

## REVIEW ARTICLE

### Communalism or caricature: patterns of Bookchin critique

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*Social Ecology and Communalism*

Murray Bookchin

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*Being a Bookchinite*

Chuck Morse

Chuck Morse, New York 2007

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Bookchin's *Social Ecology and Communalism* (2007), a posthumous collection of four essays, culminates in the last theoretical piece he was to write, wherein he concludes that, 'its often refreshing aphorisms and insights notwithstanding', anarchism '*is simply not a social theory*' (p.90, emphasis added). As forthright as ever, one can almost feel the hackles rising at Bookchin's final proclamation. However, it would be all too easy here to make the same mistakes that much of the reaction to Bookchin in the 1990s made, and to read his ultimate break with anarchism as further evidence of, variously: Bookchin's nefarious desire to be leader of the green-anarcho left; his desire to extinguish any other political creed but his own; or his fundamental personal failings that render his liberatory project dogmatic and irrelevant.

In truth, however, this caricature of Bookchin is unfair, and Bookchin's rejection of anarchism more properly reflects the two driving forces of his half-century of radical thought: the commitment to the *social* expression of humanity's creative potentiality; and the commitment to the continuing dialectical development of radical oppositional thought in light of the continuing development of capitalism. In *Social Ecology and Communalism* – thanks in no small measure to the excellent selection and ordering by Eirik Eigladd, who collates and introduces the collection – these two driving forces are traceable throughout and find their synthesis in the political project Bookchin outlines in his final theoretical outing.

In the opening essay, 'What is Social Ecology?' first published in 1993, we find a clear enunciation of Bookchin's view of nature, both human and

nonhuman, from which emerges his formulation of humanity's creative potential. '[T]he natural world and the social', Bookchin writes, 'are inter-linked by evolution into one nature that consists of two differentiations: first, or biotic nature, and second or social nature' (p.29). What links these two natures is that they both 'share an evolutionary potential for greater subjectivity and flexibility' (p.29).

That is to say that humanity is both the expression of, and is endowed with, a creative, evolutionary potentiality for increased subjectivity, flexibility, and ultimately, self-consciousness. These evolutionary materials not only rendered humanity the most self-conscious element in nature in the present but also provide it with the creative potentiality to achieve a rational ecological society in the future. Needless to say, this creative potentiality has been arrested by the destructiveness that has thus far characterised human society and its relationship with the natural world. It is to the creation of social forms that both express this creative potentiality *and* ameliorate the destructive that Bookchin sets his political programme.

In the two essays that follow – 'Radical Politics in an Era of Advanced Capitalism' (1989), and 'Social Ecology in a Period of Reaction' (1996) – we can trace Bookchin's commitment to the dialectical development of oppositional thought in light of the ever-shifting terrain of capitalism. Here, he describes the changing nature of capitalism post-1945 (p.56; p.69). During the 1950s and 1960s, capitalism began to mutate an economic system into a social system, bringing new challenges to the Left. It is from within these changes that Bookchin's critique of the stasis of Marxism would emerge.

By the 1990s, however, the rules of engagement had changed again: capitalism was no longer solely a set of social relations but had transformed into the 'end of history' itself, had become enshrined as the ultimate version of human nature, a nature predicated on its ethos 'to compete, win, and grow' (p.73). In the light of such a shift, ideas and movements that opposed capitalism had also been deeply affected, and must therefore be subject to a constant 'uncompromising critique' (p.75). This uncompromising critique of the movements to which he belonged, so characteristic of Bookchin's career, was based on this clear understanding of the extent of the changing nature of capitalism and the changes this necessitated in *anti-capitalism*.

Which bring us to the fourth essay, 'The Communalist Project' (2002), Bookchin's final outlining of his political project. Here, the two driving motors of his work in fact become one, intertwined whole: the project to build a society that is the expression of the creative potentiality of humanity must be drawn in light of the ultimate shift in capitalism and the crisis it fosters – i.e., the threat of ecological collapse. This response, in light of the fact that capitalist crisis is now *generalised* (p.84) – i.e., it is not solely an economic crisis, does not solely affect one particular class –

must be predicated on a direct *empowerment* of the citizen through the community. It is in this sense that Bookchin argues that, 'Above all, Communalism is engaged with the problem of power' (p.109). This engagement with power is in fact twofold. First, the empowerment of the citizen and the community would require the creation of a decentralised 'ensemble of institutions designed to deal with the problems of consociational life in an orderly and hopefully fair manner' (p.95). This process would not only require substantial organisation but also *leadership*. For Bookchin, 'leadership *always* exists ... [and] ... a serious libertarian approach to leadership would indeed acknowledge the reality and crucial importance of leaders' (p.111, emphasis in original), to both challenge the abusive power of present leaders and to engender the material and institutional changes necessary for the move toward communalism.

Second, in order to engender this new social reality, the members of a community would need to be materially and politically empowered, *today*. Therefore, Bookchin argues that 'adherents of Communalism mobilize themselves to *electorally* engage in a potentially important centre of power – the municipal council – and try to compel it to create legislatively potent neighbourhood assemblies' (p.109, emphasis added). This would constitute the 'minimum programme' of communalism that would aim, in the here and now, 'to satisfy the most elemental needs of the masses, to improve their access to the resources that make daily life tolerable' (p.114). In light of the extent of the spread of the ethos of capitalism, now enshrined as human nature itself (and to the extent that it permits no other conception of human nature) this tentative, material and political empowerment is *indispensable* to opening up even the idea of radical change.

These initial steps, then, are not the start of a process through which a communalist society can be legislated into existence for Bookchin, but rather the process through which the 'maximum program' is hopefully brought into view: they are the first tentative steps to establish 'new rules of engagement between the people and capital', as revolutionaries – anarchist or otherwise – start to envision and create 'lasting organizations and institutions that can play a socially transformative role in the real world' (p.115).

In *Social Ecology and Communalism*, then, we get a glimpse, uncluttered of the polemics of the 1990s, of the explicitly *social* nature of the whole Bookchin programme: philosophically, in his commitment to the social expression of humanity's creative evolutionary potential; and politically in his commitment to confronting the realities of the power required to start this process, today. This social focus and the commitment to the dialectical development of radical thought are the fundamentals of Bookchin's revolutionary programme, and it is from these fundamentals (rather than dubious motivations or personal failings) that stem his critiques of the less-socially focused aspects of anarchism. Anyone with

any lingering doubts about Bookchin's motivations should read this concise yet comprehensive collection.

Unfortunately, the second piece under review here, Chuck Morse's essay, 'Being a Bookchinite', almost completely neglects these fundamentals. In doing so, it 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 (p.3). Based on the three years he spent studying and working in close association with Bookchin (1989-92) – which began after he 'self-consciously apprenticed' himself to Bookchin and became 'one of his core disciples' (p.5) – Morse offers to 'illustrate the strengths and weaknesses of his [Bookchin's] particular approach to revolutionary organising' (p.6).

He begins by outlining 'three of the cardinal tenets of membership of Bookchin's core circle' (p.10). These were: an emphasis on education, as a result of which, Morse tells us, he received an unparalleled education under Bookchin (p.10, fn.13); the unique framing of politics as a moral activity, which 'fostered an unusually strong commitment to honesty, accountability, and the principled discussion of ideas' (p.12); and a commitment to a 'boldness' of political engagement, fostering the notion of a small group of people being able to change the world if willing to take risks (p.14). For Morse, however, these cardinal tenets also presented 'significant problems' (p.18).

In terms of the emphasis on education, Morse argues that the centrality of Bookchin as the educator, and the principle focus on his thought, 'tended to close us off from insights that other traditions and thinkers had to offer' (p.18). His followers believed that Bookchin had found the principles of social development that could replace capitalism and avert ecological disaster, and therefore 'Bookchin's ideas played a quasi-religious role for us and he became something of a prophet' (p.18). From this, since they believed that 'Bookchin advanced *the* truth, other theorists advanced deceptions by default' (p.18, emphasis in original). Moreover, Bookchin 'often dissuaded us from exploring other writers who – he seemed to fear – might threaten his hold on us' (p.19).

However, this claim of educational 'closure' around Bookchin jars with Morse's own description of the extent and scope of that education. Only a few pages earlier, Morse describes how there were regular lectures from Bookchin on his own work but how it was also possible to 'participate in weekly study groups on Hegel, Marx, the French Revolution, cities, and other weighty topics and theorists' (pp.11-12). Indeed, 'there were so many study groups, of such high quality, that people used to say that we had started an underground university' (p.12). Many of these groups were student led, but Bookchin had encouraged them directly: he counselled his

students ‘not only to explore key revolutionary thinkers and events, but also to acquaint ourselves with major moments in the Western tradition’, in order to ‘assimilate the best aspects of this legacy into our movement’ (pp.10-11). Moreover, he tells us that ‘the extraordinary breadth of historical and theoretical references in his [Bookchin’s] work seemed to show this was possible’, and proved to Morse that ‘no idea was too abstract or event too remote to be incorporated into our transformative project’ (p.11).

Quite how a thinker who encouraged such an education could then close his students off from other insights is left unclear. One can only assume here that Morse took his self-appointed role as a Bookchin ‘disciple’ all too literally, and that this ‘closing-off’ was a self-imposed one. The fact that Bookchin dissuaded his students from other writers or schools of thought does not automatically translate as an attempt to maintain a hold over his students. Rather, it represents the messy business of a democratic politics, and the freedom of opinion therein.

Later, Morse himself openly concedes there is no evidence for this kind of intellectual domineering in Bookchin, but does so only to launch an even more problematic criticism: ‘Although I never saw Bookchin demand obsequiousness’, Morse states, ‘he encouraged it indirectly’, as ‘he constantly spoke of his ill-health and implied that his death was imminent’ (p.21). For Morse, Bookchin’s discussions of his own mortality are all the more problematic as Bookchin did this ‘when I first met him in 1989, almost two decades before his actual death’ (p.21). The insinuation here of some kind of mortal deception by Bookchin is compounded by Morse when he tells us, rather unscientifically, that ‘he has heard accounts of similar behaviour twenty years before that’, and that this created a ‘tragic aura’ around Bookchin that fostered a feeling in those around him ‘that we should treasure every moment with him’ (p.21).

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. Moreover, and although it is regrettable that one has to enter into this personal discussion, it should be noted in the name of fairness that Bookchin turned 70 in the period that Morse knew him (in 1991) and was in ill-health: he was three years away from his first heart attack and was increasingly crippled by osteoarthritis. Is it so surprising that a man of 70 would talk of his declining health, and even his death? And why should this present a problem? Again, this tells us less about Bookchin and his programme and more about Morse: to be lulled into obsequiousness by a septuagenarian discussing his health and death speaks more of weaknesses of the listener than those of the speaker.

Next, Morse argues that the second cardinal tenet, Bookchin’s framing of politics as a moral activity, led to ‘an obsession with defending his views

against threats' (a causal link he does not explain) which led to Bookchin's 'endless stream of polemics' (again, unexplained) (p.21; p.22). This 'tendency for defensiveness' also manifested itself in Bookchin constantly 'inventing new names for his views' – his move from social ecology to *radical* social ecology, anarchism to social anarchism, and libertarian municipalism to communalism (p.22). That Bookchin changed the names of different aspects of his thought, that he was a strident polemicist is clear; that these things stem from defensiveness is not. As noted already in this review, this more accurately reflects the commitment to the dialectical development of radical thought throughout Bookchin's career. However, Morse does not see the dialectic in Bookchin, and views Bookchin's ultimate rejection of anarchism and his move toward communalism as 'bitter, doctrinal carping' (p.24).

For Morse, instead of 'carping', what Bookchin should have *actually* been doing was enjoying the 'triumphant moment' that the re-emergence of anarchism within the anti-capitalist movement represented, 'given that he had done more than any other thinker to redeem the anarchist vision in the second half of the twentieth century' (pp.23-4). It does not occur to Morse to ask: why would Bookchin forego such a triumphant moment? Why would he forego the enjoyment of seeing his work justified, of sitting back and resting on his laurels? Why not take the path of least resistance in what was clearly the autumn of his life? Again, the answers to these questions are to be found in Bookchin's work itself, and not in the caricature that Morse falls back onto here.

Finally, the third cardinal tenet – Bookchin's commitment to the notion 'that a small group of people can change the world' – led for Morse to Bookchin's 'disregard of the material conditions of social change' (p.18). Despite the fact that Bookchin's commitment to the creation of an educated intelligentsia to *lead* social change stems from a detailed regard for the extent to which present material conditions *preclude* social change (as discussed above), Morse uses this claim to launch his most specious accusation yet: that Bookchin's dismissal of the material conditions for revolutionary change was most strikingly represented by his 'silence on white supremacy and racism, which he never addressed in all but the most cursory fashion' (p.24).

Further, Morse then goes on to tell us that he remembers 'marvelling at how strange it was that Bookchin had settled in Vermont, the whitest state in America' and how the organisations he built 'were always overwhelmingly white' (p.24). Here, the same pattern that Morse uses in his earlier insinuation repeats itself, as he tells us that 'though I never personally witnessed what I recognised as an obvious act of prejudice, it was clear to me that Bookchin lived in a bubble' (p.24) – i.e., just as in the case of Bookchin's demanding of obsequiousness, prejudice is insinuated by noting its very absence.

## ANARCHIST STUDIES

In terms of the claim that Bookchin was ‘silent’ on race, then the whole of Bookchin’s writings on hierarchy and domination set themselves to a critique of these concepts *in their entirety*, including the hierarchy and domination that exists *between ethnic groups*. To argue for the dissolution of hierarchy *as such* in society is to argue for the end of white supremacy. It is ridiculous to suggest that Bookchin was silent on this issue. The instances where Bookchin discusses these hierarchies specifically are there in his work, and too numerous to list here, but we should remind ourselves in passing of his vociferous (and voluminous) late-1980s writings against those in the ecology movement who argued that population growth was the cause of the ecological crisis, writings which endlessly pointed out the implicit racism of such a position. This is to leave aside Bookchin’s involvement in the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s.

In terms of the criticism of Bookchin’s residency in Vermont, then, to attempt to draw *any* conclusions from the question of where a person in their fifties (as Bookchin was when he moved to Vermont, gradually, throughout 1970s) – who had lived in the US Northeast his entire life, who had a network of friends, family, political and work commitments in the region – ‘chose’ to live shows a complete disregard for the material conditions of social *reality*, not just social change; but again, on Morse’s part, not Bookchin’s. Moreover, it also overlooks one of the key political motivations for moving to Vermont in the first place: the New England town meeting tradition, which Bookchin would consistently write of (see Bookchin 1995, for example), and to which he hoped he could tap into in the construction of his new politics.

Again here, and as with the rest of Morse’s essay, an explanation of the problems he raises can be found in Bookchin’s work, in an examination of his theoretical foundations and their conclusions for radical action: there is a coherence of thought and practice in Bookchin, wherein his political programme, whether one agrees with him or not, is based upon his principles. It is here where we can, and should, put Bookchin to the test, through a detailed examination of these principles and the practice they necessitate. Unfortunately, Morse does not offer this here but rather falls back into the patterns of caricature that surrounded Bookchin in the 1990s.

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## BIBLIOGRAPHY

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