Murray Bookchin

Father of Social Ecology and Anarcho-Communalism
(1921 - 2006)

Description: Growing up in the era of traditional proletarian socialism, with its working-class insurrections and struggles against classical fascism, as an adult he helped start the ecology movement, embraced the feminist movement as antihierarchical, and developed his own democratic, communalist politics. (From: Anarchy Archives)

Tags: anarchist, author, municipalist, american, libertarian, socialist, social ecology, anti-capitalist, new york, jewish.

Quotes:

"Or will ecology groups and the Greens turn the entire ecology movement into a starry-eyed religion decorated by gods, goddesses, woodsprites, and organized around sedating rituals that reduce militant activist groups to self-indulgent encounter groups?" (From: "The Crisis in the Ecology Movement," by Murray Bookchin, Green Perspectives, No. 6, May 1988.)

"...real growth occurs exactly when people have different views and confront each other in order to creatively arrive at more advanced levels of truth -- not adopt a low common denominator of ideas that
is 'acceptable' to everyone but actually satisfies no one in the long run. Truth is achieved through dialogue and, yes, harsh disputes -- not by a deadening homogeneity and a bleak silence that ultimately turns bland 'ideas' into rigid dogmas." (From: "The Crisis in the Ecology Movement," by Murray Bookchin, Green Perspectives, No. 6, May 1988.)

"The social view of humanity, namely that of social ecology, focuses primarily on the historic emergence of hierarchy and the need to eliminate hierarchical relationships." (From: "The Crisis in the Ecology Movement," by Murray Bookchin, Green Perspectives, No. 6, May 1988.)

"...a market economy based on dog-eat-dog as a law of survival and 'progress' has penetrated every aspect of society..." (From: "The Crisis in the Ecology Movement," by Murray Bookchin, Green Perspectives, No. 6, May 1988.)

"We are direly in need not only of 're-enchanting the world' and 'nature' but also of re-enchanting humanity -- of giving itself a sense of wonder over its own capacity as natural beings and a caring product of natural evolution" (From: "The Crisis in the Ecology Movement," by Murray Bookchin, Green Perspectives, No. 6, May 1988.)

"...anarchism is above all antihierarchical rather than simply individualistic; it seeks to remove the
domination of human by human, not only the abolition of the state and exploitation by ruling economic classes." (From: "The Ghost of Anarcho-Syndicalism," by Murray Bookchin, November 6, 1992.)

"...Proudhon here appears as a supporter of direct democracy and assembly self-management on a clearly civic level, a form of social organization well worth fighting for in an era of centralization and oligarchy." (From: "The Ghost of Anarcho-Syndicalism," by Murray Bookchin, November 6, 1992.)

"The historic opposition of anarchists to oppression of all kinds, be it that of serfs, peasants, craftspeople, or workers, inevitably led them to oppose exploitation in the newly emerging factory system as well. Much earlier than we are often led to imagine, syndicalism—essentially a rather inchoate but radical form of trade unionism—became a vehicle by which many anarchists reached out to the industrial working class of the 1830s and 1840s." (From: "The Ghost of Anarcho-Syndicalism," by Murray Bookchin, November 6, 1992.)

"...the extraordinary achievements of the Spanish workers and peasants in the revolution of 1936, many of which were unmatched by any previous revolution." (From: "The Ghost of Anarcho-Syndicalism," by Murray Bookchin, November 6,
Broader movements and issues are now on the horizon of modern society that, while they must necessarily involve workers, require a perspective that is larger than the factory, trade union, and a proletarian orientation." (From: "The Ghost of Anarcho-Syndicalism," by Murray Bookchin, November 6, 1992.)

Biography:

A Short Biography of Murray Bookchin

by Janet Biehl

Murray Bookchin was born in New York City on January 14, 1921, to Russian Jewish immigrant parents who had been active in the Russian revolutionary movement. In 1930 he entered the Communist youth movement, joining first the Young Pioneers and then the Young Communist League, serving as education director for his branch. But in 1935 he became disillusioned by Stalin's shift of international Communism to the less militant Popular Front; party line. Deeply involved in organizing activities around the Spanish Civil War (he was too young to participate directly), he remained with the Communists until the Stalin-Hitler pact of September 1939, when he was expelled for "Trotskyist-anarchist deviations." He proceeded to aligned himself with the American Trotskyists. After graduating from high school, he found work as a foundryman in northern New Jersey, thereby entering the workers' movement. At the foundry, where he worked for four years, he became active in labor organizing for the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO).

He served in the U.S. Army during the mid-1940s, then returned home to employment as an autoworker. He became deeply involved in the United Auto Workers (UAW), which was at the time a highly libertarian union. Ideologically, he
became increasingly disappointed by the Trotskyists' traditional Bolshevist authoritarianism. After participating in the great General Motors strike of 1948, he began to question all his traditional conceptions about the "hegemonic" or "vanguard" role of the industrial working class. Rather than move to the right, as many disillusioned Communists in his generation did, he looked for ways to construct a nonauthoritarian, indeed libertarian communism.

During the 1950s, calling himself a libertarian socialist, worked closely with a group of dissident German Marxists living in New York who held a similar perspective (International Kommunisten Deutschlands, or IKD). Many of his early articles were published in this group's German-language periodical, *Dinge der Zeit*, as well as its English-language sister publication, *Contemporary Issues*, under the pen names M. S. Shiloh, Lewis Herber, Robert Keller, and Harry Ludd. His earliest book, *Lebensgefährliche Lebensmittel* (1955), published in West Germany in collaboration with Gotz Ohly, was based on a very large article "The Problem of Chemicals in Food," that had been published in *Contemporary Issues* in 1952. Here he explored the possible effects of food preservatives and pesticides on human health. Such ideas, which have since entered into the general consciousness of our time, were highly original in the late 1950s and early 1960s.

In the early 1960s Bookchin wrote two important journalistic books, intended for a general readership, that raised the alarm about a range of environmental ills. In *Our Synthetic Environment* (pseud. Lewis Herber), published in 1962 (preceding Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* by nearly half a year), he surveyed the scientific literature on pesticides, food additives, and X-radiation as sources of human illness, including cancer. In *Crisis in Our Cities* (1965) explored environmental problems specific to American urban areas.

Around this time Bookchin's political evolution led him to the anarchist tradition of Peter Kropotkin, which he hoped could become a home for his decentralist and antihierarchical ideas and a political framework within which he could work. As the New Left and counterculture movements emerged in the 1960s, he popularized his libertarian and ecological ideas in several innovative and widely influential essays. *Ecology and Revolutionary Thought* (1964) was the first work to call for a radical political ecology; here attempted to
marry ecology and anarchism, founding what he called Social Ecology. In "Towards a Liberatory Technology" (1965) he called for a new ecotechnics using alternative, renewable energy sources and microtechnologies that would form the infrastructure of a liberatory society. In "Listen, Marxist!" (1969) he tried to warn SDS against its imminent takeover by a Maoist group and in so doing mounted a searing critique of Marxism-Leninism. In "A Note on Affinity Groups" he called attention to a nonhierarchical unit of political organization used by the Spanish anarchists. All these essays profoundly influenced the New Left in North America and Europe and were collected in the anthology *Post-Scarcity Anarchism* (1971; republished 1977 and 2004).

In the late 1960s Bookchin also taught at the Alternative University in New York, one of the largest "free universities" in the United States, and at City University of New York in Staten Island.

In 1974 he co-founded and directed the Institute for Social Ecology in Plainfield, Vermont, which went on to acquire an international reputation for its advanced courses in ecophilosophy, social theory, and alternative technologies. In 1974 he also began teaching at Ramapo College of New Jersey, where this self-educated high-school graduate eventually became a full professor of social theory; he retired in 1983 to an emeritus status. In the 1970s Bookchin was active in the antinuclear movement and participated in the Clamshell Alliance, opposing the Seabrook nuclear reactor in New Hampshire. His book *The Limits of the City* (1974) continued his exploration of urban issues in radical social thought. His next book, *The Spanish Anarchists* (1977), was a history of the Spanish anarchist movement from its origins to the mid-1930s; a planned second volume, intended to cover the Spanish Revolution of 1936-37, was never written (although volume 4 of *The Third Revolution*, completed in 2003, covers much of that history). Several of his 1970s essays criticized developments in the new ecology movement and distinguished between ecology, which he considered radical and innovative, and environmentalism, or reformist or state-oriented approaches that failed to address the root cause of ecological problems. These essays were anthologized in *Toward an Ecological Society* (Black Rose Books, 1981).

republished 1991 and 2005) is a magisterial discussion of ecology and social hierarchy, weaving political, anthropological, psychological, and scientific themes. Here Bookchin explores the notion of dominating nature and its historical emergence primarily from the very real social domination of human by human, particularly in gerontocracies, patriarchies, and other hierarchical strata. He considered hierarchy and domination as more fundamental forms of oppression than class and exploitation.

His second magnum opus was *The Rise of Urbanization and the Decline of Citizenship* (1986; republished as *Urbanization Without Cities* [1992] and *From Urbanization to Cities* [1995]). This masterpiece narrates a history of civic self-management, face-to-face democracy, and confederalism in the Western democratic tradition, beginning in ancient Greece and proceeding through medieval European towns and to the popular institutions in several revolutions, particularly the American and French. The book culminates in a chapter-long exposition of libertarian municipalism, which is the name Bookchin gave to his political project. Libertarian municipalism is a politics that seeks to recreate a vital local political or civic sphere in order to establish direct-democratic popular assemblies at the municipal, town, and neighborhood levels. Over larger regions these assemblies would confederate and, as they gained strength, challenge the centralized nation-state. He argued for a municipalization (rather than a Marxian nationalization) of the economy, as a way of opposing the present corporate capitalist system of ownership and management. Some of these ideas were also developed in the essays compiled in *The Modern Crisis* (1986).

In the mid-1980s Bookchin helped inspire the emergence of the international Green political movement and had a strong influence on the rise of the Greens in Germany and later on its fundi wing. In 1987 he delivered the keynote address of the first Green gathering in the United States, in Amherst, Massachusetts. Here he opened up a debate within the ecology movement over Deep Ecology, a set of ideas that were gaining influence at the time and that he considered to have reactionary political implications due to their prioritization of nonhuman nature over human beings as well as to their emphasis on spirituality and mysticism. He also opposed tendencies in the U.S. Greens that wanted to create a Green Party to run candidates for state and national office; instead he
preferred a radical green movement that would educate the public about the need for both local democracy and ecological solutions, in accordance with libertarian municipalism. In the late 1980s, as a member of the Greens in Burlington, Vermont, he participated in several local political campaigns that were intended to raise awareness of environmental issues in the city and at the same time call for the democratization of local political institutions. In 1988 he co-founded the Left Green Network, a confederation of groups that shared his approach.

In 1990 Bookchin retired from active political life. He continued to teach at the Institute for Social Ecology, where he held the status of director emeritus, but spent most of his time writing. With his companion and collaborator Janet Biehl, he co-edited forty issues of the theoretical newsletter Green Perspectives (later renamed Left Green Perspectives); it became the main venue for his articles in that decade, finally folding in 2000. In 1996 he wrote a critique of postmodernism, misanthropy, and antihumanism that he called Re-enchanting Humanity: A Defense of the Human Spirit Against Anti-humanism, Misanthropy, Mysticism, and Primitivism (1996). Underpinning many of his political ideas is a reworked system of dialectical thinking, one that puts a naturalized; or developmental version of Hegel's dialectics to the service of ecological thinking. His concept of dialectical naturalism is elucidated in considerable detail in his book The Philosophy of Social Ecology (1990, revised 1994).

Between 1992 and 2003 he also wrote his massive four-volume history of popular revolutionary movements, The Third Revolution (published by Cassell and subsequently by Continuum between 1996 and 2003). Volume 1 covers the American and French Revolutions; volume 2, the French revolutions of the nineteenth century, including the Paris Commune; volume 3, the Russian revolutions of 1905 and 1917; and volume 4, the central European and Spanish revolutions. He spent much of his time in his final years working on this huge project.

In the meantime in the mid-1990s Bookchin developed serious doubts about his late-1950s choice to work with anarchism as an overarching political approach. Anarchism, he increasingly suspected, was fundamentally rooted in individualism, a doctrine that he abhorred. He set about distancing himself from many parts of the
anarchist movement, starting with "The Ghost of Anarcho-Syndicalism" (1992). Two years later he argued that the democratic dimension of anarchism was communalism; in 1995 he wrote *Social Anarchism or Lifestyle Anarchism: An Unbridgeable Chasm*, as a challenge to anarchists to reject the narcissistic, ad hoc adventurism of lifestyle anarchism; in favor of a communal anarchism grounded in social movements and realities. The challenge was not met, in his view, and in a 2002 essay he called "The Communalist Project" he rejected anarchism altogether in favor of communalism, an equally anti-statist doctrine that he felt to be more explicitly oriented than anarchism to social rather than to individual liberation.

Murray Bookchin's life and work spanned two historic eras: the interwar period, when the Great Depression seemed to bring capitalism to the brink of collapse, and the postwar era of consolidated corporate capitalism. Growing up in the era of traditional proletarian socialism, with its working-class insurrections and struggles against classical fascism, as an adult he helped start the ecology movement, embraced the feminist movement as antihierarchical, and developed his own democratic, communalist politics. He analyzed these sweeping changes in society and consciousness into a coherent outlook that he hoped could lead to a liberated future. To those interested in learning more about his ideas, he always recommended *Remaking Society* (1989), his basic introduction to his own ideas; *The Murray Bookchin Reader*, edited by Janet Biehl in 1997; and Biehl's summary of his political ideas, *The Politics of Social Ecology: Libertarian Municipalism* (1998).

On July 30, 2006, about one year after the publication of the fourth and final volume of *The Third Revolution*, Bookchin died of heart failure at his home in Burlington. He died as he had always lived, as a socialist, with integrity.

From: A Short Biography of Murray Bookchin, by Janet Biehl, from Anarchy Archives.

**Works:**

Chronology:

January 14, 1921: Murray Bookchin's Birth Day.


Links:

• Anarchy Archives: Murray Bookchin Archive http://dwardmac.pitzer.edu/Anarchist_Archives/bookchin/Bookchinarchive.html

• Anarchist Library: Murray Bookchin https://theanarchistlibrary.org/category/author/murray-bookchin

• Wikipedia: Murray Bookchin https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Murray_Bookchin

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