, I welcome *any* response, and would have been quite happy to leave the matter as it is, no matter how many authors responded. However, the general tenor of these three responses points to the fact that they have missed the point I was making in my review, and I here offer my own brief reply.

Across all three responses posted on Morse’s site, I would argue that there are two main claims: the first, that I am trying, in Sunshine’s words “to close discussion down” around Bookchin’s

legacy; the second, that in establishing the dichotomy between the different patterns of approaching Bookchin I identified in my title, I am offering a “mischaracterization” of the nature of the critique of Bookchin⁵. I will come to this second, more serious claim in due course, but to the claim that I want to “close down” any criticism of Bookchin, that I represent a “dogmatic sectarianism” endemic to “Bookchinism” itself (Tell), or in Morse’s words, that I am “troubled” that he had “the temerity to advance any criticism at all”, I can only implore all three authors to revisit my review. At the very end, I argue that “we can, and should put Bookchin to the test” on his theoretical and practical principles⁶. My entire section on Morse is a description of how, in *BAB*, he failed to do this and instead offered a recollection of his own personal interactions with Bookchin.

This central focus of my review, it seems, was lost on Morse and the others, so I will explain it again here as briefly as I can. In his reply, Morse begins by restating the opening claim of *BAB*: that Bookchin was unsuccessful in “mounting a revolutionary challenge” – that is, that Bookchin’s revolutionary project was a failure. He then tells us that the people involved in this failed project were “inspired and frustrated”, and it was this he tried to encapsulate in *BAB*. Moreover, people had responded favourably to his essay, Morse tells us: everyone, it appears, bar me. According to Morse,

Price ... had a very different response. Though he accepts all of my favorable remarks about Bookchin without comment, he challenges every observation in my essay that might put Bookchin in an unfavorable light. He argues that my criticisms – though not my praise – are methodologically unsound and presuppose a misreading of Bookchin’s work.

2. Chuck Morse, “Being a Bookchinite” (2007), available at <http://www.negotiations.net/?p=131>.

3. Andy Price, “Communalism or Caricature: Patterns of Bookchin Critique,” *Anarchist Studies*, 16, no. 1 (2008), pp. 76–82

4. See C.N. Tell, “Praying the Hail Murray, Again” (2008); Chuck Morse, “Reply to Andy Price’s ‘Communalism or Caricature’” (2008); and Spencer Sunshine, “Reply to Andy Price: On the Bookchin Debates of the 1990s and the Communist Pedagogical Tradition” (2008). All these replies are available at www.negotiations.net.

5. There is in fact a further criticism, from Sunshine, which I have neither the time nor the understanding to respond to. For Sunshine, my critique of Morse’s description of the problems of education under Bookchin “shows an ignorance of Communist pedagogical culture, which Bookchin inherited the legacy of and reproduced himself”. He goes on to state that Morse calls Bookchin a “sect-builder” and then he sets out, presumably as part of his criticism of me, to prove that this is the case. But wait: nowhere did I take issue with the description of Bookchin as a sect builder. The phrase does not appear anywhere in my review. Therefore, whilst I found Spencer’s discussion of sect building in the communist tradition genuinely very interesting, as part of a criticism of my review of Morse, it makes no sense to me, and as such I can offer nothing in way of a response.

6. Price, “Communalism or Caricature,” p. 82

However, this is to fundamentally misread my review. Morse's remarks about Bookchin, favourable or unfavourable, are, in many ways, unchallengeable: they are his own *personal* recollection of his time with Bookchin, his recounting of the experience he spent in Bookchin's inner circle. Therefore, we take it on trust that this is in fact how he felt at the time, that this is what it was like for him to work with Bookchin. But here lies the fundamental failing of the Morse essay: this personal recollection, whether good or bad, tells us *nothing* of the success or failure of Bookchin's revolutionary project. I stress again, this account tell us how Morse himself *felt*, and not how Bookchin worked. The more serious problem here, however, is that Morse's essay is set up *entirely* as a discussion of the strengths and weaknesses of Bookchin's revolutionary project, as he tells us at the outset. Moreover, it is a discussion drawn out in the shadow of Morse's grandiose opening claim: that overall, the Bookchin project was unsuccessful. *BAB*, then, is constructed in the following way: (1) claim the Bookchin project, both theoretically and practically, was a failure; (2) to prove this, offer an entirely personal discussion of his time with Bookchin and, worse, his own interpretation of Bookchin's apparent personal failings.

Criticism of this fundamental flaw is the main contention of my review. As I wrote, "in terms of what *an essay on the strengths and weaknesses of Bookchin's revolutionary project* should contain, we surely know that it should not be this kind of personal recollection and gossipy insinuation"⁷ (emphasis added). That is to say, if Morse wants to write a piece that recalls his time spent with Bookchin, that recalls his personal relationship to him, his personal reactions to him, then of course, he is perfectly entitled to do so. Moreover, I would read it, as I read *BAB*: I would be interested, from a purely personal and biographical view, in these recollections (in much the same way I would read biographical accounts of Marx, or any other thinker I am interested in). However – and again, the main contention of my review – *please*, let us not pass this off as political and theoretical comment, as I am afraid Morse does in *BAB*. There has been too much of this already in the literature surrounding Bookchin, a *pattern*, or a trend, which has followed this personal, non-theoretical

approach, which is highly problematic and, as we shall see below, deeply entrenched.

Contrary to what CN Tell claims, there are no "important political lessons that can be gleaned" from Morse's wholly personal approach to his time with Bookchin: there is nothing, for example, to be gleaned from his description of the poster on Bookchin's bedroom wall. Equally, there are no "important political lessons" in Morse's musings about where Bookchin lived, or his personal reaction to Bookchin's discussion of other thinkers. Most ridiculously, there is absolutely nothing to be learnt from recounting Bookchin's conversations about his ill-health. These are *not* strengths or weaknesses of Bookchin's revolutionary organising, but matters of personal demeanour, of personal circumstances. And as Morse surely knows, there is a time-honoured commitment in theoretical exchange to avoid this kind of *ad hominem* approach, to separate personal comment from objective discussion of ideas and events.

Avoiding the personal in general

In a general sense, the commitment to avoid this kind of personal approach is based, in part, on the fact that personal feelings and reactions to individuals and their respective demeanours are so wildly subjective that they cannot prove or disprove anything. Undoubtedly, there are people who had similar interactions with Bookchin and came away with radically different feelings and interpretations than did Morse. Again, accounts of these interactions would make for interesting reading, but the same principle applies: a piece that would describe how warm Bookchin was, how personable, would also tell us nothing about the philosophical and political programme he bequeathed us. Despite the suggestion from Tell that "one of the most attractive aspects of the anarchist tradition is the inclusion and centralization of the personal in politics", we have to somehow attempt, at the very least, to separate the confusing and massively varied feelings we get through personal interaction, which differ from person to person, from what we can concretely know about the viability of a theory and practice.

In short, it is not solely Morse's criticisms that I deemed methodologically unsound in my review, but his entire approach, his "praise" included. It is, more specifically, the confusion in *BAB* between an avowed attempt at objective and scholarly analysis

7. Price, "Communalism or Caricature," p. 80.

of Bookchin's key principles and personal criticisms. Indeed, this confusion has carried over into Morse's reply to my piece. Here, he writes in defence of *BAB* that he finds "analyses that relate ideas to practice are richer than those that treat ideas alone", and of how he "described Bookchin's views on nature and history and social change and related them directly to the political experience that I shared with him". If these were Morse's genuine intentions, I can have no disagreement with them. But then, what went wrong with *BAB*? Why did Morse not carry through on his intentions? In truth, in *BAB*, Morse nowhere relates Bookchin's ideas to practice, but rather confuses this rather difficult intellectual process with a far easier discussion of Bookchin's personal demeanour.

Indeed, this is the *modus operandi* of the entire essay. For Morse, Bookchin's educational style necessitated a closure around him; to prove it, he recounts personal conversations he had with Bookchin (and noted those he has been told about by others). For Morse there was a "defensiveness" that stemmed automatically from Bookchin's moral conception of politics; to prove it, Morse offers his recollection that, at times, Bookchin "seemed to relish in his own isolation, as if it were a sign of grace". Finally, for Morse, Bookchin's "voluntarism" automatically led to a dismissal of the material conditions of change"; to prove it, Morse tells us how he used to "marvel" at the fact that Bookchin lived in the whitest state in the US. At the risk of repetition, I state again: all of these may be exactly how Morse interpreted his involvement with Bookchin at the time, but they explain nothing when considering the success or failure of his revolutionary project.

Avoiding the personal in Bookchin

In a more specific sense, in the particular case of Bookchin, we should be more stridently committed to such a separation of the personal and the theoretical due to emergence of a particular *pattern* of critiquing Bookchin throughout the 1990s. This pattern, I argue, stemmed from Bookchin's forthright 1987 critique of the theoretical and practical problems of the deep ecology movement.⁸ Here, the responses to Bookchin's critique, barring one or two notable exceptions, paid no serious attention

to the issues Bookchin raised, or to the philosophical and political foundations from which they stemmed, but instead accused him of all manner of ill-founded motivations. The interested reader should revisit these debates, where, from within both the political and intellectual movement of deep ecology, we find no engagement with the problems raised by Bookchin, but rather descriptions and discussions of Bookchin's "attack" on the deep ecologists. We find, for example, apropos of no evidence, how Bookchin in 1987 wasn't interested in the specifics of the debate that he initiated but in fact how he was involved in a ruse, an "attempt to corner the word 'ecology'".⁹

This dismissal of Bookchin's critique as an attack, as some kind of political manoeuvre is repeated again and again. As one of the leading intellectuals of deep ecology movement claimed at the time, "in 1987, anarchists-leftists-Marxists, led by Murray Bookchin, launched an attack on deep ecology".¹⁰ This attack, he continued, indicated "that the deep ecology movement is considered the new boy on the block and a turf war has erupted".¹¹ This apparent "turf war" was supposedly between the new ideology of deep ecology, and the "Old Left", represented by Bookchin. Elsewhere, Bookchin's critique would be dismissed as "sour grapes", or the product of "envy." Writing in the leading deep ecologist publication of the time, Chim Blea wrote that "Murray Bookchin has been toiling away for years developing and promoting his 'Social Ecology' and has received little notice". Suddenly, deep ecology appears "and steal[s] all the attention that should rightfully be his".¹²

Again, I urge the interested reader to revisit the extraordinary exchanges between Bookchin and the deep ecologists and to witness the forming of a pattern in responding to Bookchin that is undeniable: there is the emergence of a tendency to dismiss the issues Bookchin raised by casting his motives into doubt. Further, and though impossible to explain in full here, it is clear that Bookchin's 1987 critique was a richly articulated explanation of the problems inherent in the philosophy of deep ecology and

8. Murray Bookchin, "Social Ecology versus Deep Ecology," *Green Perspectives*, Nos, 4-5 (Summer 1987).

9. R.W. Flowers, "Of Old Wine in New Bottles: Taking up Bookchin's challenge," *Earth First!*, November 1 (1987), p. 19.

10. Bill Devall, "Deep Ecology and its Critics," *Trumpeter*, Vol 5, No. 2, (Spring 1988), p. 55.

11. *Ibid.*

12. Chim Blea, "Why the Venom," *Earth First!*, November 1 (1987), p. 19.

of the principles of social ecology on which his critique was based. Unfortunately, the issues were in large part lost, as the focus slipped from the theoretical to the personal.

Unfortunate also, is that this pattern did not stop with the debate with the deep ecologists: they would reappear again and again throughout the 1990s. The notion of Bookchin as dogmatic, as trying to squeeze out any ideas that might compete with his own were picked up, sometimes consciously, sometimes unconsciously, by writers in the mid-1990s who conflated a fair and unbiased critique of his ideas with the discussion of these dubious political motivations. After his critique of “lifestyle anarchism,” the same response would emerge. Here, for example, we get descriptions of him as “The General Secretary of social ecology”, who has no interest on philosophical principles and their practical manifestations but who is interested only in “intellectual bullying”.¹³ Or, we are told elsewhere that, again, Bookchin is not interested in the issues but “is out to clobber the opposition”.¹⁴

Perhaps at the most vindictive end of the spectrum in the 1990s is the book length tirade against Bookchin from Bob Black.¹⁵ Here, again, the reliance on the patterns of caricature established a decade earlier is undeniable. Without explaining how he can possibly know the inner workings of Bookchin’s mind, Black explains to us the *real* reasons for the critiques Bookchin offered of the philosophical and political movements he found problematic. “I get the distinct impression”, Black tells us, “that Bookchin, an elderly man said to be in ill-health is cashing in his chips as a prominent anarchist theorist” by “demolishing all possible alternatives to his own creed”.¹⁶

It is these patterns of critiquing Bookchin, resorting to the caricature established in 1987, that I suggested Morse had followed in *BAB*. Despite the claims made across all three responses on Morse’s blog, that *BAB* was an attempt at “true

dialectics” (Tell), or that it offered a genuine “critical look” at Bookchin’s legacy (Sunshine), I argued that Morse fell back all too easily onto this caricature, that in fact Morse’s piece was nothing but a personal recollection of the problems Morse had with Bookchin, bolstered by the existing literature that discussed Bookchin’s personal problems. This, passed off as theoretical insight, is the patterns of critique of Bookchin that has become entrenched over the last two decades.

On patterns and mischaracterisations

Which brings us to the second main claim of the responses I want to address here, that, according to Sunshine, in identifying these problematic patterns of Bookchin critique in my review, I in fact offer a “mischaracterization of the criticisms of Bookchin during the 1990s”. That is to say, Sunshine continues, that I offer an “unscholarly dismissal of the numerous serious arguments concerning Murray Bookchin’s philosophy, particularly his relationship to Marxism, ecological philosophy, and technology”.

For evidence of my unscholarly dismissal, Spencer reproduces the following passage from my original review:

[Chuck Morse’s essay, “Being a Bookchinite”] follows the same patterns of much of the critiques of Bookchin of the 1990s: it offers an analysis of Bookchin and his work without paying sufficient attention to his theoretical and practical programme. Instead, Morse relies on the insinuation of personal failings and insidious motives in Bookchin that render his revolutionary project a failure.

For Sunshine, this amounts to my dismissal of *all* criticism of Bookchin. But how did he arrive at this conclusion? I am bemused as to how this happened, considering that in the very passage he reproduces I argued that Morse’s essay “follows the same patterns of *much* of the critiques of Bookchin of the 1990s” (emphasis added). Not *all* critique; not *every* critique: but *much* of the critiques. However, Sunshine argues that this description means I dismiss *all* critiques, many of which “were made by a large number of intellectuals and constitute the vast majority of the ‘critiques of Bookchin of the 1990s’”.

13. David Watson, *Beyond Bookchin: Preface for a Future Social Ecology* (Detroit: Black and Red, 1997), p. 17.

14. Max Cafard (pseudonym for John Clark), “Bookchin Agonistes: How Murray Bookchin’s Attempts to Re-Enchant Humanity Became a Pugilistic Bacchanal,” *Fifth Estate*, vol. 32, no. 1 (Summer 1997), pp. 20-23.

15. Bob Black, *Anarchy after Leftism: A Farewell to the Anarchism That Was* (Columbia: CAL Press, 1997).

16. *Ibid.* p. 13.

There are two things to note here. First, as I detail above, I set my review out along very specific lines to note two distinct patterns of Bookchin critique: the robust critiques, that deal with the fundamentals of his program, and the not-so-robust critiques that focus on Bookchin's personal demeanor and motivations. I find it confusing that a review where the existence of different *patterns* of Bookchin critique is identified in the title can be said to be dismissive of *all* Bookchin critique. Sunshine claims that my "refusal to even recognize" that serious discussions of Bookchin's ideas have taken place "shows a real closure around the discussion of Bookchin's philosophy". However, at the risk of tiring the reader's patience, I point out again the structure of my entire review: I talk here of *patterns* of Bookchin critique, not *the* pattern of Bookchin critique. My "refusal to recognize" the other distinct patterns of Bookchin critique stems from nothing more sinister than a short word limit and not from any attempt at closure.

Second, although Sunshine is right to say that there were serious appraisals and critiques of Bookchin throughout the 1990s, I would argue that the patterns of critique I was referring to in the review, and those I give brief examples of above, have a problematic effect on even the most sound and unbiased discussions of Bookchin over the last two decades. The caricature of Bookchin noted above as the dogmatic Old Leftist that so swirled around discussions of Bookchin in the 1990s and still do till this day would infiltrate and infuse even those discussions of him that ostensibly tried to rise above the personal attacks. Lest Sunshine misunderstand me again: I am not claiming that *all* critique is based on these patterns, but that these patterns do exist and in trying to evaluate Bookchin's legacy, we need be aware of them and of their effect on our understanding of him and his programme.

To illustrate this, let us turn to the 1998 collection of essays on Bookchin edited by Andrew Light, *Social Ecology after Bookchin* (hereafter, *SAB*), which Sunshine holds up as an example of thoughtful, scholarly critique on Bookchin. In this collection, as I have never denied, there are indeed thoughtful pieces on Bookchin. However there is a distinct tenor to the collection, a spill-over, if you will, of the caricature into thoughtful debate. This is established right at the outset. In the editor's introduction, Light recounts how in 1993 he "unwittingly stepped into a

battlefield" after publishing a paper on Bookchin that touched upon the idea of a rapprochement, via Marcuse, between deep ecology and social ecology¹⁷. Light tells us that Bookchin responded forcefully (he did), and that in light of the vitriolic nature of the debate between Bookchin and the deep ecologists, he could in part understand why Bookchin would take issue with his piece.

Light then claims that in collating *SAB*, he intends to move away from the debate between Bookchin and the deep ecologists, claiming that "there is more to Bookchin" than these disagreements¹⁸. However, the moment Light announces his move away from the polemics between Bookchin and the deep ecologists, he unconsciously falls back onto the caricature these polemics had created. Using the very same terminology of the original deep ecology response to Bookchin, Light asks whether Bookchin's "Old Left style [has] infected the development of political ecology as a body of theoretical works and as a movement", and he answers in the affirmative.¹⁹ Moreover, he continues, there has been a "slow dissolution of social ecology down to the views of one person and one person only, Murray Bookchin" and consequently, "[w]hen social ecologists go too far afield from this theory, they are pushed out of the camp".²⁰

That is to say, ten years after the first unfounded claims of Bookchin's authoritarianism, Light repeated them in full. But as with the original accusations, he offers no evidence. There is no evidence of Bookchin exorcising people from his movement, of pushing people out of the camp (there is, in fact, evidence of quite the opposite when one looks at the specific disagreements he had with former allies). Yes, Bookchin may have left several "camps" himself, and people would have left him, but this is not the same as the accusation that Light makes here. Again, this is an example of how the debate and critiques that emerged around Bookchin in 1987 were to forever influence future reaction to him. One must ask here: would Light have been able to make such an unsubstantiated claim without the foundations of the

17. Andrew Light, "Introduction," in Andrew Light, ed., *Social Ecology After Bookchin* (New York: Guilford, 1998), p. 1.

18. *Ibid.* p. 4.

19. *Ibid.* p. 5.

20. *Ibid.*

Bookchin caricature having been laid a decade earlier? I would argue emphatically no: and crucially, nor would Morse have been able to make the claims he made in *BAB* without these same patterns.

We then turn to the first essay in the *Light* collection, written by Joel Kovel, which *Sunshine* also cites approvingly. Here, we are presented with an ostensibly theoretical piece, written from within the academy, that claims to show how Bookchin's dialectic is in fact a dialectic of "non-recognition", of how there is a conflict in what Bookchin claims to be his dialectical natural philosophy and the rancorous practice of Bookchin the polemicist. In short, Kovel claims that there is a potential problem in the forthright polemical style of Bookchin and his commitment to dialectical development and all that this entails. However, after a lengthy heuristic endeavour, in which Kovel sets up the dichotomy between these two narratives in Bookchin's work, Kovel's theoretical mask slips, and we get to the bottom of his disagreement with Bookchin, and it reveals itself as being infused, yet again, with the patterns of caricature established earlier in the 1990s.

"The world", Kovel informs us, "is full of bad people in the eyes of Murray Bookchin", and Bookchin is consumed with offering a critique of these people – the post-modernists, the deep ecologists, the lifestyle anarchists. Furthermore, and quite without explaining how he, like Black, has come to know the inner workings of Bookchin's mind, Kovel explains that there is, for Bookchin, an ever-present "Satan", the slaying of which Bookchin has determined his role to be. "Let there be no mistake", Kovel contends, "that one big devil hangs over" the rest of Bookchin's opponents, and that devil is "Bookchin's *bête noire*, Karl Marx".²¹ Much like the earlier reaction from the deep ecologists, then, Kovel enacts the same shift of focus away from the issues raised by Bookchin (this time, in his critique of Marx) and on to these unknowable but inferred motivations. Continuing his *ad hominem* approach, Kovel informs us that Bookchin sets out not to discuss the theoretical and historical failings of Marx and Marxism, but to somehow knock Marx's work out of the way to make way for his own:

If hierarchy/domination as Bookchin understands them are to become the centrepieces of radical ecological thought, then the central contributions of Marxism – class struggle, mode of production, and the like – have to be displaced. It is an unfortunate feature of messianism [sic] that it can be worn by only one figure. Those applying for the position have to eliminate the opposition. Bookchin has to wrestle with Marx and defeat him if his own messianic ambitions are to be fulfilled. And so there is a material reason why the figure of the Great Satan takes the shape of Karl Marx and figures so massively in Bookchin's texts.²²

Despite his claim to have uncovered a material reason for Bookchin's desire to "displace" Marx, this is nothing more than insinuation and aspersion about Bookchin's motives that, in truth, Kovel can know nothing of. As with the similar elements of critique of Bookchin that slip into personal slurs, the primary evidence these critics have for such claims is the existence of similar materials: this problematic pattern of approaching Bookchin fed upon itself throughout the 1990s, and moreover, exists up to the present day. Take, for example, the latest piece by John Clark in *Capitalism, Nature, Socialism*.²³ Here, Clark offers a largely theoretical discussion of Bookchin's version of dialectic, and of course, as no-one would deny, this is a valid (and necessary) avenue of investigation when examining Bookchin's legacy. These types of theoretical investigations of Bookchin's philosophical fundamentals are *precisely* the approach we should be taking to Bookchin and his work.

However, what to do with Clark's opening gambit, that "Bookchin's concept of dialectic is implicitly an apologia for his own life and politics, and a rationalization of the failures of that life and politics"?²⁴ What does this do to the essay overall? What does it do to the unsuspecting reader, to have Bookchin's apparent personal failures thrust into their mind at the outset, based on nothing but insinuation? On the other hand, what does it do to the reader who is committed to avoiding this kind of

22. Kovel, "Negating Bookchin," p. 38.

23. John Clark, "Domesticating the Dialectic: A Critique of Bookchin's Neo-Aristotelian Metaphysics," *Capitalism, Nature, Socialism*, Vol. 19, No. 1 (March 2008), pp. 82–97.

24. Clark, "Domesticating the Dialectic," p. 82.

21. Joel Kovel, "Negating Bookchin," in Andrew Light, ed., *Social Ecology After Bookchin* (New York: Guilford, 1998), p. 37.

unsubstantiated claim? At best, it sours the rest of Clark's piece, it muddies the water, casts doubt over Clark's judgement; at worst, taken together with the other slips into personal slur that appear throughout the piece, it renders the rest of his essay easily dismissible, the product not of genuine theoretical endeavour but of Clark's obvious personal distaste for Murray Bookchin.

It is this type of pattern, this trend, that I criticised Morse's *BAB* for falling back onto. I would argue that no other thinker of recent times suffers such a blurring of the theoretical and the personal as does Bookchin. Whether one sees this as Bookchin's own fault, the product of his own personal failings, or an over-zealous polemical style, or whether one sees it as the product of a

misunderstanding of the political action which his philosophical principles necessitated, is, in the final analysis, beside the point. The main focus should be, as it should be with any thinker, on the theoretical and political legacy Bookchin left behind, the re-evaluation of a philosophy that, in the light in the ever-increasing need for a solution to the ecological crisis, may serve to offer a significant contribution. The teasing out of this contribution is a process I hope to be involved in myself in the coming years and as such, despite the claims of Morse *et al*, I have no interest in closing this discussion down; on the contrary, this debate, shorn of the more problematic literature from the last two decades, is only just getting started.

Measures of Failure and Success: Part 1

Reflections on Chuck Morse's "Being a Bookchinite"

By Eirik Eigliad

In order to mature and develop, every radical movement must clarify its ideals and ideological foundations. Distinct and recognizable ideas about social change are one of the necessary preconditions for a distinct and recognizable social movement. Furthermore, in order to maintain its relevance, it must continuously reassess these ideological foundations, as well as their underlying intellectual premises, and evaluate their impact on its political practices. To guide its practice, such a movement needs no gurus or prophets, nor does it need any ossified dogmas or hallowed canons – it needs a solid theoretical grounding, and must make use of available critical insights in order to consistently reorient itself. Intellectual or ideological stagnation signifies – *by definition* – the death of any social movement.

If we are to create a new political practice – direly needed in our times – a new radical social movement has to be nurtured, one that aims for fundamental social change. Social ecologists suggest that such a movement should base itself on the ideological

legacy of the radical theorist Murray Bookchin, and advance a revolutionary and libertarian municipalist approach to counter the crises of our time. Such a movement cannot, for reasons given above, eschew critique; On the contrary, it should consistently welcome critique as a means of reorienting itself. At all times, this movement must be able to explain and justify its ideological foundations, as well as its political relevance.

Still, there are many forms of critique. Not everything that passes for criticism today lives up to its promises of being a compass, by providing real analysis and assessments of ideas and their social consequences. In order to maintain focus and integrity, social ecologists should insist on certain intellectual standards; at the very least, criticisms must be expected to be factually consistent, theoretically substantiated, and coherently contextualized, simply to help ensure that the critique actually helps the movement reassess and possibly reorient itself. Very fine lines exist in polemics and political debates, and real theoretical

issues can easily be obscured by self-importance, squabbles, and slander. Just as important as the necessary openness toward critique and subsequent re-evaluation processes is the capacity to distinguish the components of a given critique, and cut to the core of the argument. In my view, real critique can always be fruitful and constructive if it is true to its aspirations, as a real “critical art.” By following transparent and consistent practices for critical engagement with ideas, we can hope that everyone in our movement learns to discern what authentic and substantial criticisms are, and that the movement as such can mature in the process.

Particularly relevant for a movement that identifies with the ideas of social ecology could, at this point, be a critical assessment of the life and works of Murray Bookchin. After all, Bookchin was undisputedly the leading theoretical figure of this movement, and he devoted more than twenty books, as well as numerous speeches and essays, to develop this body of ideas.¹ Furthermore, Bookchin was not only the most prominent social ecologist, but a major theorist of the post-war libertarian Left, and his wide-ranging and original works should be considered important also for broader social movements concerned with issues like direct democracy, non-hierarchy, radical ecology, or libertarian socialism. For these reasons, such an assessment would be most appropriate – as well as timely, in light of Bookchin’s recent passing – as the ideas he developed deserve serious attention, perhaps more now than ever before. As a participant in this emerging international movement, I am very much looking forward to seeing social ecologists critically engage with Bookchin’s ideas, and help develop social ecology.

Chuck Morse as a “Bookchinite”

Recently we have witnessed an attempt to formulate a criticism of Bookchin’s life and work, by Chuck Morse, a New York anarchist, who was associated with Murray Bookchin and the Youth Greens

in the early nineties, and ostensibly still is sympathetic to social ecology. In his recent pamphlet, “Being a Bookchinite,”² he seeks to assess Murray Bookchin’s influence and relevance as a social theorist, as seen from the perspective a participant in the political milieus surrounding Bookchin, if only for a period of about two years.³ This pamphlet falls short of contributing to a critical assessment of Murray Bookchin’s theoretical contributions and political activities.

It does so for several reasons. One immediate problem in Morse’s account is that it contains many factual mistakes. Just on the first page, when we supposedly learn that Bookchin had “much in common with other sect builders of the socialist left,” the footnote refers to Bookchin as a former “member of Shachtman’s Socialist Workers Party.” Bookchin, however, was never a follower of Max Shachtman, but sided with his main political rival in the Trotskyist movement, James P. Cannon.⁴ In the very next sentence we find a different kind of erroneousness. Here we can learn that Marcel Van der Linden presents an “excellent” discussion of the degree to which Josef “Weber’s views actually prefigured many of Bookchin’s later contributions.”⁵ Regardless of whether we agree on judging Van der Linden’s thesis as “excellent” or not, it is clearly an academic piece *specifically* attempting to detect the influence of Josef Weber on the writing of Bookchin’s essays in *Post-Scarcity Anarchism* (1971), not simply “many” of Bookchin’s later contributions, as Morse wants us to believe. Are either of these mistakes important in and of themselves? Of course not!

1. Murray Bookchin’s writings on social ecology date from the early sixties, although he had been an active and outspoken participant in radical movements since the mid-thirties. For a complete overview of the works of Murray Bookchin, see the bibliography Janet Biehl compiled for his seventieth birthday. The bibliography has been subsequently updated and is now available in its most recent version (November 27, 2006) online at http://dwardmac.pitzer.edu/anarchist_archives/bookchin/biehlbiblio.html.

2. Chuck Morse, “Being a Bookchinite” (<http://www.negotiations.net>). All page references are taken from the pdf-pamphlet published here. (This essay was apparently scheduled for republication in the spring, 2008 issue of *Perspectives on Anarchist Theory*.)

3. Ibid pp. 5–6, 26.

4. Under all circumstances it is wrong to talk about “Shachtman’s Socialist Workers Party,” as Morse does here, as it was Cannon who held the undeniable leadership of this party well into the 1950s. In the aftermath of the Soviet invasion of Finland (when Bookchin was fully involved in the Trotskyist movement), the Shachtmanites had left SWP to form the Workers Party. Although Bookchin did follow Shachtman’s ideas and activities with interest, he never belonged to his party.

5. See Marcel Van der Linden, “The Pre-History of Post-Scarcity Anarchism: Josef Weber and the Movement for a Democracy of Content (1947–1964),” in *Anarchist Studies*, Volume 9, No. 2 (Fall, 2001), Translated from Dutch by Lee Mitzman, pp 127–145. For a critique of Van der Linden’s account, see Janet Biehl, “Bookchin’s Originality: A Reply to Marcel Van der Linden,” in *Communalism* 14 (April 2008).

They are next to negligible. The problem is that this pamphlet is congested with such “negligible” errors: These examples are simply chosen because they appear in the very *first* sentences in the *first* footnote on the *first* page.

Another problem is the heavily laden language in this pamphlet. Bookchin is consistently presented as a “sect builder” and an instigator of a “cultish” project. Although Morse admits that “Bookchin never used the word ‘sect’ to describe his efforts and surely would have rejected it,” he deems it “applicable nonetheless,” and uses *The Merriam-Webster Unabridged Dictionary* as reference. (This is one of the rare instances, I may add, where Morse actually tries to substantiate his reasoning.) This dictionary describes a sect as – and I use Morse’s exact quote – “a separate group adhering to a distinctive doctrine or way of thinking or to a particular leader ... a school of philosophy or of philosophic opinion ... a group holding similar political, economic, or other views.”⁶ Of course, to the perceptive reader, it is clear that such a vague and all-encompassing description could be used for *just about any* political movement or ideological tendency, not only what commonly passes for a “sect” or a “cultish” phenomenon. Not only would this probably describe, say, the Republican Party of America, but also the critical theorists of the *Frankfurter Schule*, and the argument could be made that even Morse’s own Institute for Anarchist Studies would fit this description. Such an interpretation would of course quickly render the very concept meaningless. This, however, does not seem to trouble Morse. Not only does he accuse Bookchin of sectarianism, he deliberately characterizes Bookchin’s political project at the time (the Burlington Greens) as a sect, and even intensifies its religious connotations. He insists that Bookchin’s ideas “played a quasi-religious role” to the “disciples and protégés” that surrounded him and that Bookchin became “something of a prophet.” We even curiously learn that “Bookchin seemed relish in his own isolation, as if it were a sign of grace.”

Certainly, people committed to building a revolutionary social alternative have always been accused of sectarianism. Generally, revolutionaries are not troubled by such accusations; usually they are levelled by openly reformist and centrist tendencies.

However, since Morse claims he used to be a “core disciple” in Bookchin’s “inner circle,” the charges could seem to carry some more weight, and we could be interested in learning more about the dynamics and characteristics that qualify his terminology. However, any substantiation is woefully lacking; it all boils down to an exposition of persuasions, clad in a politically laden terminology. Indeed, the very language Morse uses, filled with both explicit charges and insinuations, leaves us wondering what Morse really intends to say even when he uses other words in this context, for instance when he, in the very first sentence of the pamphlet, describes Murray Bookchin as an “ambitious” and “compelling” figure.

I am not going to give a detailed exposition of Morse’s rather sophomoric use of footnotes and references. However, in this particular instance it is perhaps worth noting that Morse chose Maurice Isserman as one of his sources on the American Left. Isserman was one of the “new historians” that wrote approvingly of the policies of the Communist Party (The Stalinists), vehemently stamping all forms of Trotskyism and libertarian socialism as “sectarian.”⁷ By learning from Isserman and other “new historians,” we can easily dismiss Trotskyist party leaders as “sect-builders.” But it will not help us understand anything.

Another problem is the many inconsistencies of this article. Some times they point to major contradictions (and these I intend to address later on), but often these inconsistencies merely concern trifle anecdotes. Consider for example how Morse writes (in footnote 13 on page 10) that he essentially had forsaken a college education and academic career, only to write later (on page 25) that he left Burlington to study at the New School for Social Research in New York. Of course it is not interesting for

7. See Maurice Isserman, *If I had a Hammer: The Death of the Old Left and the Birth of the New Left* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1993). He also wrote *Which Side Were You On? The American Communist Party During the Second World War* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1982). The debates over the historiography of the Old Left raged in the mid-1980s, where Theodore Draper was one of the most outspoken critics of these “new historians.” Bookchin also commented on this, writing letters in support of Draper. See *Village Voice*, September 3, 1985 and *New York Review of Books*, August 15, 1985. Curiously Morse chose to refer to Bookchin’s latter comment on this debate (p. 15, fn 17), where he writes that “for a time [*sic*] [Bookchin] saw the Communist Party as one of the worst offenders, which [Bookchin] believed [*sic*] had created a ‘police mentality’ among its members.” (The quotation marks are Morse’s.) Apparently Morse does not understand the significance of these letters, or this debate, something which, in light of Morse’s charges, should concern us.

6. Morse, “Being a Bookchinite,” p. 5 (footnote 2).

us to know whether Morse pursued academic degrees or not, and it is certainly not relevant for this essay. But then again, why does he make an issue out of his apparent “sacrifice”?

One of the more problematic aspects of this pamphlet is how Morse makes far-reaching generalizations on the bases of his often trivial and inconsistent recollections. Some of these reflections are patently absurd, like when Morse explains how Bookchin indirectly encouraged “obsequiousness” by constantly speaking about his ill health: “These remarks created a tragic aura around him and the feeling that we should treasure every moment with him.”⁸ Aside from the quite pathetic stunt to blame a dead man for being concerned about his frail health – issues that *naturally* concern most old people – the conclusions Morse draws are quite staggering. I see no need to counter Morse’s indictments here: If Bookchin did exert a calculated self-pity to “demand obsequiousness,” he seems to have had very weak means at his disposal indeed. Actually, in my opinion, petty remarks like this (that Morse uses to describe and explain Bookchin’s “exalted position within [their] milieu”) tell us considerably more about Morse’s character than about Bookchin’s. The fact that Morse qualifies his persuasion by admitting that he “never saw Bookchin demand obsequiousness” – for this or any other reason – makes his comment seem even more ignoble.

Many of the recollections follow the same pattern. The pamphlet does require attentive reading if we are to correctly evaluate it, particularly since Morse usually substantiates his persuasions simply by referring to his own personal experiences. Furthermore, his charges are more based on hints and insinuations than any reasoned argumentation. His speculations therefore remain in the realm of quasi-theory, and entirely depend on the readers accepting his persuasions at face value. In fact, Morse’s pamphlet can easily be read as one long attack on Bookchin’s character, from which his ideas and actions ostensibly stem; yet it is presented as a “serious appraisal” from one who maintained “friendly contact.”⁹

Despite the striking shallowness Morse displays in these recollections, the real problems that this pamphlet expresses are not simply a result of sloppy work; it is one of real political disagreements. It would therefore be unfortunate if we got sidetracked from the *ideological* issues at stake, and I intend to spend no more time commenting on minor errors, inconsistencies, conceptual inaccuracies, and trivia in Morse’s pamphlet. Instead I intend to focus on the real political issues we must discuss in order to understand and evaluate the legacy that Murray Bookchin left us.

Above all, I will concentrate my efforts on challenging the main thrust of Chuck Morse’s pamphlet; namely the extent to which Murray Bookchin’s life and works are to be considered failures. This, after all, is Morse’s most fundamental criticism of Bookchin: He starts out by asking whether Bookchin was “successful,” and immediately replies with a resolute answer, “No, he was not.” He explains that Bookchin “did not create a new revolutionary doctrine that was adequate to his aims or one, for instance, that possessed the transformative force of Marxism.” This is a sweeping indictment indeed, and one that has to be backed up on both points, and it will be interesting to see how Morse attempts to do so.

First, we should take a look at why Morse thinks Bookchin’s social ecology does not possess “the transformative role of Marxism,” because he immediately continues by self-confidently asserting that Bookchin’s “work simply lacks the coherence and subtlety necessary to register on that scale.” Yet if we look for any kind of substantiation of this claim in his pamphlet, our search will be in vain. Nowhere does Morse tell us where and to what extent Bookchin’s “doctrine” is incoherent, and how it is so, and neither do we learn in what ways it lacks subtlety. This leaves us only with Morse’s personal, but hopelessly unreasoned, opinion. Okay, so Morse seems to think that Bookchin’s corpus lacks coherence and subtlety, but what more reasons does he give for this “doctrine” to be a failure? Why and in what way does social ecology fail to register on the scale of Marxism? Surprisingly enough, those are the only reasons Morse ever gives. In fact, that sentence is all that is said on that subject in the rest of the pamphlet; although he repeats the same claim in one of the concluding passages, where he writes that Bookchin “did

8. See Morse, “Being a Bookchinite,” p. 20–21.

9. In my view, anyone who wants to focus on Chuck Morse’s peculiar methodology could easily write another “Meditation on Anarchist Ethics.” This, however, is not my intention here.

not elaborate a doctrine comparable to Marxism,” any kind of validation of this claim is still woefully lacking.¹⁰

Second, we should take a look at how Morse judges whether or not Bookchin did “create a new revolutionary doctrine that was adequate to his aims,” as Bookchin admittedly hoped contribute to through his writings on social ecology and communalism. Morse professes to “judge Bookchin according to the standards that he set for himself.” However, to properly evaluate Bookchin’s achievements – as well as what the standards he set for himself actually were – we first need to take a closer look at the content of Morse’s pamphlet, and explore some key points in the presentation of social ecology that Morse offers: In order to understand Bookchin’s project or evaluate his theories, and see whether Morse can help us in this endeavor, perhaps we should even take a closer look at Bookchin’s ideas than Morse seems to warrant.

Indeed, in order to assess whether Morse is right in concluding that Bookchin was a failure, and whether the body of ideas he developed can be useful for future radicalism, I would like us also to enter a discussion on how social ecologists measure failure and how we measure success. This is not possible unless I first take issue with some of the major ideological questions involved, all of which are expressed in this pamphlet.¹¹ By bringing up these major points of contention – which in many respects distinguishes social ecology from other radical

approaches, including Morse’s own – I hope to enter a more constructive discussion of Bookchin’s ideological legacy. Above all, I will look at whether this pamphlet really addresses “the strengths and weaknesses in [Bookchin’s] particular approach to revolutionary organizing.”¹²

The Social Ecology of Development

First, I would like to question Morse’s presentation of social ecology; particularly since it has implications for our understanding of historical development and social change. For me, it was utterly astonishing to witness how Morse – after first having condemned Bookchin’s work for lacking coherence and subtlety – carelessly presents a most simplistic caricature of social ecology.¹³ In Morse’s hands, the whole project Bookchin developed through a lifetime, and literally thousands of pages, is efficiently reduced to 3 embarrassing pages – a mere 611 words! – “explaining” what “those faithful to life’s evolutionary mission” must do “according to Bookchin.” The problem here is not brevity, but superficiality. We should not be surprised to learn that Morse thinks Bookchin’s work lacks coherence and subtlety: in this desultory presentation it certainly does.¹⁴

If we are to properly evaluate Bookchin’s legacy we need to first understand its content. Simplistic explications do not always make ideas simpler to grasp or more explicable. It would be unfortunate if we let our subsequent discussions be based on a misreading of Bookchin’s perspective on social evolution and political change, as this is necessary to understand the fuller

10. Morse, “Being a Bookchinite,” p. 27. Morse’s theoretical carelessness is problematic indeed: I must point the attention of the readers to the fact that nowhere in this pamphlet do we even get a clear impression of whether Morse even thinks “coherence” and “subtlety” is virtuous in this respect, and whether he himself actually sees the need for a new revolutionary project (coherent yet with subtlety!) that possesses “the transformative force of Marxism.” Elsewhere in this pamphlet, Morse uses arguments against Bookchin’s project that easily could be an indictment of Marxism as well, even more so, like when he, on page 26, claims that the “theoretical premises necessary [for ‘another Bookchin sect’] – the idea of a universal history, of primary and secondary contradictions, etc – have not fared well in the culture at large.” If it is correct, as I suspect, that Morse does not see the need for, or even the possibility of, a doctrine comparable to Marxism, why bring it up this way? I mention this because, strikingly often, Morse’s own forms of expressions are redolent of those associated with post-modernism, whose anti-ideological discourse certainly has fared better “in the culture at large” – not the least in academia and in anarchist circles.

11. I will return to this discussion in the concluding parts of my reply to Chuck Morse. (Parts 2, 3, and 4 of my reply are forthcoming in *Communalism*.) Serious readers may very well ask why a shoddy pamphlet like “Being a Bookchinite” deserves this much attention, but I do believe that a thorough exposition of Morse’s many simplifications and distortions provide some basic lessons that are instructive for social ecologists.

12. Ibid p. 6. Regardless of his ulterior motives, Morse’s *expressed* intentions, analyses and conclusions appear throughout the text, alongside his more implicit notions.

13. For a brief discussion on “Being a Bookchinite,” see also Andy Price, “Communalism or Caricature: Patterns of Bookchin Critique,” *Anarchist Studies* 16, no. 1 (2008), pp. 76–82.

14. Surprisingly, this poor description and evaluation of social ecological theory and practice comes from one that repeatedly boasts of being personally and politically “guided” and “educated” by Murray Bookchin. Perhaps more surprising still is the fact that this tract represents not only his own personal viewpoints, but it has apparently been read and commented on by “Paul Glavin, Walter Hergt, Matt Hern, Yvonne Liu, Joe Lowndes and the editors of *Perspectives*,” several of which could be expected to have familiarized themselves with Bookchin’s ideas to a degree that they would be able to counter Morse’s insidious disinformation. Since it is a fact that none of them have done so, and Morse still seems “grateful” for their “helpful comments,” I can only presume that they agree with Morse’s purpose of writing this essay to an extent that they think the ends justifies the means. Morse, “Being a Bookchinite,” p. 2.

content of this body of ideas. To begin this process of unraveling the ideas of Bookchin beneath the caricatured presentation in Morse's pamphlet, we should perhaps start out by dealing with Bookchin's alleged "catch phrases."

According to Morse, Bookchin encouraged that "an 'intelligentsia' should study 'organic societies' if it wants to 'render nature self-conscious.'"¹⁵ The informed reader will surely question the extent to which the example in case accurately portrays "catch phrases" by Murray Bookchin. I also find it appropriate to ask readers to question whether Bookchin himself would prefer social ecologists to address other activists or citizens by his "catch phrases alone," as Morse insinuates here. Clearly, Morse creates a straw man that can easily be ridiculed and dismissed. Morse even draws far-reaching conclusions from these alleged catch phrases, claiming that they partially explain why Bookchin's ideas did not gain a larger following.¹⁶ However superficial and obvious Morse's ridicule may be, these "catch phrases" must be addressed, as they reveal much of Morse's caricatured approach. To get to the core of this point of contention, I will first look at Bookchin's view on the need to study organic societies, and comment on Morse's presentation in light of this.

Morse writes that in order to "honor our evolutionary heritage, we must create a society whose metabolism with the natural world is ecologically sound and whose internal relationships are democratic and decentralized. It is solely these social forms that possess the wholeness and freedom that life requires." Morse proceeds by proclaiming that "[a]ccording to Bookchin, we approximated this in our early history while living in what he called 'organic societies.' Then, humans had relatively egalitarian cultural practices and a sympathetic, if uninformed, relationship to nature. 'Let us frankly acknowledge,' Bookchin

wrote, 'that organic societies spontaneously evolved values that we rarely can improve.'"¹⁷

Despite the somewhat peculiar wordings, this passage at first glance may not seem too problematic. After all, Bookchin did base much of his monumental work *The Ecology of Freedom* on studies of "organic societies," in an attempt to anthropologically understand the emergence of hierarchies, and, in turn, to suggest how hierarchies as such could be abolished by fundamentally remaking our societies. Morse chose to present this as a "catch phrase." Still, as I will try to explain, this one-sided presentation Morse gives does pose some serious challenges for us, if we are to understand and evaluate a social ecological perspective on historical development.

First of all, it could be of interest to our subsequent discussions to note that by "organic society," Bookchin meant "forms of organization in which the community is united by kinship ties and by common interest in dealing with the means of life. They are distinct in the fact that they are "not yet divided into the classes and bureaucracies based on exploitation we find in hierarchical society."¹⁸ This was not a "catch phrase" for Bookchin. For reasons of decency, it should be noted that Bookchin himself provided a very thorough critique of simplistic interpretations of organic societies, and the longing for a return to a Golden Age that has only existed in mythic imageries.¹⁹ As

15. Ibid p. 19. Morse apparently presents this as some quotation from Murray Bookchin, but gives no reference in the linked footnote.

16. Morse writes that the "tendency toward hermeticism had a political logic. Specifically, we assumed that it was not possible to build a mass movement at the present juncture, given the generalized historical decline that we presumed to see around us, and thus we felt compelled to address more 'advanced' sectors of the population. This sanctioned the use of very esoteric discourse and, to a degree, made it necessary as a bonding element in our political community." Ibid, p. 19, fn 26.

17. Morse, "Being a Bookchinite," p. 7. The quote is from Murray Bookchin, *The Ecology of Freedom: the Emergence and Dissolution of Hierarchy* (Palo Alto, CA: Chesire Books, 1982), p. 319. For my references here, I use the 1991 edition, published by Black Rose Books (Montréal), which uses the same pagination.

18. See Murray Bookchin, "Introduction to the First Edition," *Post-Scarcity Anarchism* (Montréal: Black Rose Books, 1986), p 11.

19. The Black Rose Books re-edition of *Ecology of Freedom* was enlarged with a very substantial new introduction called "Twenty Years Later... Seeking a Balanced Viewpoint" where Bookchin scrupulously criticizes much of the ideas that had been associated with him in the 1980s, that had been partly developed in *Ecology of Freedom*, in order to elaborate further his views on hierarchies and social development, and to avoid misreadings of his ideas. Among other fundamental issues, he did nuance his presentation of organic societies, admitting that his chapter "2: The Outlook of Organic Society" was a polemical one, to "countervail the standard image of preliterate cultures as 'savage', by emphasizing their benign aspects. I wanted to shatter this ugly image of preliterate peoples and explore more fully the ancestral sources of values like care, nurture, and early humanity's subjectivization or personalization of 'Nature.'" (p. lkv) In fact, he further nuanced this book in some important aspects in the recent introduction to the AK Press edition of the book (published in 2005; Edinburgh and Oakland). I find it hard to understand how Morse could be oblivious to these developments (or, dare I say, *nuancing*) of Bookchin's ideas.

he said himself: “At no point in my discussion did I suggest we can return to aboriginal lifeways. In fact I was at pains to warn against any belief that we can – or should – do so.” And further, “[i]f we are to achieve an ecological society in the future, it will have to be enriched by the insights, knowledge, and data we have acquired as a result of the long history of philosophy, science, technology, and rationality.”²⁰ If Bookchin neither suggests that we can actually return to “aboriginal lifeways” nor look upon it as desirable, what then are these values that he evokes? Bookchin summarized it this way:

Looking back in time to the preliterate ‘organic society’ that existed before hierarchy and capitalism emerged, I explored the nonhierarchical sensibilities, practices, values, and beliefs of egalitarian cultures generally, as well as the social features of an organic society, that seemed to be relevant to a radical ecological politics today: the principle of the irreducible minimum, by which organic societies guaranteed to everyone the basic means of life; its commitment to usufruct rather than to the ownership of property; its ethics of complementarity, as distinguished from a morality of command and obedience. All of these principles and values, to my mind, were – and are – desiderata that should find a major place in a future ecological society. I also felt that they had to be integrated with the rationality, science, and in large parts the technics of the modern world, redesigned, to be sure, to promote humanity’s integration with the non-human world. This selective integration could form the overarching practices of an entirely new society and sensibility.²¹

This careful evaluation of organic societies is already far removed from the attributed simplistic notions of primordial virtues. Actually, the quote Morse chose is taken from a longer passage, which interestingly reads: “Can we”, Bookchin asks,

integrate the archaic customs of usufruct, complementarity, and the equality of unequals into a modern vision of freedom?

20. Bookchin, *Ecology of Freedom*, p. lvii.

21. Bookchin, *Ecology of Freedom*, p. xiv. Although this passage is found in his “Twenty years later...” clear yet nuanced explanations about Bookchin’s perspectives abound also in the regular chapters of the original book.

Whatever newer sensibilities, technics, and ethics, can we develop, and what newer social institutions can we hope to form? If the freedom of humanity implies the liberation of nature *through* humanity, by what means and criteria and means can we reenter natural evolution? Our very use of the words ‘humanity’ and ‘individuality’ betrays the fact that our answers must be drawn from a very different context than that of the preliterate social world. In fact “civilization” has broadened the terrain of freedom well beyond the parochial relationships fostered by the blood oath, the sexual division of labor, and the role of age groups in structuring early communities. On this qualitatively new terrain, we cannot – and should not – rely on the power of custom, much less on traditions that have long faded into the past. We are no longer an inwardly orientated, largely homogenous group of folk that is untroubled by a long history of internal conflict and unblemished by the mores and practices of domination. Our values and practices now demand a degree of consciousness and intellectual sophistication that early bands, clans, and tribes never required to maintain their freedom as a lived phenomenon. With this caveat in mind, let us frankly acknowledge that organic societies spontaneously evolved values that we rarely can improve.²²

The values that Bookchin sought to incorporate by *selective integration* were precisely the ethical principles of *the irreducible minimum, usufruct, and complementarity*, as necessary moral pillars for creating a social “equality of unequals,” the basic promise of freedom. These underlying principles for human consociation could be regenerated as basic social values and made existentially relevant; much like the values of care and nurture still are relevant to human interaction. Although their concrete social expressions certainly will be differentiated, and could be made much more socially complex through our social-ecological reconstruction, they would constitute social values whose basic principles and premises would essentially be the same.

Exactly how Chuck Morse manages to make the study of organic societies a “catch phrase” by Bookchin, or essential for the social ecological approach escapes me. Bookchin advocated a

22. Bookchin, *Ecology of Freedom*, p. 319, emphasis in original.

serious study of society and social development *as such* (including organic societies), from prehistory to our own day, in order to understand historical development and prospects. In caricatured versions like Morse's presentation, we are simply bereft of the ability to understand how Bookchin viewed the basic issues at stake: How has society developed? To what extent is society rooted in nature? What are its defining socializing features? How can we discern liberatory societal traits from oppressive ones, and how and to what extent do they interplay? Indeed, what is progressive and rational in social development, and, ultimately, what would define a rational society? Those were some of the basic questions Bookchin tried to answer in his many books. If we seek to understand and evaluate the theories Bookchin developed, we must try and understand how these kinds of questions were related to his attempt to create distinct, radical social theory. To make a mockery out of social ecological analysis by reducing it to "catch phrases" and some random quotes brings us nowhere. After all, with little effort, wilful de-contextualization can render virtually concept and idea meaningless.²³ However, when dealing with history and social theory, to paraphrase American scholar Mary G. Dietz; *context is all*.

In order to clarify some of the most blatant distortions by Chuck Morse, I will therefore have to briefly *re*-contextualize Bookchin's ideas. By re-contextualization I urge us to try to understand both the social context in which these ideas of social ecology were developed as well as the theoretical context in which concepts were presented.²⁴ Social ecology is not just a set of catch phrases or a pile of quotes from Murray Bookchin, it is not even his collected writings: Social ecology, *as it has been developed by Bookchin*, is simultaneously an ethical social theory, an ecological world-view and a radical political approach.

23. The ability to de-construct a theory can be a useful tool, but is in itself inadequate form of dealing with social theory. Equally important for social radicals – who seek to understand the world in order to be able to change it – is the ability to contextualize and coherently integrate ideas in a theory that can serve to explain social development and guide political activism. Currently fashionable methods of deconstructionism, in their defiance of all "grand narratives," can easily be used to take away all meaning from social concepts, and in this process threaten to render radical activism subjectivist, immediatist, relative, and ultimately meaningless in a *social* sense.

24. This, of course, is in addition to the obvious *textual* context that we have to consider. For instance, we see that Chuck Morse's quotation from Murray Bookchin ("organic societies spontaneously evolved values that we rarely can improve") was taken out of context.

Bookchin was the first social thinker to insist that a free society would also have to be an ecological one; at the same time he insisted that an ecological society would have to be one of a liberated humanity. "In addressing the sources of our present social and ecological problems," Bookchin argues, "perhaps the most fundamental message that social ecology advances is that the very *idea* of dominating nature stems from the domination of human by human."²⁵ His ecological philosophy had revolutionary implications: We can never solve today's ecological problems, Bookchin maintained, without challenging their social roots: The "most fundamental route to a resolution of our ecological problems is *social* in character."²⁶ To confront the ecological crisis, social ecology therefore calls for a new politics and a new movement, indeed for a total remaking of society. "Until domination as such is removed from social life and replaced by a truly egalitarian and sharing society, powerful ideological, technological, and systemic forces will be used by the existing society to degrade the environment, indeed the entire biosphere."²⁷

Bookchin's perseverance with the necessity to properly address *the totality of the crisis* we face, did put him squarely at odds with the mainstream of most radical and environmental movements, and were often the basis for his polemics and intellectual feuds within those movements. "If," as Bookchin challengingly asked in the quote above, "the freedom of humanity implies the liberation of nature *through* humanity, by what means and criteria and means can we reenter natural evolution?" Although Morse may ridicule social ecology's concern with macro-historical perspectives, such questions still beg for solutions: Anyone concerned with creating an *ecological society* will have to relate to them.

Murray Bookchin sought to answer these questions with an integrated and coherent theory addressing the totality of humanity's relationship to nature, and its meaning for social liberation. Social ecologists follow his reasoning that, in our struggle for an ecological society, we must seek social liberation

25. Murray Bookchin, "The Ecological Crisis, Socialism, and the Need to Remake Society," in *Society and Nature* 2, no. 3 (1994), p. 1, emphasis in original.

26. *Ibid*, emphasis in original.

27. *Ibid*.

through the conscious reintegration of society (or second nature) in the natural world (or first nature), a reintegration that gives due value to our distinctly rational and social faculties. Yes, this implies “no less a humanization of nature than a naturalization of humanity.”²⁸ This philosophical naturalism suggests that we *can*, given full humanization and socialization, actually achieve full naturalization of humanity. By actualizing our potentiality for rationality and ethical deliberation, social ecologists insist that *humanity* can play the role of a “nature rendered self-conscious.”²⁹ In fact, our societies have the *potentiality* of actualizing what Bookchin called a *free nature*. To understand our potentialities for sociality, rationality, and freedom, we must not only look at evolution; but more specifically, we must look to *history*.

While it is true that humanity’s pre-historical social forms merit serious attention, the study of organic societies was never one of Bookchin’s “catch phrases.” Neither did Bookchin, unlike so many others in the ecology movement, flatly romanticize organic society. In fact, as the above quote shows, he was always mindful of the necessary subjectivity and abstraction of rationality that makes it problematical to even speak of “individuality” and “humanity” in pre-historical human communities. He was also always mindful of the necessary development of the material preconditions for a libertarian and ecological society, in which people would be free to dedicate their leisure time to political and cultural development. Important technological, scientific and industrial advances have created the potential for a social organization free of poverty, toil and scarcity, advances that have made it possible for humanity to attain freedom and welfare for *all* human beings, if only we are able to fundamentally reorganize our societies.³⁰ Of particular importance is the development of

the *city*, when social organization gradually came to itself, and created a sphere that was undermining the biological limitations on social development present in first nature. The emergence of the city is of great importance for historical development and its civilizing efforts – and therefore to social ecology – something Bookchin did not ignore. In fact, he bluntly stated that cities “embody the most important traditions of civilization.”³¹

Morse completely omits the centrality of cities and even *politics* in his marred presentation of social ecology. Actually, it is hard to grasp the essential characters of the municipality and the confederations envisioned by social ecologists, or even to understand the real content of social ecologists’ calls for a new politics and an empowered citizenry, if we dismiss or ignore the “Urban revolution.” Bookchin not only values these “most important traditions of civilization,” but he goes much further when he says that “some kind of urban community” is indeed “not only the environment of humanity: it is its destiny. Only in a complete urban environment can there be complete people; only in a rational urban situation can the human spirit advance its most vital cultural and social traditions.”³²

Despite this lyrical adherence to the classical ideal, Bookchin was not romanticizing urban life as such. To qualify this passage, Bookchin concludes that there is a point where “cities negate themselves.” The current processes of urbanization are steadily eroding citizenship as responsible human agency in a civil setting, and consequently undermining city life *as politics*, thus pitting the city against itself. In our time, this antagonism between

Black Rose Books), and 2005 (Edinburgh and San Francisco: AK Press).

28. Bookchin, *Ecology of Freedom*, p. 315; quoted in Morse, “Being a Bookchinite,” p. 9.

29. This is another of the alleged “catch phrases.” Readers are encouraged to look more fully into what Bookchin meant by these philosophical terms and their historical implications by examining his works, particularly *The Philosophy of Social Ecology: Essays on Dialectical Naturalism* (Montréal: Black Rose Books, 1995; rev. ed.), as well as the concluding chapter in *Re-Enchanting Humanity: A Defense of the Human Spirit Against Anti-Humanism, Misanthropy, Mysticism, and Primitivism* (London: Cassell, 1995), pp. 228–257.

30. The notion that changing material conditions created a new point of departure for radical theory, in tandem with a new sensibility toward ecological issues, do form the very bases for his influential collection of essays that first defined social ecology. See Murray Bookchin, *Post-Scarcity Anarchism* (San Francisco: Ramparts Books, 1971). *Post-Scarcity Anarchism* was republished with new introductions in 1986 (Montréal:

Black Rose Books), and 2005 (Edinburgh and San Francisco: AK Press).

31. Murray Bookchin, *The Limits of the City*, (1973; republished with a new introduction and a new concluding chapter, “Theses on Libertarian Municipalism,” by Black Rose Books (Montréal, 1986), p. 1.

32. Bookchin, *Limits of the City*, p. 1–2. I specifically refer to this Aristotelian perception from the introduction to the 1973 edition of *The Limits of the City*, to show how Bookchin’s ideas were far more complex at the time *The Ecology of Freedom* was written, than Morse would like us to acknowledge. Bookchin was consistent in his adherence to the classical ideals of citizenship to the very end, as his last completed essay, “The Communalist Project” (written in 2002), documents. See Murray Bookchin, *Social Ecology and Communalism* (San Francisco and Edinburgh: AK Press, 2007), particularly pp 103–107. While commenting on this, I should mention that Bookchin also was consistent in his evaluation of the virtues of organic societies. See his essay “What is Social Ecology?” (Written in 1993; revised in 2001), stating that “in nonhierarchical societies, certain customs guide human behavior along basically decent lines.” Bookchin, *Social Ecology and Communalism*, p. 37.

modern urban entities and the civic freedoms embodied in the historical city has not only set the city against itself, but is to a large extent the cause of the complete disruptions in the balance between the city and the land. Today, this historical antagonism has become not only an important social question, but one of decisive ecological urgency. To glimpse how Bookchin perceived this tension in civic development, consider the following passage:

Modern cities occupy a unique position in urban history – a fact that I feel is not clearly understood by those who dwell in them. On the one hand, the immense development of industry over the past century has created a remarkable opportunity for bringing land and city into a rational and ecological synthesis. The two could be blended into an artistic unity that would open a new vision of the human and natural experience. On the other hand, the modern city – particularly the metropolis – develops the historical limitations of city life as such, bringing the antagonism between land and country to a breaking point. Given its grossly distorted form, it is questionable whether the city is any longer the proper arena for social and cultural development. Thus, by exhausting the one-sidedness of city life based on a vast and malleable industry, the metropolis, by its inner logic, tends to raise the issue of developing all that is desirable in urbanity into a qualitatively new human community.³³

Bookchin, after all, was quite convinced that social potentialities are rooted in “material factors.” This reference to *The Limits of the City* I find important, precisely because it is such an early social ecological work (began in the 1950s and was finished in the 1970s), which contained many of the unique elements he would return to and sophisticate in his later works.³⁴ With *The Limits of*

the City, however, Bookchin was, in his own words, bent on “using Marx against Marxism”: This book, he claimed, carries “what is most useful in Marx’s work over to the libertarian arena,” where he wanted us to discuss the “city as a world in its own right.”³⁵ The city was a social phenomenon of immense cultural as well as economical importance. For Bookchin, the city could not be understood in mere commercial or spatial terms; he perceived the city as the “realm of the citizen.” Although Bookchin clearly admires the instances where citizenship was understood as “an ethical compact,” the main focus of *The Limits of the City* is to explain the economical aspects of the development of cities, as well as their possibilities and limitations.³⁶ If the city is pitted against itself, this paradox is created precisely because cities are “developing with the material conditions that shape society as a whole.”³⁷

In order to understand how Bookchin perceived a phenomenon like the city, and its relationship to early tribal villages as well as modern urban metropolises, we have to see it in light of his perspective on historical development in general, which spun around in a “double helix”: the legacy of freedom and the legacy of domination. Analyzing the expressed unfolding of each of these legacies gave Bookchin the opportunity to discern historical progress from a libertarian perspective, and Bookchin’s analysis was always rooted in this historical understanding. Not only was it necessary to explain these legacies’ distinct features and separate logical unfolding, but also how they interplayed and informed each other.

What ‘civilization’ has given us, in spite of itself, is the recognition that the ancient values of usufruct, complementarity, and the irreducible minimum must be extended from the kin group to humanity as a whole. Beyond the blood oath, society must override the traditional sexual

33. Bookchin, *Limits of the City*, p. 3.

34. His central work in this area is *The Rise of Urbanization and the Decline of Citizenship* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1987), which presents a more elaborate analysis of politics and citizenship from a social ecological perspective. This was later republished as *Urbanization Without Cities: The Rise and Decline of Citizenship* (Montréal: Black Rose Books, 1992), and then finally revised and republished as *From Urbanization to Cities: Toward a New Politics of Citizenship* (London: Cassell, 1995). In this work, Bookchin also explains his tripartite distinctions between the

political sphere, the social sphere, and the state – distinctions that are crucial for the libertarian municipalist approach.

35. Bookchin, *Limits of the City*, p. 6-7.

36. Bookchin, *Limits of the City*, p. 11. This predominantly economic focus was somehow tempered by his supplements in the 1986 version of the book, where his new final chapter “Theses on Libertarian Municipalism” as well as the new introduction incorporated more of the political emphasis he had developed in his *From Urbanization to Cities*.

37. Bookchin, *Limits of the City*, p. 2-3.

division of labor and the privileges claimed by age groups to embrace the ‘stranger’ and exogenous cultures. Moreover, ‘civilization’ has removed these ancient values from the realm of rigid custom and unthinking tradition by rendering them ideational or conceptual.³⁸

For Bookchin it was essential not only to trace social progress empirically in material conditions, developed as existential possibilities, but also to explore the processes of ideational abstraction that could serve to explain and ultimately judge this progression. Unless we have an idea of freedom we cannot actually *know* whether we are free or not, and hence we are not free.³⁹ Simple forms of conscious social interaction in early human communities have gradually paved the way for a historical process of ever-greater degrees of human self-consciousness and rationality, at least unfolded as potentialities. Although we do not live in a free society, we can now know what freedom is; we can debate its features and further expand our conceptions of it. This knowledge of social concepts, if only on the level of ideas, is crucial, and we can use this understanding to pass judgements on any given social order. In light of the ethical “what should be” we are fit to evaluate the existential “what is,” and make conscious choices about the future of our society. Such social choices were made possible only through a process of increasing subjectivity and rational interaction, and thus the gradual emergence of morality and ethics has laid the real foundation for social freedom. When humans are able to

fully make sense of and conceptually explain the increasingly broader range of social potentialities, our ideas and value systems could encompass broader and richer ideals of freedom, and by acting on this knowledge we can contribute to a *society* rendered self-conscious: It is by choosing a social order that embodies these conceptions of self-consciousness and rationality (and, by implication, choice), we can actualize potentialities for social freedom. In this sense, social ecologists fight to ensure that we politically choose our shared destiny – as a society – to a degree that is unprecedented in history, not only as a result of improved technological, scientific, and material preconditions, but also because of an expansion of our shared concepts of rationality, humanity, and freedom.

Freedom is not a static social concept, and there are no particular historical models to explain it fully. Bookchin had no one-dimensional perspective on either “organic societies,” ancient “city states,” or any other historical institution: He cherished these examples for their contribution to the general human legacy of freedom. In his distinctive vein, Bookchin further qualifies his views in the following passage:

[To] include ethical standards of a shared *humanitas*, of a human community, involved a sweeping change in the process of conceptualizing social relations. A free-flowing realm of ethics, as distinguished from a world of hardened customs (however admirable these may be), is a creative realm in which the growth of mind and spirit is possible on a scale that has no precedents in the world of traditional mores. Ethics, values, and with them, social relationships, technics, and self-cultivation can now become self-forming, guided by intellect, sympathy, and love.⁴⁰

Social ecologists seek to sophisticate this legacy of human freedom by “selective integration.”⁴¹ As Bookchin reminded us, it “is not atavistic to cull from history the ways in which people developed humanistic lifeways and realistic institutions that

38. Bookchin, *Ecology of Freedom*, p. 322. Bookchin was later to abandon his tendency of placing the term “civilization” in quotation marks, and become even more outspoken in his defense of civilization. See for instance, his essay “History, Civilization, and Progress: Outline for a Criticism of Modern Relativism,” published in *Green Perspectives* (no. 29, March 1994). Republished in the revised edition of *The Philosophy of Social Ecology: Essays on Dialectical Naturalism* (Montréal: Black Rose Books, 1995). Against primitivists, mystics and romantics, Bookchin insisted that today’s crisis were not caused by humanity being “too civilized,” but by humanity “not being civilized enough.”

39. Social ecologists maintain this commitment to *freedom as a social concept* in flat defiance of the primitivism that is so much in vogue in anarchist milieus today. If we are not aware of a choice, we cannot really choose; and if we are not aware of our freedoms, we are not truly free: Neither a fox running around on a moor nor a bird singing on a branch is free in any meaningful sense of the term; least *freedom* should be reduced to the mere absence of interference, an extreme liberal notion. Still, even the crudest forms of negative liberty, to stick with Isaiah Berlin’s distinctions, cannot explain it as simple freedom from consciousness, interpretation, and choice. If only for these reasons, anarchist primitivism is in every sense of the word socially reactionary.

40. Bookchin, *Ecology of Freedom*, p. 322.

41. Bookchin, *Ecology of Freedom*, p. xiv; quotation referred to earlier in this essay.

could provide workable examples for developing a free society.” He then explains how:

The irreducible minimum, the equality of unequals, and the ethics of complementarity that emerged in organic societies are imperishable standards for freedom, albeit standards that must be extended beyond the parochial group, band, and tribal bonds. The Greek notions of limits and balance in terms of needs and the Athenian institutions of direct democracy are also imperishable standards, albeit standards that must be divested of patricentricity, slavery, exclusionary forms of citizenship, and the high premium the Greeks placed on the arts of war. Christianity’s vision of a universal *humanitas*, for all the defects of the Church, must always be a guiding principle, albeit without any notion of a Supernature to support it. The principle of confederation, so prominent in late medieval cities, as opposed to the nation-state, also belongs to the repertoire of freedom that we can cull from the past, albeit without the patriciates that ruled many of the cities in the late Middle Ages.⁴²

Bookchin did see social development as a *totality* – yet one of many dimensions and nuances – and this totality explains itself only through concrete historical examples. Of course, this totality must be mediated by human interpretation through cumulative knowledge, in order to make sense out of these developments. Despite countless attempts to insist that his social analysis or political theory was not based on *any* social models, Bookchin’s critics repeatedly return to their favorite straw men. Bookchin never allowed for a fetishization of the virtues of organic societies, nor of the ones associated with the ancient Greek *poleis* like Athens, the traditions of New England, or even the achievements of revolutionary Spain. He sought to bring out and highlight what was rational and progressive in any given social development. If only for these reasons, it is highly problematical to simply say, as Morse does, that we approximated a society of “wholeness and freedom” in early history, when humans lived in “organic societies.” It becomes even more problematical when Morse moves on to mock Bookchin on this score, like when he

42. Bookchin, *Ecology of Freedom*, p. liii.

wants us to consider what appeal such “catch phrases” would have to the general public.⁴³

At the risk of repeating myself, I must point to one last example before I leave this discussion on the social ecology of development. Immediately after quoting Bookchin as saying we could not improve the values of organic society, Morse writes: “However, instead of building upon this early achievement, we made a tragic departure from our evolutionary itinerary,” and choose to quote Bookchin: “[I]n the intermediate zone between first [non-human] nature and second [human] . . . social evolution began to assume a highly aberrant form. The effort of organic societies like bands and tribes to elaborate nonhierarchical, egalitarian social forms was arrested. . . . social evolution was divested from the realization and fulfilment of a cooperative society into a direction that yielded hierarchical, class-oriented, and Statist institutions.”⁴⁴

Again, the reader is advised to read the original passages from Murray Bookchin, in order to appropriately understand the actual sentences as well as their context. The full passage in the original reads: “To speak concretely: in the intermediate zone between first nature and second *that saw the graded passage of biological evolution into social*, social evolution began to assume a highly aberrant form. The effort of organic societies like bands and tribes to elaborate *their* nonhierarchical, egalitarian social forms was arrested. *For reasons that involve complex evaluation*, social evolution was divested from the realization and fulfillment of a cooperative society into a direction that yielded hierarchical, class-oriented, and Statist institutions.”⁴⁵ Bookchin himself tried to give such a “complex evaluation” of these processes of

43. Morse, “Being a Bookchinite,” p. 19. Morse’s claim however, is plainly absurd: In no way would Bookchin have wanted to see a political organization act “through his catch phrases alone.”

44. Morse, “Being a Bookchinite,” p. 7. Chuck Morse has taken this quote from Murray Bookchin, *The Philosophy of Social Ecology: Essays on Dialectical Naturalism*, First edition (Montréal: Black Rose Books, 1990), p. 178. Morse notes that the same passage also exists in Murray Bookchin, “Postscript: Ecologizing the Dialectic,” in John Clark (editor), *Renewing the Earth: The Promise of Social Ecology, A Celebration of the Work of Murray Bookchin* (London: Green Print, 1990), p. 211 (which is the version I quote as I do not possess the first edition of *Philosophy*). The full essay from which this excerpt was taken, “Thinking Ecologically: A Dialectical Approach,” first appeared in *Our Generation*, vol. 18, no. 2 (Spring–Summer 1987), pp. 3–41.

45. Bookchin, “Ecologizing the Dialectic,” in Clark (ed.), *Renewing the Earth*, p. 211. The ellipsis points are replaced with text in italics (and so is the word “their,” which was somehow omitted in Morse’s quotation).

social evolution in his works, but Morse seemingly wants to depict Bookchin as someone who simply sought to revitalize the virtues of organic society.⁴⁶ But for Bookchin it was crucial to address precisely this “graded passage of biological evolution into social,” in order to understand both cultural development as well as the limitations of our biological heritage. An elaboration of the relationship between biological and cultural factors in conditioning the development of society is imperative for understanding Bookchin’s social ecology.

By using the term “evolutionary itinerary,” moreover, Morse seems to suggest that Bookchin harbored a teleological approach to natural evolution, something Bookchin repeatedly and forcefully denied. His open-endedness was characteristic. Still, he recognized that historical progress has occurred, and that human beings are potentially capable of rationally interpreting these processes that advance society. Bookchin claimed that it was only through careful retrospection of our past that we can elicit and explain what is truly progressive in civilization, by reasonable judgments of the various “what have been,” “what is,” and “what could be,” and from there be able to educe “what should be” according to ethical criteria. Bookchin did not have a schematic view when he used his social ecological analysis to evaluate historical developments: He simply sought to inspire us to look for and draw out the *rational* in any given social development.

Beyond Materialism and Idealism

Unfortunately, nothing in Morse’s short tract sheds light on the fundamental bases of Bookchin’s historical and philosophical approach, and, again, I advise readers to consult Bookchin’s own works to get a more correct picture. The far-reaching conclusions Morse draws from his simplistic presentation are nothing short

of stunning: With a few sentences, he unabashedly writes Bookchin off as an idealist (in the traditional philosophical sense of the term), and makes the pretense that Bookchin’s ethical perspectives were not concerned with material factors. This would imply that Bookchin, wholly emphasizing cultural values and ethics in explaining historical development – according to Morse, that is – was basically aiming for a return to the social principles of organic society, albeit on a more self-conscious level than those societies were historically able to.

The fact that I have dwelled so long with Bookchin’s supposed preferences for organic societies is precisely because it leads us directly to this more fundamental misreading by Chuck Morse: Bookchin’s alleged disregard for material factors. Indeed, in his pamphlet Morse writes how “[t]his voluntarism was consistent with [Bookchin’s] broader view of historical development. For Bookchin, it is our ideas and values – not society’s economic base – that determine the course of events (in the “final instance”). He wove this principle into all of his historical writings, whether he was examining revolutionary movements or broader topics in the history of civilization.”⁴⁷

I have never seen any instances where Bookchin stressed the need to emphasize the element of will *in disregard* of material elements. When Bookchin described historical events (as in his works on radical popular movements), he often addressed a range of subjective factors, particularly at important historical *junctures*, but this does not explain Bookchin’s “broader view of historical development.” Acknowledging this element of will – and of “ideas and values” – certainly does not make Bookchin an *idealist* or even a strict *voluntarist*, in any meaningful philosophical sense. Bookchin never contended that will was the fundamental or dominant factor either politically or historically. It is true, however, that Bookchin did seek to recreate a popular politics where “will” expressed through rational deliberation and ethically based choices would *become* the dominant factor in social development. He wanted to see a world where the realm of necessity gradually was surpassed by the realm of freedom. Still, a free society would have to relate to material factors: “In the realm of *true* freedom – that is, freedom that has been actualized as the result of consciousness, knowledge, and necessity – to know *what*

46. These apparent minutiae are one thing, but it appears Morse’s particular choice of quotation is even more strange, because Bookchin did not think the wording in the above quote appropriately conveyed his views when he five years later revised his collection of essays on ecological philosophy. If we look at the passage here, it reads: “In the intermediate zone between first nature and second that saw the graded passage of biological evolution into social, social evolution began to assume increasingly hierarchical forms. Whether this could have been avoided is impossible to say – and meaningless to divine. In any case, social evolution unfolded in the direction of hierarchical, class-oriented, and statist institutions, giving rise to the nation-state and ultimately, albeit not inevitably, to a capitalist economy.” Bookchin, *Philosophy of Social Ecology*, p. 133.

47. Morse, “Being a Bookchinite,” pp. 16–17.

we can and cannot do is more cleanly honest and true to reality than to avert the responsibility of knowing the limits of the lived world.⁴⁸

Furthermore, at no time did Bookchin disregard the importance of material factors in shaping social reality; these insights were incorporated into a framework that sought to understand historical development in material, as well as cultural, ecological, and political terms. Bookchin sought to understand *history* as a *totality of tendencies*. To grasp the fact that social development consists of both material and ideational dimensions is perhaps too much to ask of Morse, who mistakes Bookchin for an idealist because he challenged the rather conventional Marxist image of historical development. Still, in evaluating Marxism at the end of his life, Bookchin maintained that it was “[b]rilliant as a theory of the material *preconditions* for socialism,” although he was quick to point out that it had failed to “address the ecological, civic, and subjective forces or the *efficient* causes that could impel humanity into a movement for revolutionary social change.”⁴⁹ Nowhere did Bookchin discard the need to address the material preconditions for socialism; he only thought it insufficient if taken alone, and sought also to explain the cultural and political preconditions for attaining a new libertarian society.

By accusing Bookchin of “voluntarism” Morse meant that Bookchin dismissed “the material conditions for social change.”⁵⁰ These accusations of “voluntarism” here are partly based on a lack of understanding of Bookchin, and partly on a false dichotomy. Even Lenin, who has often been depicted as the voluntarist par excellence, cannot be accused of simply dismissing “material factors,” not even after the publication of his “April Theses”: Despite his high premium on the subjective preparation and organization of the working class into a party, Lenin based his broader view of historical development on a quite rigid Marxism, a fact that played no little role in his civil war against the peasantry and its revolutionary parties. In fact, Morse’s flippant categorizations easily renders any self-conscious political agent

seeking to change the world an “idealist” and a “voluntarist” in “the final instance,” regardless of their actual philosophical or political inclinations. As it is, *any* political actor must believe that there is sense in changing ideas and struggling to personally contribute to changing the course of events.

Morse continues this shadow-boxing, when he curiously tries to “invert one of Marx’s more incisive phrases” into “it is not being that determines consciousness, but consciousness that determines being,” and claim that this apply to Bookchin’s ideas.⁵¹ I assume Morse refers to Marx’ discussion in the preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, where he stated that “It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness.” This sentence is far more precise than Morse’s paraphrase, as Marx (and this was important for him) referred specifically to our relationship to the prevailing mode of production – in other words, to our class status. In the preceding sentences Marx explains his views:

In the social production of their existence, men inevitably enter into definite relations, which are independent of their will, namely relations of production appropriate to a given stage in the development of their material forces of production. The totality of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation, on which arises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness. The mode of production of material life conditions the general process of social, political and intellectual life.⁵²

Furthermore Marx explicitly said that it was impossible to judge “a period of transformation by its consciousness, but, on the contrary, this consciousness must be explained from the contradictions of material life, from the conflict existing between the social forces of production and the relations of production.” This is precisely the kind of historical perspective that Bookchin refused to accept. We clearly see how deterministic historical materialism is – at least compared to Bookchin’s more nuanced

48. See Bookchin, *Social Ecology and Communalism*, pp. 112–113, emphasis in original.

49. Bookchin, *Social Ecology and Communalism*, p. 89.

50. Morse, “Being a Bookchinite,” p. 24.

51. Morse, “Being a Bookchinite,” p. 17.

52. See *Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels: The Collected Works*, Volume 29: 1857–1861 (New York: International Publishers, 1987), p. 263.

dialectical naturalism – when Marx thereafter exclaimed: “No social order is ever destroyed before all the productive forces for which it is sufficient have been developed, and new superior relations of production never replace older ones before the material conditions for their existence have matured within the framework of the old society.”⁵³ Such schematic expositions fostered even more rigid historical interpretations, views that heavily informed almost all socialists of the Marxist bent, and it goes a long way in explaining the Russian Mensheviks unflinching commitment to “the bourgeois stage of revolution.”

But let us look at how Morse substantiates this. Interestingly, Morse wants us to “consider the following discussion of the rise of capitalism” in order to prove that Bookchin adhered to strict idealist interpretation of history, where “consciousness determines being”:

If cultural factors were merely reflexes of economic ones, capitalism would have emerged at almost any time in the past, as far back as antiquity. Capitalists in sizable numbers lived in ancient Greece and Rome as well as many parts of medieval Europe, and they were no less acquisitive or enterprising in their pursuit of wealth than our own bourgeoisie. But what prevented them from taking a commanding position in social life – assuming that they tried to do so – was precisely a host of cultural factors that favored the ownership of land over capital, denigrated material accumulation, and strongly emphasized social status in the form of noble titles rather than the ownership of fungible property.⁵⁴

I find it irredeemably odd that Morse has chosen this excerpt from the preface of *The Third Revolution*, to “prove” that Bookchin was an idealist, presumably in the classical Hegelian tradition. I will strongly doubt that even the most scrupulous reader will find anything that suggests an idealist interpretation of history in the quote above. We should perhaps highlight Bookchin’s use of the word *merely* in the first sentence here, so that Morse can understand what is obvious for the rest of us; that

Bookchin was once more qualifying his dialectical perspective of historical development, one that was decidedly neither “idealist” nor “materialist.” The *interrelationships* between cultural and material factors are extremely important when we are trying to explain historical development. Indeed, it was a problem that apparently troubled Karl Marx as well, one that he was unable to answer despite – or rather *because of* – his materialist conception of history, insisting that social change was wholly contingent on the development of the mode of production. For Bookchin, it was imperative to strive to understand the economical, political, cultural, and ecological conditions – *as well as the ideas and actions of real-life human beings* – in order to explain historical phenomena.

Indeed, if Morse had only read the preceding paragraphs, he would perhaps have understood more fully Bookchin’s reasons for writing this passage, as he tried to explain why we should care to seriously explore the ideals, the programs, the organizations, and the actions of past revolutionaries, in order to grasp the depth and breadth of the social possibilities that emerged at various historical turning points throughout the revolutionary era he describes. In no way did Bookchin accept that capitalism was predestined to gain supremacy, as Marxian historical materialism suggests, and, for very obvious reasons, it has been necessary for Bookchin to distinguish his approach from the traditional Marxist one, which has all but dominated the radical left, whether explicitly or unthinkingly.⁵⁵

Indeed, Bookchin sought to avoid such a crude economic interpretation in this work by examining “past revolutions internally, from within their own inner dynamics, rather than externally, from the standpoint of where we are today.” Bookchin uses the preface to explain how he is not “working with the teleological conviction that what *now* exists *had* to come into existence,” and that he refused to “consider the high ideals that emerged in past revolutions as merely an ideological patina for uncontrollable economic forces that determined human behavior irrespective of human wishes and desires.”⁵⁶ For this

53. Ibid, p. 263.

54. Murray Bookchin, *The Third Revolution: Popular Movements in the Revolutionary Era*, Vol. 1 (London: Cassell, 1996), p. ix. Quoted in Morse, “Being a Bookchinite,” p. 17.

55. Bookchin’s thorough *historical* emphasis throughout his works, which involves the material as well as the cultural elements of social development, is not only distinctly non-idealistic, but some of his works – like *From Urbanization to Cities* – even concludes with a programmatic account of how the ideas of social ecology can be put into practice.

56. Bookchin, *The Third Revolution*, Vol. 1, p. viii, emphasis in original.

reason, Bookchin's work refutes the economic categorizations of the English, French, and the American revolutions as *bourgeois* revolutions, and their radical movements as advocates of *bourgeois* social ideals. As Bookchin further stated: "I have avoided viewing the intentions of these movements as reflecting the emergence and consolidation of industrial capitalism; rather, I have taken the demands of the various revolutionary tendencies at their word. I believe that the great mass of people who made the revolutions described in this work genuinely believed in the notions of liberty, equality, fraternity, and the pursuit of happiness that they articulated – not necessarily in free trade, a ruthless egotism, or class collaboration, contrary to the retrospective interpretations that have been given to their liberatory slogans." Moreover, Bookchin specified that each revolution "advanced moral, political, and social alternatives to capitalism – although they lacked any clear idea of what capitalism would become and often even cleared the way for modern capitalism,"⁵⁷ a comment that in itself should be sufficient to undermine Morse's unfounded charges of idealism. In his discussions in *The Third Revolution*, Bookchin has, in his own words, "tried to provide the social, economic, cultural, and political background that gave rise to and sustained its radical movement."⁵⁸

Without disregarding the material "basis" of any given society, we must also acknowledge the cultural and institutional features of a society, as well as its ideological components. Today, we cannot stick to stale perceptions that "being determines consciousness," as traditional Marxists would claim, and its disdainful references to ethics, culture, and politics as mere superstructural expressions of the mode of production. Such a one-dimensional perspective cannot explain our contemporary society any more than it can explain our past. I think this could be an appropriate moment to pause and ask ourselves *why* Morse thinks this phrase is one of Marx most incisive ones; Does Morse actually think being fully determines consciousness?

Bookchin did not. Again, it is the *character* and the *dynamic* of the *interrelationship* that Bookchin was concerned with, not antiquated adherences to either a materialist or idealist conception of historical development. This *interrelationship* is crucial as

well as the differentiated qualifications that can give meanings to questions about *why* and not merely how a certain historical development occurred. After all, how can we else make sense of the fact that, more often than not, various social systems have existed side by side for longer periods of time, as witnessed by the European Middle Ages, which was clearly a mixed economy, and not a strict feudal one. In fact, feudalism never gained a completely hegemonic position in Europe, and even at its height, its systems of production and distribution were based on mixed economies. Some European regions and countries, like Norway, were actually notoriously lacking in feudal institutions or culture. At the same time, we have to account for the fact that wealthy merchants, bankers, and proto-industrialists did exist long before capitalism gained predominance. This meant that some of the technological and material preconditions already existed and, according to Marxist interpretations, should have brought the emergence of capitalism as a system at an earlier stage in history. However, it was only centuries later that some of the very same technologies and forms of production – in a different social, cultural, and political setting – ensured the breakthrough of capitalism in the Western world. This fact suggests that we cannot turn to schematic materialist interpretations of the transitions from one class society to another, but seek more nuanced explanations that encompass material as well as cultural developments.

Bookchin used many "cultural arguments" to counter the prevailing Marxist notions of social development, but this was not "in disregard of material factors." After all, Marx and Engels were certainly right when they boldly claimed that the "history of all hitherto existing society has been a history of class struggles," but it is at the same time important to acknowledge that this is *not all* history has been.⁵⁹ Class struggles have been an important and often decisive component of historical progress, but it is still woefully insufficient in explaining the whole process of social development. The process of capitalist development out of feudalism is more complex than the historical materialist interpretation suggests, in its one-dimensional scheme, where forms of societal succession are entirely reflecting the various

57. Ibid, emphasis added.

58. Ibid.

59. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, "Manifesto of the Communist Party," in *Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels: The Collected Works*, Volume 6: 1845–1848 (New York: International Publishers, 1976), p. 482. To be more precise; their statement is correct after the emergence of class divisions and property.

modes of productive relations. While recognizing the importance of material factors in shaping social development, Bookchin's social ecology, I would argue, is more careful, and far more nuanced.

To conclude, I must say that I frankly had a hard time understanding how Morse can accuse Bookchin of idealism. After all, as Bookchin said repeatedly, "the most fundamental message that social ecology advances is that the very *idea* of dominating nature stems from the domination of human by human."⁶⁰ How could Bookchin possibly state more clearly that our ideas are shaped by social conditions? Social ecology seeks to end the idea of dominating nature precisely by *remaking society*. By aiming at eliminating oppression, exploitation and hierarchies in the social world, we aim at making it possible to end the attempts to "dominate," exploit and plunder nature. How Morse, a self-proclaimed "core disciple," is able to misinterpret this is simply astonishing.

It has to be emphasized, again, that these discussions of organic societies or of idealism are by no means the only

problematical simplifications to occur in Morse's text, neither are they the worst misrepresentations of Bookchin's ideas appearing here. I have chosen to highlight them for very particular reasons. First, because it is such an obvious de-contextualization of certain phrases by Bookchin, and it clearly shows Morse's irresponsible "methods" in dealing with social theory. Second, the negligence of the political impact of *citification* completely obscures the message of libertarian municipalism, the *politics* of social ecology (a subject that I will discuss in greater detail later). Third, Morse's patently absurd claims that Bookchin displayed a disregard for material factors, and even "dismissal of the material conditions of social change," derails our attempts to understand the social ecology of development. Last, but not least, through Morse's superficial presentation we could come to believe that Bookchin's theories on non-hierarchical social forms were historically cemented and thus irrelevant in several important respects, and it would make it particularly hard to understand the non-hierarchical and fundamentally anti-racist message of Bookchin's social ecology. It is to these issues we will now turn.

60. Bookchin, "The Ecological Crisis," p. 1, emphasis in original.

The next section of my reply to Chuck Morse will explore the concepts of racism, freedom, and citizenship, and their significance for social ecology: Part 2 of "Measures of Failure and Success" is forthcoming in Communalism.