

# Communalism

**A Liberatory Alternative**

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## Communalism

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*a liberatory alternative*



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The belief that what currently exists must necessarily exist is the acid that corrodes all visionary thinking.

Murray Bookchin

# Introduction

Communalism is the all encompassing term given to a comprehensive theory and practice that seeks to reconstruct society along ecological lines. It is based in the essential premise that *all environmental problems are rooted in social problems*. Along with global climate change, problems such as widespread pollution, deforestation, and species extinction are all anthropogenic in their source. Assessing these issues as a whole, we can see that our society is simplifying the environment on a global scale. In fact, it is undoing the achievements of evolution by creating a more simplified, inorganic world.<sup>1</sup>

Communalism holds an objective set of social ethics that reflect the most developmental trends in evolution, including greater choice, dynamic stability, and diversity. Supported by these ecological trends, Communalism provides a foundation to act against injustice, domination, and hierarchy, which are neither “natural” nor inevitable features of society.

These ideas also works within a historical framework that recognizes that society has not always maintained the irrational form that we live in today. Communalism asserts that an ideal of freedom has expanded throughout history in opposition to the development of hierarchy and domination. To build upon these emancipatory efforts, a reconstructive vision is provided of an ecologically harmonious society that is free from all forms of hierarchy.

This pamphlet is primarily focused on discussing this reconstructive vision, as well as exploring practical steps for engaging in an educational and political process that can bridge where we are today with the society we hope to achieve. Readers interested in learning more about Communalism’s philosophical and anthropological underpinnings should turn to the Resources section.

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<sup>1</sup> The ideas discussed herein are based, by and large, on the work of Murray Bookchin. For an introductory text on Communalism see:

✉ Bookchin, Murray, *Social Ecology and Communalism* (Oakland, CA and Edinburgh: AK Press, 2007)

# Ecological Ethics

Communalism holds a set of social ethics that reflect the developmental trends in evolution. An objective ethics, meaning an ethics rooted outside the ambiguities of our imagination and perceptible to all, is important because it provides us with a set of principles from which to counter injustices and to guide our efforts for a truly free society void of any form of domination.

To begin, let us first define what is meant by “nature.” Nature is the *history* of its own development over millions of years. This *cumulative* development incorporates its past and continuously reaches into a broader, yet unified, diversification of species. Humans, no less than any other species, are a part of nature. The emergence of humanity introduced a new realm in to nature, a social nature. This species’ transcendence of instinctual behavior, and its ability for reflective thought and action was a significant expansion in comparison to the evolution of mind elsewhere in nature. Along with this freedom comes the ability to contribute in a beneficial manner toward both non-human and social nature, or to go against natural processes, as is found within hierarchical relationships.<sup>1</sup>

Many people believe that hierarchy exists in non-human nature, but this belief is inaccurate. Hierarchy is an *institutionalized* system of command and obedience. An institution is a set of social relationships that are neither determined by instinct nor idiosyncratic, and which can be liberating or dehumanizing. They are organized, fairly stable, alterable, and continuous over generations. Hierarchy was created by humans and therefore does not exist outside of society. Thus, what we consider to be a “queen” bee is not a monarch at all, but an animal acting purely upon biological instinct. What we call “the king of the jungle,” a lion, is no higher in the ecosystem than the tiny ant that moves along the ground floor. Humans have projected the concept of hierarchy onto nature because it is a system that defines and controls the order of their own relationships.<sup>2</sup>

What is needed is for us to determine a set of social ethics that reflect what is actually present in non-human nature. Diversity is an essential value because it creates the environmental context for choice among organisms. The ability for animals to choose expands as species become more developed neurologically and physiologically. Likewise, choice becomes more perceptible as the interactions between different species in an ecosystem increase in number and complexity. Regardless how rudimentary the decisions made by an animal are, the capacity for self-directiveness marks a nascent form of freedom within non-human nature itself. Together with the evolution of mind and freedom evolves subjectivity, individuality, creativity, and reason. In addition, contemporary evolutionary biologists have supported Peter Kropotkin’s argument that mutualism is as essential, if not greater, a component of evolution than what is commonly referred to as competition. Thus, what is gained from this assessment is a view of evolution that is *participa-*

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<sup>1</sup> ☒ Bookchin, Murray, *Remaking Society* (Boston: South End Press, 1990) – p.24–39

☒ Heller, Chaia, *The Ecology of Everyday Life* (Montreal, New York, and London: Black Rose Books, 1999) – p.124–140

<sup>2</sup> ☒ Bookchin, Murray, *The Ecology of Freedom*. 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Oakland, CA and Edinburgh: AK Press, 2005) – p.80–108

*tory* and *cooperative* rather than a Victorian era outlook focused on a competitive “struggle for existence.”<sup>3</sup>

Based on these arguments, an ecological society would be non-hierarchical, increase diversity, expand the possibilities of freedom, foster the participation of each individual, and provide the opportunity for each individual to develop their own subjectivity and rational capacity. Such a society must provide people with the technological base to achieve these goals while interacting with non-human nature in a manner that increases natural complexity. Additionally, the built environment must be physically organized in such a way that a harmonious balance with non-human nature is achieved. And finally, there must be a political system that empowers each person to participate fully in the activities of social life.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> ☒ The Ecology of Freedom – p.459.

Here Bookchin quotes William Trager from his work *Symbiosis* (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold Co., 1970), p.vii  
☒ Kropotkin, Peter, *Mutual Aid*. 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (London: Freedom Press, 1987)

See here for more recent media on this subject. [blogs.scientificamerican.com](http://blogs.scientificamerican.com)

<sup>4</sup> ☒ Bookchin, Murray, *The Philosophy of Social Ecology* (Montreal and New York: Black Rose Books, 1990) – p.106–131

# Hierarchy

As stated, hierarchy is made up of institutionalized social relationships. Hierarchical relationships also entail a pyramidal mentality in which differences are ranked antagonistically. In the earliest human societies, any biological differences among people, as in age or gender, were organized such to promote the unity and survival of the group. Over time, through a slow and unsteady process, human relations were changed and institutionalized to the harsh forms of hierarchy that we know of today, such as sexism, racism, homophobia, ablism, and so on.<sup>1</sup>

Hierarchy first emerged through fairly benign forms of gerontocracy, in which elders of a community exercised decision making over younger members. The relationships between men and women were differentiated, yet complementary, which maintained the harmony of the overall group. This balance in roles began to shift when the male civic realm expanded and encroached on women's domestic sphere, a social context known as patricentricity. As time passed, men's standing was enhanced by other factors such as population increase which led to an expansion of inter-tribal encounters and the spread of warfare. The ordering of society into classes followed the formation of kingships and monarchies. The ideology of racism grew and gained supporters as European people spread the fictitious belief in biological races and argued that people have essential characteristics dependent on their racial group. This belief led to a stratified ordering of white people and people of color, in which whites are placed superior to non-whites and receive benefits at their expense.<sup>2</sup>

This brief history provides a context through which we can understand where we are in contemporary society. The destructive effects of hierarchy are all too transparent in cases of war, genocide, and slavery. Yet, hierarchy is so commonplace that it infiltrates our lives in the subtlest of ways, disrupting our relationships to one another and to non-human nature. An individual's experience of hierarchical society can be shaped by a confluence of oppressions and privileges. To be sure, certain groups of people exercise a greater deal of privilege than others. Hierarchy is reinforced by privileged groups of people with the power to control the life of others.

Further, a hierarchical mentality has influenced the ways that people think about our environmental problems. The rise of hierarchy and domination provided a basis for the idea that the environment is something distinct from the human world and can be dominated by people. Fueling this idea to dominate nature is a false perception of the natural world as a static object, something tameable and conquerable by humans. Many popular ideologies of our time, from liberalism to Marxism, have argued for the domination of the environment in order to make freedom real. However, unless we recognize the social origins of environmental domination, and change

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<sup>1</sup> ☒ The Ecology of Freedom – p.80–129

☒ Remaking Society – p.30–53

<sup>2</sup> ☒ The Ecology of Freedom – p.130–214

☒ Remaking Society – p.54–94

these hierarchical and class structures, we will see the rise of our problems, and the impossibility of freedom.<sup>3</sup>

It is important to emphasize that hierarchy is antithetical to nature's tendency toward mutualism and diversity. Hierarchy has not always existed, nor did it spring forth abruptly. There were several points throughout history when societies could have gone in the direction of cooperation; where people fought and died in trying to make freedom real. Hierarchy developed unsteadily over the course of thousands of years and has reached its apogee with the nation-State, modern capitalism, and large-scale destruction of the environment.

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<sup>3</sup> ☒ Remaking Society – p.44–46, 154



# Capitalism

Capitalism is a hierarchical economic system that necessitates continuous expansion, exploitation, and the concentrated ownership of wealth. The driving force of capitalism is the competitive market. The market economy's essential purpose is to sell commodities for profit. Profit has to be realized, regardless of the broader effects the commodity has on the environment or society at large, or the capitalist will go bankrupt. In order to gain a competitive advantage over other businesses, the capitalist is compelled to eliminate all social constraints on the exploitation of labor, and to reinvest a large portion of accumulated profits into technologies that will increase productive capacity, thereby lowering the cost of production through its economy of scale. A slow process of cannibalization occurs in which businesses must fail thereby causing wealth to be concentrated into the fewer hands of those who succeed.

From a broader perspective, if the economy as a whole produces more goods than can be sold in the market, the system enters into a crisis because profitable outlets cannot be found. In turn investment money dries up, workers are laid off, and even less money is then spent purchasing the excess commodities that are available. To alleviate this problem the State has taken on the role of consumer of last resort, ensuring the perpetual growth of the economy. Due to the "grow or die" imperative imposed by the market, economic growth cannot be contained by moral persuasion, it must continue to expand without any regard for human needs or environmental impact. Thus, capitalism should be seen for what it is, a malignant cancer. It will continue to grow until it has so simplified and disrupted the biosphere such that life itself will not be possible without complete technocratic control of all natural processes.<sup>1</sup>

Additionally under capitalism, people get rewarded according to their profitability, and economic decisions are put into the individual hands of those who control land, money, machinery, and technical knowledge. Each actor must do what it takes to keep their sales going or else face bankruptcy or unemployment. Due to the market imperative to sell, every aspect of life is eventually assigned a price tag. Not only is this system undemocratic, it is also trivializing and dehumanizing. Community relationships are reduced to business relationships, and the whole orientation of society is thus fixated on competition, egotism, and conspicuous consumption. Following the Second World War capitalism facilitated isolated individualism through creating automobile dependence, the spread of atomized suburban plots, shopping malls, big box stores, and the mindless entertainment provided by television and electronic gadgets. Everyday life was made banal providing corporations with bored people cut off from the nourishment that comes from developed social bonds. Still further, corporations have subjected us all to the incessant propaganda of advertising since birth, manipulating us all into viewing worthless junk, which is designed to break or go obsolete, as necessary for one's own self worth.<sup>2</sup>

Capitalism also has a destructive effect on the urban environment. Before the rise of industrial capitalism, cities consisted of definable, humanly scaled communities. These definable limits have

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<sup>1</sup> ☒ Dowd, Doug, *The Twisted Dream*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Cambridge, MA: Winthrop Publishers, Inc, 1977)

<sup>2</sup> ☒ *The Ecology of Freedom* – p.209–212

been erased by urbanization, creating megacities that devastate the landscape and the quality of human relationships. The stark realities of sprawl, traffic congestion, compartmentalization, noise, chemical pollution, and a lack of public space are all everyday situations that people are needlessly subjected to. The city itself is controlled and managed like a business corporation by elected officials, where maximizing taxes and services is the “bottom line.” People are anonymous in their environments, often living without a perceivable connection to events outside of their homes because they do not have direct involvement in them. What information we do receive through the “news” is propagated by the media to instill a mindset of fear against one another, to misinform on the problems of society, and to encourage consumption and sell a packaged way of life. Severe issues such as drug abuse and alcoholism, violence, mental illness, low-self esteem, and stress all rise as the megalopolis continues to expand to the detriment of life.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> ☒ Bookchin, Murray, *The Rise of Urbanization and the Decline of Citizenship* (San Francisco: Sierra Book Club, 1987) – p.1–14

Later republished with the following different titles:

☒ *Urbanization without Cities* (1992)

☒ *From Urbanization to Cities* (1996)

# The State

States have taken various forms over time, all of which cannot be covered and discussed within this pamphlet. Here, we shall talk about the nation-State, which emerged out of Western civilization from a long and complex process. A discussion of this modern State demands a clarification of its ambiguous relationship with politics. The conventional use of the word “politics,” which equals corruption in many peoples’ minds, is actually an inaccurate use of terms. Politics first originated in ancient Greece, wherein Greek citizens created and participated in a collective process to decide how to manage their own communities. What we commonly call politics today should instead be called Statecraft. Statecraft is the practice of exercising power *over* citizens. This power is held by professional politicians and bureaucrats and is backed by a monopoly of violence through the institutions of the military, secret service, police, prison industrial complex, and the like.

The State is an organized system of social coercion based on the belief that we are all incompetent beings who cannot be allowed to participate in the decision making of society. Living under this system, people’s unique and diverse identities are reduced to “taxpayer,” “voter,” and “constituent.” The citizen is made a passive recipient of services, rather than an active and knowledgeable participant in the social and political affairs of life. Decisions made on significant issues such as education, health care, housing, and more are kept out of our control and put into the hands of an impersonal web of bureaucrats and legislators, who are removed from our everyday lives.

Although the system enables people to vote for their representatives, we don’t have to look far to see that election campaigns are funded by wealthy elites, that elections only partially or superficially address important issues, and that politicians consistently abandon campaign promises. Politicians are professionals whose careers depend on obtaining power. Regardless of the intentions of the politician, he or she soon learns that for their career to remain and prosper they must serve economic interests, rather than the people who they are supposed to represent.

Representative governments and the bureaucracies that sustain them are fundamentally opposed to popular democratic power. Whatever power the State gains is at the expense of popular power, and any power that people gain is done at the expense of the State. It is thus futile to turn to the State with major appeals for change, for these appeals would only be subverted by the State in an attempt to strengthen its own power. To be sure, there are reforms that are necessary and valuable. But if we only work for the completion of these minor reforms, then the root causes of social and environmental problems will persist, and worse, grow and intensify.

No policy is democratically legitimate unless it has been proposed, discussed, and decided upon by people in a face-to-face assembly. Representatives cannot handle social decision making better than “amateurs,” everyday people who reflect a range of perspectives, and possess detailed knowledge of the experiences of daily life. As long as we live under the State’s power, we cannot

expect to have full control over our lives, to fulfill all of our needs, and to be free from oppression altogether.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> ☒ Biehl, Janet, *The Politics of Social Ecology* (Montreal: Black Rose Books, 1998) – p.1–10, 88  
For a history of the modern nation-State see:  
☒ *The Rise of Urbanization and the Decline of Citizenship*

# Freedom in History

The concept of freedom did not emerge in history as a fully articulated and finalized ideal. Instead, freedom developed and expanded over time by popular grassroots movements and through influential ideas that sought to counter the experience of domination. Thus, for the history of freedom to be fully appreciated, one must acknowledge the contributions that have been made with regard to their social contexts, even while some of those advances may be grossly lacking from our current perspective. \*

Freedom first appears in recorded history as the term ‘amargi’. Amargi was the desired state sought after by Sumerian peasants during a peasant uprising. To them, freedom meant a longing for a return to a utopian past in the days before communal solidarity was disrupted and oppressed by the emergence of hierarchy.<sup>1</sup>

As mentioned previously in discussing the State, the Greeks literally invented politics in an attempt to curb the brutal power of the aristocracy. Although Greek citizenship was blatantly exclusive from today’s perspective, the idea was established that people were competent to administer their lives themselves without the mediation of an external authority. Greek political life did not merely retain a localist perspective, but instead expanded outward by forming a union of cities, or confederation, that lacked an overarching State structure. Centuries later, Medieval cities, or communes as they were called, were also free of State control and were often organized as a local democracy or republic. These communes were joined as a confederation over large regions of Europe.<sup>2</sup>

After the Medieval period, the revolution in America was founded on local town meeting democracy and coordinated throughout the colonies by an elaborate committee system. The town meetings, which began in New England, spread over the course of the revolution as far south as South Carolina. These democratic bodies formed what could have been a decentralized direction for the newly independent colonies.<sup>3</sup>

It was during this time that the Enlightenment had its greatest impact. Although it was subverted by the crass instrumentalism of capitalism, its significance as a contribution to freedom should not be overlooked. With the Enlightenment came a dynamic perspective on reason that focused on unearthing the potentiality of a being or concept, rather than the linear logic of deduction. People were believed to be capable of relying on their rational faculties, as opposed to dependence on faith, superstition, or obedience. Additionally, there was a belief in popular governance and the possibility of material well-being for all.<sup>4</sup>

The influence of the Enlightenment reached all the way to the base of French society at the close of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Within only a matter of four years Paris was transformed from an

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<sup>1</sup> ☒ The Ecology of Freedom – p.244–245

☒ Remaking Society – p.102–103

<sup>2</sup> ☒ The Rise of Urbanization and the Decline of Citizenship

<sup>3</sup> ☒ Bookchin, Murray, The Third Revolution. Vol. 1 (London and Washington: Cassell, 1996) – p.143–246

<sup>4</sup> ☒ Remaking Society – p.165–167

absolute monarchy to a direct democracy. This direct democracy consisted of neighborhood assemblies attended by working class residents, known as the *sans-culottes*. The more far-reaching *sans-culottes* called for all of France to eliminate the State and organize as a confederation of communes. This advocacy came literally within moments of realization before it was subverted by liberal reactionaries.<sup>5</sup>

The French Revolution's ideals of political equality led to an explosion of ideas regarding economic equality. Socialism and anarchism both emerged in the revolution's aftermath. Anti-authoritarian socialists sought a materially sufficient world free from the dehumanizing effects of capitalism. Anarchists stressed the ability of individuals to form rational and ethical decisions free from State coercion. Utopian theorists sought a pleasurable society that harmonized an aesthetic urban area with the natural world. And finally, Internationalists called for workers throughout the world, regardless of race, ethnicity, or nationality, to organize together and free themselves from capitalist domination.<sup>6</sup>

During the 1848 French Revolution the red flag was raised over Paris, and a social democratic republic was proclaimed. This revolution marked the first workers insurrection in history. Parisian workers sought an artisanal form of socialism, and yet, their efforts were thwarted by liberal reactionaries. A generation later, during the Paris Commune of 1871, State authorities were compelled to flee the city and leave it in the direct control of its citizens. Despite being short-lived, the Paris Commune is significant because it too sought to restructure all of France into a confederation of democratic cities free from State control.<sup>7</sup>

Before being subverted by Bolshevik control, the Russian Revolution was marked by a grassroots democratic movement in both the urban and rural areas of the country. Initially, soviets were democratic neighborhood bodies, composed of workers and soldiers, which addressed a variety of civic issues. In the countryside, villages took control of their own affairs and began re-distributing land according to need. The soviets and peasant communes were desired by many as the political structure of Russia. After Lenin came to power, insurrections by both Ukrainian populists and Kronstadt sailors sought to eliminate Bolshevik control and re-establish the democratic soviets and village communes.<sup>8</sup>

In many ways, the Spanish Revolution was the most far reaching revolution in history. At the time, the majority of Spanish industrial workers were members of the anarchist influenced union, the CNT. The CNT was syndicalist, meaning it sought democratic worker control of industry. The revolution itself was initiated in response to an uprising led by fascist military generals during 1936. In Barcelona, the workers defeated the military and took control of the city themselves. Workers throughout the entire city expropriated their workplaces and began to run and manage them collectively. In the Spanish countryside, peasants took control of their villages and began organizing their farms to be worked as democratic collectives. In many villages, money was abolished altogether and people were provided for according to their needs. Worker and peasant assemblies were networked by an extensive committee system which essentially replaced the au-

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<sup>5</sup> ☒ The Third Revolution. Vol. 1 – p.247–369

<sup>6</sup> ☒ Cole, G.D.H. A History of Socialist Thought: The Forerunners, 1789 – 1850. Vol. 1 (London: MacMillan & Co LTD, 1953)

☒ Bookchin, Murray, The Third Revolution. Vol. 2 (London and Washington: Cassell, 1998) – p.2–28

<sup>7</sup> ☒ The Third Revolution. Vol. 2 – p.192–251

<sup>8</sup> ☒ Bookchin, Murray, The Third Revolution. Vol. 3 (London and New York: Continuum, 2004)

thority of the State. The Spanish revolutionaries explicitly sought a morally transformed society in which all contributed as they could and all were provided for according to need.<sup>9</sup>

Following World War Two, the power of the State and capitalism expanded in ways which in turn led to new contributions to freedom. The counter culture, civil rights, anti-war, feminist, ecology, student, gay, and neighborhood movements offered a challenge to hierarchical society as such. The black and women's liberation movements showed clearly that people were discriminated against and socially isolated for non-economic reasons, and that efforts to achieve freedom should not be limited to political and economic equality, but must go further and eliminate hierarchy altogether. In recent years the anti-globalization movement has continued the struggle against centralized power, and the Occupy movement has sought to address grievances through popular assemblies organized at the municipal level.<sup>10</sup>

This section largely follows contributions to freedom made in Western society. Unequivocally, some forms of domination, such as racism and imperialism, were spread globally by European countries. Without absolving these realities, it would be one-sided to discredit the emancipatory ideals that also developed there. As with other societies, European domination also extended inward against the vast majority of people who populated Europe. Freedom is an ideal that developed in dialectical tension with domination itself. Concepts such as socialism, anarchism, and utopia emerged in Europe as a result of people's attempts to counter absolutism and class exploitation. Additionally, non-Western revolutions were largely limited to being nationalistic due to their historical need to expel the Western imperialists. In contrast, many of the Western revolutions had the historical privilege of going beyond nationalism and promoting universal ideals to the whole world – ideals such as democracy and socialism.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> ☒ Bookchin, Murray, *The Third Revolution*. Vol. 4 (London and New York: Continuum, 2005) – p.95–260

<sup>10</sup> ☒ *Remaking Society* – p.152–58

☒ Bookchin, Murray, *Toward an Ecological Society* (Montreal: Black Rose Books, 1980) – p.11–31

☒ *Post-Scarcity Anarchism* (Palo Alto, CA: Ramparts Press, 1971) – p.31–54

<sup>11</sup> ☒ *The Third Revolution*. Vol. 1 – p.16–19

# Social Freedom

History has shown that there is ever growing potential in what we can achieve for our societies. It is important to know how people in the past have expanded the ideal of freedom in order to see the possibilities that lie in our present and future. Communalism offers a concept of freedom that is twofold in nature, involving both a positive and a negative form. These are freedom *from* exploitation, and the freedom *to* realize one's own individual potential as a human being. Thus, to fully realize freedom, an ecological society must be opposed to all forms of exploitation, whether it be economic, ethnic, sexual, or any other form. An ecological society should seek to minimize anyone's suffering, while enabling everyone to fulfill their creative potentials.<sup>1</sup>

Overcoming the social and ecological crisis must involve the renewal of individuality. Contemporary individualism, defined as freedom from social obligations, is an alienating conception of selfhood that encourages competition and egotism.<sup>2</sup> By contrast, Communalism maintains that a well rounded, developed self only results from empowered participation in one's communities and through the bonds of cooperative relationships with the members of those communities. Direct participation provides a person with insight into and a degree of control over the social events that he or she is a part of. It also reveals our mutual dependence on each other and gives fulfillment to our social need for solidarity. Moreover, participation provides each individual a public space to share his or her own skills and experiences with the larger group. A renewed appreciation for diversity would emerge as societies recognize that acknowledging and celebrating differences leads to stronger unity.<sup>3</sup> Ultimately, society should uphold a type of selfhood that is as Murray Bookchin described, "guided by a rational, humane, and high-minded notion of the social and communal good."<sup>4</sup>

A society of empowered individuals must also involve the freedom from an exploitative market, and the freedom to participate in an economy based on ethics. Communalism maintains that there are no technical impediments to achieving a "post-scarcity" society. Today, capitalism creates an artificial scarcity of goods, while the mass media is used to generate artificial needs in our minds. A post-scarcity society is made possible by rejecting the notion of limitless needs, and replacing it with a commitment to enhance the welfare of all individuals and our environments. Material affluence would be exchanged for a life in which individual needs are consciously arrived at with the purpose in mind of enabling our creative and cultural potentialities. Modern technology, for instance, holds the potential of producing a sufficiency of goods for all people, while reducing the hardships of human labor. This is not to suggest an ascetic life of denial. To the contrary, by eliminating market induced consumerism, advanced technology could be used to provide the

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<sup>1</sup> ☒ The Ecology of Freedom – p.218–219, 351–352

<sup>2</sup> ☒ Toward an Ecological Society – p.147, 253

☒ The Ecology of Freedom – p.418, 433

<sup>3</sup> ☒ Toward an Ecological Society – p.47, 187

☒ The Ecology of Freedom – p.168, 413

☒ The Politics of Social Ecology – p.83–86

<sup>4</sup> ☒ Remaking Society – p.120



material base for the fulfillment of each individual's aesthetic, intellectual, and sensuous desires within an ethical social context.<sup>5</sup>

For a fuller appreciation of social freedom, let us distinguish between the concepts of justice and freedom. Justice seeks equality by treating all people as uniform, and rewards them in proportion to their contribution. Individual people, however, are different for many reasons, among which include poor health, disability, or age. Justice inadvertently creates inequality because it fails to compensate for individual need, rather than contribution. By contrast, freedom should be based on an ethics of concern for personal difficulties or suffering and strive to eliminate these hardships. Accordingly, genuine freedom creates equality through the recognition of and compensation for inequalities.<sup>6</sup>

Communalism emphasizes the subjective experience of the individual, and their capacity for reflective action. The commitment to the realization of the individual's full potential through an ethics of care and cooperation provides the basis for the abolition of domination as such. Our liberation must encompass the remaking of our own psyches such that a pyramidal ranking of differences is replaced with an ecological outlook whereby individual differences are encouraged and celebrated as contributions to the enrichment and beautification of the whole experience of life.<sup>7</sup>

This social context would yield a society free from oppression. White supremacy would cease, and people of color and whites would have the same shared social power. Although ethnic and cultural diversity should remain, the concept of separate "races" would come to an end. Traditional gender roles would no longer be the standard for men and women, and they would be free to choose their behavior and roles according to their own interests and strengths. People would be empowered to choose their gender identity and sexual relationships freely without moral retribution or political interference. Classism and economic status would no longer be possible when everyone is provided for according to need. Able-challenged people would also not be discriminated against, and would be provided for such that they are able to fulfill their passions to the extent possible. The subjective experience of children would be valued, and paternalistic domination would be replaced by parent's facilitating their development toward adulthood. And last but not least, the emphasis placed on people's subjective experience would result in a culture actively opposed to rape and physical, psychological, and sexual abuse.

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<sup>5</sup> ☒ Post-Scarcity Anarchism – p.10–11, 134–136

☒ Toward an Ecological Society – p.25, 36–37

☒ The Ecology of Freedom – p.136–140

<sup>6</sup> ☒ Toward an Ecological Society – p.64–65

☒ The Ecology of Freedom – p.73–75

☒ Remaking Society – p.96–100

<sup>7</sup> ☒ Post-Scarcity Anarchism – p.82

☒ Toward an Ecological Society – p.60

☒ The Ecology of Freedom – p.397–401

# Direct Democracy

Communalism calls upon people to take control over their lives through roles of active citizenship. Here, citizenship does not mean writing or petitioning your legislators. Instead, it is the empowerment of all people to participate directly in deciding social legislation. Selfhood and the democratic community mutually reinforce each other through the development of civic virtues and a commitment to the welfare all people. Thus, a person should participate in social decision making with consideration of how a decision would not only affect one's self, but how it will affect others as well.<sup>1</sup>

For these reasons, Communalists advocate the creation of directly democratic legislative assemblies at the neighborhood or town level as the sole policy making bodies of the land. These assemblies should meet regularly and follow defined rules of order that give each person the right to speak while keeping meetings within an acceptable length of time. In addition, all citizens would be permitted to contribute to the meeting's agenda. A person's own confidence in participation should follow naturally from the education and experience provided by participation itself. Furthermore, it should be recognized that it would be impossible for an entire society to make decisions with unanimous consent. Some form of majority voting is not only inevitable, but also desirable. Public dissent with the decisions made by a majority should be welcomed and encouraged because dissenting opinions serve as the generative force of fresh ideas. Those who hold positions not supported by the majority would retain the freedom to persistently advocate their stance through reasoned discourse. The details and rules of each assembly should be democratically founded on a carefully constructed set of bylaws.<sup>2</sup>

Arguing for local direct democracy does not mean that it would be necessary or required for all citizens to attend assembly meetings. Even attendance rates are not significant. It can be assumed that during ordinary times attendance could be quite low. While during more controversial times it can be expected that people will turn out in much larger numbers. What is important here is that all people have the freedom to participate whenever they so choose.<sup>3</sup>

An important point to keep in mind when considering the feasibility of direct democracy is the separation of policy making from the administration of those policies. All policies should only be made directly by the citizens' assemblies. The administration of these policies would be handled by delegates who have no policy making power of their own. Instead, they would be issued mandates which describe the range of actions and powers granted to the delegates. All delegates would be subject to immediate recall by the assemblies if they fail to follow the mandates given to them. Administrative delegates could be elected or even chosen at random in a conscious effort to prevent the professionalization or centralization of social administration. This separation of policy making from its administration is a critical point. If at any time the delegates chosen to

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<sup>1</sup> ☒ Toward an Ecological Society – p.47, 238, 253–254 The Politics of Social Ecology – p.86–88

<sup>2</sup> ☒ The Politics of Social Ecology – p.56–59, 131

<sup>3</sup> ☒ The Ecology of Freedom – p.435

☒ The Politics of Social Ecology – p.157–158

administer the community's policies begin to decide social policies for themselves, then power will have left the hands of the citizens, thus laying the groundwork for a new State.<sup>4</sup>

To gain a better understanding of assembly policies let us consider two different examples. For one, a policy can be made that restricts people from engaging in certain actions. For example, a policy could be approved that prohibits the logging of trees in certain forested areas. Alternatively, a policy can be one that enables people to take certain actions. An example of this could be when an assembly decides to build a bridge across a waterway. A team of engineers would likely be tasked with drafting various bridge proposals for the assembly to choose from. It would be the engineers' responsibility to explain their various proposals in clear language for all to understand, but the decision of which plan to implement would be decided by the assembly.<sup>5</sup>

Doubtless, there will be times when policies are infringed upon. These encounters should occur at a tremendously lesser rate than in our current society because today's policies exist to maintain a dehumanizing power structure and stark inequalities in wealth. Nonetheless, when it is suspected that a policy has been broken, the inquiry should be pursued by a popular jury of people known to the suspect. In the times that it is decided that a person is a physical danger to their community, then that person should be restrained at a comfortable, life-enhancing therapeutic center that provides counseling, care, and productive activities. There should be no prisons or jails at all. The focus of this restraint should be the healthy reintegration of the individual back into society.

Another important component of direct democracy is that it doesn't preclude governance over larger areas of society. In fact, this system can be expanded to regional levels, even globally, without any need for a centralized State. To do this, cities and towns would form an administrative body of mandated delegates in much the same way that administration is handled at the local level. This form of inter-municipal cooperation is called a confederation. Confederation policies would still be made directly by the citizenry, only now through referenda. The results of a referendum would be decided in favor of the majority of the total votes cast. Each city would be bound to follow the decisions of the citizens as a whole, thus giving citizens regional power to prevent a municipality from causing environmental damage or human rights abuses. Through a confederation, all citizens are given collective power to administer society without creating an intermediate institution with power over them.<sup>6</sup>

The resolving of conflicts between municipalities should focus on non-violent tactics. When needed, facilitation or arbitration should be provided from outside the areas that are in conflict. These conflicts would hopefully be rare given the abolition of power and wealth inequalities throughout society. If a situation arises that a municipality needs to defend itself physically, this defense should be organized around democratic militias controlled by the popular assemblies, as opposed to a hierarchical, professional army.

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<sup>4</sup> ☒ The Rise of Urbanization and the Decline of Citizenship – p.246–247

<sup>5</sup> ☒ The Politics of Social Ecology – p.105–107

<sup>6</sup> ☒ Bookchin, Murray – “The Meaning of Confederalism”

☒ The Politics of Social Ecology – p.95–109

# Liberatory Technology

Although technology has been used to exploit and simplify the planet on a frightening scale, it is not technology itself that is at fault here. Rather, it is the fact that technologies are designed and employed within the context of a hierarchical and rapacious society. In an ecological society, technology could be oriented to play a liberatory role for humans that also enhances the integrity and biodiversity of non-human nature. From this orientation, technology would be used for the purpose of eliminating toil and drudgery, and labor-saving techniques would be applied so as to minimize the amount of necessary work for everyone.<sup>1</sup>

Although automation will receive a great deal of focus, it must be stressed that we are not advocating a completely automated, roboticized environment where people are not involved in production. What is important is that these technologies can be decentralized and placed under the direct control of a community. The fact that robotics and automation can be used to provide for everyone's needs gives people the *choice* of what extent to utilize such techniques. An ecological society would free people's time for the purpose of character formation through civic involvement, and for applying one's efforts towards the artistic and vocational activities of their own choosing. In fact, work itself would become a playful activity enabling each individual to realize their own creative potential at a leisurely pace of their own choosing. People would be endowed with the opportunity to find an intricate balance between mental and physical labor, indoor and outdoor work, working communally and alone, between crafts and agriculture, and between the city and the countryside. To explore these possibilities further, here are brief explanations of the technological possibilities regarding the areas of manufacturing, mining, agriculture, and energy.<sup>2</sup>

## Manufacturing

Due to the development of 3D computer design and computer-controlled machines, virtually every area of manufacturing can be fully automated and scaled for local production. All of the individual processes of metal working and woodworking, including precision cutting, shaping, and joining can be handled by a relatively small set of machines and housed in a local neighborhood facility. Automated processes can also be implemented for the local fabrication of any shape of glass, plastics, or clothing that can be designed by anyone. Along with this capability, practically any finished product can be assembled automatically based on an item's assembly instruction computer file. For instance, any person in the world could download the design and assembly files for a baby stroller. All of the parts – possibly a combination of metal, plastic, wood, and

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<sup>1</sup> For an excellent discussion on the role of technology, see:

☒ The Ecology of Freedom – p.302–355

<sup>2</sup> ☒ Remaking Society – p.196

☒ The Ecology of Freedom – p.427–30

☒ Post-Scarcity Anarchism – see 'Toward a Liberatory Technology' p.83–139

fabric – would be manufactured directly and then fully assembled, all without requiring human labor.<sup>3</sup>

Documentation for productive machinery should be made freely available via the Internet, enabling the rapid transfer of technical and mechanical knowledge throughout the world. Documentation could include a materials list, computer design files, instructional videos, and collaboration software such as a revision system, a discussion forum, and a wiki. Additionally, assistance through video conferencing could be provided for the purpose of making it easier to answer questions and demonstrate techniques.

The maintenance of industrial infrastructure could be automated as well. Machine parts, fluids, and performance rates can be monitored using sensors that provide data to a computer control system. To the extent necessary, a machine could be disassembled robotically, and each part could be run through a series of diagnostic tests. When machine diagnostics determine fault, a replacement part could be manufactured and installed on the fly without the need for human involvement.

## Mining

Despite the use of computer-controlled machinery toward liberatory ends, the elimination of new metal production should be considered a real possibility. Vast amounts of metals are thrown into landfills every year. According to one report, the director of energy at a major aluminum corporation has estimated that there is more aluminum in landfills than can be produced by mining ores. He goes further to suggest that this may be true for copper and gold as well.<sup>4</sup> In addition, an ecological society would necessarily consist of a thoroughly remade built environment, one in which urban gigantism and the reign of the private automobile is brought to an end. In a built environment reconstructed according to ecological precepts, along with an economy oriented toward production for life rather than profit, we could very well find ourselves amidst an abundance of metals, and with no or a greatly attenuated need for new metal production.

Nevertheless, if some degree of new metal extraction is needed, it can be done in a non-destructive manner while alleviating toil. As of 2010, an iron ore has been in operation that is fully automated from the mine to port. The whole operation is remotely administered by computer operators.<sup>5</sup> This approach to automation can be coupled with a biological method of metal

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<sup>3</sup> Examples of this technology include

- ☒ robotic arms handling dies for forging [www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com)
- ☒ robotic arc welding [www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com)
- ☒ computer controlled lathe [www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com)
- ☒ robotic woodworking shop [www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com)
- ☒ automated portable sawmill [www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com)
- ☒ automated glass blowing machine [www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com)
- ☒ computer controlled loom [www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com)
- ☒ robotic programming software [www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com)
- ☒ robotic programming software (2) [www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com)
- ☒ robotic arms used for engine assembly [www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com)
- ☒ automated warehouse [www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com)

<sup>4</sup> ☒ [www.fastcompany.com](http://www.fastcompany.com)

<sup>5</sup> ☒ [www.riotinto.com](http://www.riotinto.com)

☒ [www.steelguru.com](http://www.steelguru.com)

extraction. This process, called biomining, employs microorganisms to leach the metals out of the ore. The development of biomining techniques is important because it uses only a small amount of energy, requires little infrastructure to set up, works with low as well as high grade ores, and has minimum labor requirements. Still more, it brings nature into an otherwise inorganic process, and thus assists in further clarifying the necessity for a cooperative relationship with the natural world.<sup>6</sup>

The production of aluminum impacts the environment negatively in many ways. The standard process creates a array of toxic byproducts while consuming extremely large amounts of electricity. If production of aluminum is to continue, then an alternative method must be established. Recent studies have concluded that aluminum can be biominced, and thus drastically reducing energy consumption and CO2 emissions while also eliminating other undesirable byproducts.<sup>7</sup> The fact that low grade ores can be processed through biomining opens the door for producing aluminum directly from clay, which is aluminum silicate. Through this approach, aluminum production could be radically decentralized such that people throughout the world could manufacture their own aluminum using a local and abundant resource.<sup>8</sup>

## Agriculture

Advanced technology can be applied to agriculture in an organic manner that enhances the surrounding biodiversity as well as the pleasures of farming. A typical example of beneficial farm machinery is that of the tractor. Through the use of a wide variety of attachments, a tractor is used for lifting and transporting heavy objects, digging, tilling, mowing, seeding, auger drilling, and mixing compost along with many other useful tasks. By the same token, robotic and automated farm equipment can be utilized by small-scale farms that grow nutritious, delicious food, while also improving the soil.

By coupling agricultural automation with the principles of permaculture and an advanced software system, farms can be created that are free from toil, composed of complex polycultures, and are as much aesthetic playgrounds as they are sites of food production. Permaculture is an information intensive form of ecological agriculture that seeks to enhance biodiversity by carefully designing its components such that each farm element serves multiple functions and is placed in a location that is mutually beneficial to other nearby elements. Additionally, it aims to enhance soil by facilitating natural plant succession. An example of permaculture design is the “three sisters” companion planting technique where beans, corn, and squash are grown close together. Corn provides a structure for the bean vines to grow upon, the beans fix nitrogen into the soil, and the squash provides a ground cover so as to retain moisture and prevent weeds from growing. Permaculture sites are designed to utilize plants that attract beneficial insects and birds that serve as a method of biological pest control. And finally, a strong emphasis is placed on growing perennials and the replacement of tilling with mulching so as to minimize human labor and soil disturbance.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> [http://opensourceecology.org/w/images/4/43/Biomining\\_-Carmen\\_Tailings-Com.pdf](http://opensourceecology.org/w/images/4/43/Biomining_-Carmen_Tailings-Com.pdf)

[opensourceecology.org](http://opensourceecology.org)

[wiki.biomine.skeleftea.se](http://wiki.biomine.skeleftea.se)

<sup>7</sup> [opensourceecology.org](http://opensourceecology.org)

<sup>8</sup> [opensourceecology.org](http://opensourceecology.org)

<sup>9</sup> [Mollison, Bill, Introduction to Permaculture. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. \(Tyalgum, NSW, Australia: Tagari Publications, 1994\)](#)

Computer-aided permaculture (CAP) software can assist in developing ecological farm plans that model land-use zoning, intensive polycultures, and production estimates while acting as a guide for coordinating the full use of local materials to avoid waste. Farmers, either families or collectives, would need to provide the software with the necessary information in order for the model to be generated. This information could account for climate, typography, and local hydrology among others. The software would access a publicly modified database that stores information on plant communities (companions), their appropriate spacing, germination and harvest dates, water and sun requirements, and many other attributes. Through this information, the CAP software would generate a model detailing the array of plants to be grown, their best locations according to soil, sun, and drainage, the expected volume of food, medicinals, and animal products as well as how much of what plants can be turned into biofuel, bioplastics, or mulch. With the modeled plan in hand, the farmers can go through a democratic process on modifying and settling on an acceptable plan. The finalized plan would later be modified, year after year, according to circumstances and participant choice. Furthermore, these plans could be linked up with surrounding farms in the region in order to harmonize their efforts so as to realize a regional form of agriculture that is both decentralized and ecological.

The complexities of intensive companion planting at the scale of a farm, as opposed to a backyard garden, lends itself to the assistance of small, autonomous field robots. Field robots could carry out many useful tasks like transplanting, weeding, spreading mulch, and harvesting. Automated monitoring systems could be put in place that control a drip irrigation system or the release of organic fertilizers. Even a robotic system could be implemented for corralling chickens or ducks into a specified area to eat insects. Automated greenhouses could also be used for starting seeds and tending to seedlings. Separately, automated greenhouses could implement an advanced aquaponics system that yields high volumes of fish, vegetables, and biofuel. These technologies, together with automated forms of more conventional farm machinery, could provide an abundance of food with a minimal of necessary labor while at the same time improving the soil and increasing local biodiversity.<sup>10</sup>

## Energy

The energy for an ecological society must not rely on fossil fuels, but should instead consist of a variety of renewable sources that are produced locally. Methods for producing renewable energy include not only the familiar solar panels, wind mills, and biofuels, but also concentrated

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☒ Hememway, Toby, *Gaia's Garden* (White River Junction, VT: Chelsea Green Publishing, 2000)

<sup>10</sup> Examples of this technology include

☒ small agricultural field robots [www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com)

☒ small agricultural field robots (2) [www.fieldrobot.nl/](http://www.fieldrobot.nl/)

☒ robotic arm used for harvesting strawberries [www.roboticharvesting.com](http://www.roboticharvesting.com)

☒ automated transplanter automated greenhouse transplanter [www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com)

☒ robot that climbs tree to harvest coconuts [www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com)

☒ automated chicken coop [www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com)

☒ driverless farm tractor [www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com)

☒ robotic weeding [www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com)

☒ automated milking operation [www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com)

☒ An aquaponics system has been created that grows 1 million pounds of food per year on a mere 3 acres [www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com)

solar energy systems, hydrogen fuel cells, and pyrolysis. Taken together, these techniques can supply a local community with all of their fuel and electrical needs.<sup>11</sup>

For example, pyrolysis is a process that converts biomass into varying amounts of charcoal, syngas, and bio-oil. Syngas can be converted directly to electricity using a highly efficient hydrogen fuel cell which produces very low emissions. The carbon dioxide that is given off in the process are those that were originally sequestered by the biomass used in the pyrolysis process, making the whole production cycle carbon neutral.

Given the ecological benefits it provides, the charcoal made during pyrolysis is commonly referred to as biochar. When biochar is added to soil it enhances nutrient retention and thereby increases soil fertility. Due to biochar being highly resistant to decomposition, all of the carbon contained within the biochar is effectively kept out of the atmosphere for thousands of years. Because the biomass that is turned into biochar consumes atmospheric CO<sub>2</sub> during its growth, this method of energy production is part of a *carbon negative* process that yields a beneficial soil additive to boot. Thus, biochar has great potential to reduce the high levels of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere.<sup>12</sup>

There are more economic areas that are not covered here in this pamphlet which a liberatory approach to technology could be applied. What the above analysis shows is that the necessary technologies and ecological energy sources essential for establishing a decentralized, ecological society exists now and is within our grasp.

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<sup>11</sup> Examples of this technology include

- ☒ concentrated solar photovoltaics [www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com)
- ☒ night time storage of solar energy [www.scientificamerican.com](http://www.scientificamerican.com)
- ☒ pyrolysis [www.fao.org](http://www.fao.org)
- ☒ large wind turbine data sheet [www.enercon.de](http://www.enercon.de)
- ☒ Bloom hydrogen fuel cell data sheet [www.bloomenergy.com](http://www.bloomenergy.com)
- ☒ presentation on Bloom fuel cell [www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com)
- <sup>12</sup> ☒ biochar information [opensourceecology.org](http://opensourceecology.org)
- ☒ pyrolysis processor [www.advbiorefineryinc.ca](http://www.advbiorefineryinc.ca)



# Ethical Economy

An ecological economy should be placed under the direct control of the citizenry, just like with social policies. In effect, the means of economic production – land and equipment – would be placed under the domain of the assembly, and regional economic integration would be achieved through the confederation. The range of economic decisions addressed by assemblies would include, among others, how much of various goods should be produced for the year, and which technologies are deemed acceptable for use. The specifics of how goods are produced and how services are rendered should be decided upon and administered by the people who spend their time working at or maintaining a workplace, such as a farm, workshop, or a hospital. The assemblies decide what needs to be done, and the workplaces decide how it gets done.<sup>1</sup>

An ethical economy would be one that is cooperatively planned rather than having goods allocated within a competitive market. Democratic economic planning can be greatly assisted by an advanced software system. Every item that is manufactured – not including unique hand crafted items – could be included in the system. This entry would include documentation that details the item's material requirements and build instructions. In addition, it would include an assessment of how many embodied labor hours are involved in its production, the current capacity for producing it locally at a desired quantity, its energy requirements, and qualitative assessments such as the social and ecological impact of its manufacture. During annual economic planning meetings people would propose and decide what items are needed by the municipality as a collective unit, such as a public building. In addition, individuals or households would need to submit their anticipated consumption plan for the year. Initially this would be done from scratch, but afterwards can be modified year after year. This plan would quantify categories of items needed – such as how many pairs of shoes or how many pounds of fruit – not the specifics of the items themselves. The software would aggregate everyone's information in order to assess what can be produced locally, what goods need to come from elsewhere in the confederation, how much labor will be needed, and to compile reports itemizing qualitative, user-submitted notes. In an economy that produces for need rather than profit and in a society oriented toward creativity and cooperation rather than consumerism, it is likely that total consumption requests will fall below productive capacity. Nonetheless, if requests are found to be excessive then overages would be

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<sup>1</sup> Bookchin referred to this economy as a 'moral economy'. We, however, think it would more appropriately referred to as an 'ethical economy' given the distinctions that Bookchin himself made between ethics and morality. For Bookchin, morality is standards not based on rational analysis by a community. In contrast, ethics involves rational inquiry and debate over the matters of right and wrong.

☒ The Ecology of Freedom – p.72–73

☒ Bookchin, Murray, *The Modern Crisis* (Philadelphia: New Society Publishers 1986) – see 'Market Economy or Moral Economy?' p.77–98

☒ The Politics of Social Ecology – p.111–120

highlighted, and people could be asked to modify their plans accordingly. This process would be done iteratively until a workable collective plan is voted for.<sup>2</sup>

The computer modeled economic plan should be capable of estimating how much labor in each productive area is needed. Those who are capable of working would be expected to assist in achieving the goals of the democratic assemblies. People should be allowed to volunteer their time toward the needed task of their choice. Volunteering time to fulfill needed work tasks should occur naturally because those who will do the work will have participated (or at least had the freedom to do so) in their assembly's decision making. Still further, they will be part of a cooperative community whose members they know on a face to face basis. Situations where a sufficient number of volunteers do not come forth could be handled in a non-coercive manner. Initially, the assembly could reassess whether the goal is still desired in light of how the situation develops. If the assembly concludes affirmatively, then people could simply be asked again to step up and help out. If this approach fails then the endeavor could be made more enticing by planning an accompanying feast or celebration. Otherwise the plan would ultimately be canceled until sufficient support is available.

Although the liberatory use of technology enables the radical decentralization of manufacturing, municipalities will always remain interdependent with other municipalities for different goods – both raw materials and various agricultural or manufactured items. These communities need not engage in a bourgeois concept of monetary trade. Instead, a community that receives needed items, items which would be produced with a minimum of physical labor, could express their gratitude and achieve reciprocity by responding with hand crafted gifts or by sending an occasional delegation to perform music or to provide a feast.

In keeping with the Communalist concept of social freedom, the distribution of goods in an ecological society should be made not according to one's productive contribution, but according to their needs. Within the capacity of the local assembly or confederation, each person's material requests should be fulfilled according to their own determination of needs. Hoarding and conspicuous consumption would cease to exist, because anyone could have the same goods as anyone else. More significantly, people would be free from the psychological manipulation of advertisers and would live immersed in a culture oriented toward communal cooperation, solidarity, and creative expression. Each person would be the embodiment of a rounded, developed self – in control of his or her own life, knowledgeable of the technologies that provide for his or her needs, acutely aware of the importance of biodiversity, and a known member of a caring community. Because this economy would be controlled democratically, based on a voluntary labor system, and would provide for people according to need it should be considered deeply ethical.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> These ideas are borrowed in part from Michael Albert and Robin Hahnel who developed a proposed system of democratic economic planning that they call 'participatory economics.'

✉ Albert, Michael, *Parecon: Life After Capitalism* (London and New York: Verso 2003) – p.118–147

<sup>3</sup> ✉ *Remaking Society* – p.96–100

# Urban Decentralization

Realizing the potential of a non-hierarchical society organized around a directly democratic, confederal politics, an ethical economy, and the use of liberatory technology, enables the radical transformation of the built environment along ecological lines. This transformation should necessarily bring the dimensions of the built environment down to a scale that is fully comprehensible and accessible to individual people. It is at this scale that people can come to know one another on a face to face basis as members of a community. It is also at this scale that natural balance can be achieved without overwhelming the local base of resources. It follows then that our sprawling urban and suburban conglomerations should be dismantled, and that people would relocate in a more evenly distributed manner. The same machines that are today being used to enlarge the sea of urban concrete can instead be used to tear it up, dismantle the massive commercial buildings, and salvage large quantities of useful materials.<sup>1</sup>

The actual size limits of future cities would be left up to the popular assemblies themselves. It is beneficial, however, to speculate on such matters in order to grasp the possibilities that are at hand. The population limit of 30,000 that Ebenezer Howard placed on his Garden City concept seems like an appropriate upper limit.<sup>2</sup> Anything beyond this limit would likely take a toll on local resources while becoming incomprehensible as a totality to each individual resident. While a city of this size would still prevent all of the citizens from knowing each other on a personal level, the city would be divided into numerous neighborhoods that would approximate the communal inclusiveness of a small town. These neighborhoods should themselves be no larger than 1,000 inhabitants with each containing their own democratic assembly.<sup>3</sup> Neighborhood assemblies would join together to form a municipal confederation that governs the city as a whole. To avoid conglomeration, cities of this size should be spread out across the land. Each of these cities could mark the centerpiece of a decentralized municipal arrangement known as a township. In a township a relatively large city is surrounded by a number of smaller cities, towns, and villages all of which is enclosed by agricultural and forest land. This arrangement allows for a harmonious balance to be struck between town and country.<sup>4</sup> The municipalities within a township would themselves form a township confederation, while all of the townships of a region could join together to form a regional confederation.

All citizens would be able to actively participate in neighborhood, municipal, township, and regional planning through the shared use of a GIS based city planning software system that incorporates 3D architectural and engineering modeling.<sup>5</sup> Citizens could propose and debate various

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<sup>1</sup> ☒ Toward an Ecological Society – p.186–188

<sup>2</sup> ☒ Howard, Ebenezer, *Garden Cities of To-Morrow* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press 1965) – p.54

<sup>3</sup> This figure comes from Christopher Alexander who asserted that population sizes larger than 1500 would prevent people from effectively governing themselves. He further stated that 500 inhabitants would be the ideal size.

☒ Alexander, Christopher, *A Pattern Language* (New York: Oxford University Press) – p.4, 81

<sup>4</sup> For a historical overview of the New England township model see:

☒ Mumford, Lewis, *The City in History* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc, 1961) – p.332

<sup>5</sup> For a current example of city planning software see CityEngine

plans for distributing productive facilities throughout the township or regional confederation, for solving transportation logistics, and for the aesthetic landscape of the built environment itself. Again, although these are decisions to be left for future assemblies, it is helpful to assess the principles that an ecological form of city planning should incorporate. For instance, in order to approximate the human scale, even the largest cities should be designed to allow people to easily access the countryside by bicycling or walking. The countryside itself could be merged seamlessly into the city by incorporating a web of interlocking fingers of farmland that reach all the way to the city's center. City neighborhoods should be easily identified from one another and have distinct boundaries that acknowledge their limits. Neighborhood boundaries give form to the city while providing each neighborhood with its own distinct character. Towns, villages, and cities should arrange their centers of public activity into a relatively small number of key spots so as to create vital gathering areas that facilitate social interactions. These activity centers could be home to various mixtures of workshops, recreational and sporting grounds, kitchen and dining halls, and public buildings. The area should be a magnet for creativity where art, music, and theater become an abiding part of public life. All public spaces should be built in a manner that is welcoming to people of all ages while also placing emphasis on being inclusive to people of all identities. Additionally, public spaces should be landscaped to provide both aesthetic beauty and food to enjoy throughout the seasons. Arrangements could be made that enable domesticated animals to have a continual presence, and residents should have easy access to bodies of water and forested areas. A mixture of household arrangements could be provided that accommodate couples, extended families, collectives, or those who wish to live alone.<sup>6</sup> A variety of transportation outlets could be implemented within a municipality such as a public streetcar system, electric assisted bicycles, light electric vehicles of various sorts, and a shared supply of trucks for heavy loads. Great emphasis should be placed on minimizing traffic congestion as much as possible. This minimization should not be too difficult to achieve if municipalities are well designed and limited in size. Agricultural areas could be equipped with trucks as needed, and they could be connected to a rail line for shipping and receiving goods. Finally, township municipalities and regional areas could be linked together by an energy efficient monorail system that could operate without a driver if desired.

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✉ [www.procedural.com](http://www.procedural.com)

✉ [www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com)

<sup>6</sup> ✉ These ideas are drawn largely from A Pattern Language

# From Here to There

The move from our current society to the free society detailed above must necessarily involve convincing a majority of the population to support these ideals. To do this, we must build a movement that is organized around the reconstructive vision that has been put forth. The specifics of the developments of the movement will no doubt be determined by the people involved and in light of the circumstances they face. Nonetheless, it is valuable to outline a program of action in order to provide an overall vision of how the existing system can be overcome. This program is proposed with the hope to catalyze people to act around the values of social freedom. In addition, this platform is to provide people with an initial basis of ideas from which they can develop their own ideas and creative approaches. While ideals – such as full opposition to hierarchy – will be asserted as necessary, the program detailed below is not intended to be a rigid approach to social change. Instead, it is a speculative exercise in exploring how the remaking of society might be achieved.

This movement should seek to address all of the particular issues of oppression that people face. Yet, these issues should not be addressed in isolation from one another. It is important to be aware of the intersectionality of oppressions and privileges. This awareness provides acute knowledge of the complexity of people's varied experiences, the myriad of oppressions that need to be overcome, and the privileges that should be leveraged against privilege itself. To fully address the realities that we face, one must integrate single-issue work into a broader campaign that treats all of the issues at hand. Thus, we must seek a unified movement that addresses a diversity of issues and acts in the general interest of all of humanity. This movement should strive to be as diverse as possible with regard to social and economic status so as to represent a wide spectrum of experiences and perspectives.<sup>1</sup>

An initial approach to promoting Communalist ideas is to distribute a leaflet or pamphlet with the intent to explain these ideas as clearly as possible. As supporters are found, it would be wise to form small study groups to explore these ideas together in more detail. As the group begins to gain confidence in their ability to articulate themselves, public promotion of Communalism could be expanded into a regularly occurring newsletter that seeks to promote solutions to local issues from a Communalist perspective, while tying them to the long term vision of an ecological society. As with leafleting, distributing a newsletter puts fellow Communalists in the position of having to address questions and concerns, and makes for a reciprocal educational exercise for both the Communalist and the conversation partner. Another way of educating people is by holding a lecture series or by giving talks to groups focused on social justice issues. Still another important approach is to run for local office based on a platform that makes clear the group's unwavering intent to change the structure of municipal government into that of a direct democracy. As an exercise in popular education, a Communalist campaign should be run on a face to face basis. It is important to stress that electoral attempts should never be engaged for the purpose of easily

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<sup>1</sup> ☒ Remaking Society – p.165–174

gaining a large following. Losing by a large margin is desirable if people are not yet educated on the ideas being promoted. If a Communalist campaign ever surrenders its far reaching goals to gain this large following, it will inevitably become ineffective, demoralized, and corrupted. Just as well, in order to remain true to its anti-Statist vision, campaigns for offices beyond the municipality should be wholly avoided. It is desired that educated individuals, not a mass of propagandized voters, comes to accept and join the nascent movement.<sup>2</sup>

As support begins to grow, focus could be turned toward the neighborhoods where the support is coming from. This focus could be done initially by starting a neighborhood community technology project. Community technology projects are similar to community gardens in that they bring people together in a cooperative effort.<sup>3</sup> These projects could demonstrate the liberatory possibilities of technology using relatively low cost and technically accessible examples. Some open sourced projects to start with could include building a RepRap (3D printer), a Shapeoko (computer controlled mill), a Lasersaur (computer controlled laser cutter), or a Liberator (compressed earth block press).<sup>4</sup> These provide excellent examples in showing people that decentralized manufacturing is an immediate possibility. There are many other open source hardware projects on the Internet that could be of great benefit. Concurrently, a permaculture demonstration site could be established to teach key concepts such as companion planting and holistic site design.

Simultaneous with the community technology project, a neighborhood assessment could be done to gain knowledge of both the problems and the possibilities that confront the neighborhood. An important first task is to learn the social composition of the neighborhood. This task could involve learning which homes are owner-occupied and rentals, who the long-term residents are, who people turn to as leaders, the level of unemployment, and so on. From these residents seek to learn the neighborhood's history and past political battles. Another task could be to engage in a door to door survey in order to determine what resources are available within the neighborhood. Learn what issues are important to people, what skills they have, what their hobbies are, and what tools or facilities they have that may be useful at some point. Also, learn who owns the empty buildings and neighborhood lots with the intent of finding an opportunity to put them to communal use. At the same time, residents could be given literature explaining the group's intent to empower people directly so that they are no longer controlled by centralized sources of power. Another great exercise could be to assess what the neighborhood's potential is for food and energy production, as well as its potential capacity for manufacturing its own goods.<sup>5</sup> To the extent possible, the whole neighborhood assessment process should be documented and made freely available on the Internet for others to replicate and build upon these efforts. With this wealth of information in hand, Communalists could work with concerned residents to develop a minimum program. A minimum program is a set of demands focused on addressing immediate issues. In order to avoid becoming reformist, it should be shown how the

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<sup>2</sup> ☒ The Politics of Social Ecology – p.53–62, 121–130

<sup>3</sup> For an interesting overview of a community technology project in Washington D.C. during the 1970s see:

☒ Hess, Karl, Community Technology (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1979)

<sup>4</sup> ☒ RepRap (3D printer) [www.reprap.org](http://www.reprap.org)

☒ Shapeoko (computer controlled mill) [www.shapeoko.com/](http://www.shapeoko.com/)

☒ Lasersaur (computer controlled laser cutter) [labs.nortd.com](http://labs.nortd.com)

☒ Liberator (compressed earth block press) [opensourceecology.org](http://opensourceecology.org)

☒ Also see the Global Village Construction Set [opensourceecology.org](http://opensourceecology.org)

<sup>5</sup> ☒ Morris, David and Hess, Karl, Neighborhood Power (Boston: Beacon Press, 1975) – p.16–45

minimum program ties into the long term vision, or maximum program, of the Communalist project.<sup>6</sup>

Following these initial efforts, some residents of the neighborhood will become generally familiar with Communalist ideas, and will be enticed by its call for people to directly govern their own lives. When this level of consciousness is reached, Communalists should begin calling on neighborhood residents to attend assembly meetings as an act of self-empowerment. An important point to note is that these meetings should be open to the people who actually live in the neighborhood, not the landlords or business owners who profitize off the area and live outside of it. Rather than an occasional gathering used to defend themselves against the undesirable plans coming out of city hall, these popular assemblies should occur according to a regular schedule with impromptu meetings called as needed. Regardless of how nascent their actual power to substantially effect their situation, by participating in an on-going series of assembly meetings the people of the neighborhood will have taken an immensely important step forward in overcoming the oppressive institutions that control them – they will begin to govern themselves. Although at this point these assemblies will not have real legal power, they can nonetheless act as a moral force in the community, and can pressure the city government to address their minimum demands. Because the neighborhood will have begun to govern itself to some extent, the assembly will in effect be a source of power, a *dual power*, alongside that of the city government. When the popular assembly comes into existence, Communalists should focus their efforts on educating the assembly participants on the assembly's importance as a dual power structure. This effort would help citizens see themselves as an active part of a process that can lead to the ideal of social freedom. Any power that the popular assembly is able to exercise for themselves will necessarily come at the expense of the city government. This development should not be isolated to a single neighborhood, but instead should encompass numerous neighborhoods throughout a nation, and even internationally, so that they collectively act as a dual power structure to the State itself.<sup>7</sup>

While the popular assembly is still new and its power small, it can begin to take measures to address some of the issues that the people face. In addition to applying pressure to the city government, various community projects can be initiated to begin building a cooperative culture while attempting to overcome the anonymous, alienating, and fragmentary way of life furnished by urban gigantism and the commodification of life. Examples of such projects include creating a child-care collective, a free school, or even a method of adjudicating disputes that avoid involving the police. Additionally, a community kitchen and dining hall could be established in order to free individuals and families from the labors of nightly meal preparation and from the unhealthy options provided by fast food culture. Here, people would come together to converse freely with a variety of neighbors in a social setting wholly different than the isolated tables positioned throughout a restaurant.<sup>8</sup> These quality of life improvements will induce developers to turn a speculative eye on the neighborhood. It is important to preemptively defend against gentrification before it is too late. Tools for this fight include creating a tenants union, influencing the

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<sup>6</sup> The Politics of Social Ecology – p.73–75

<sup>7</sup> ☒ The Politics of Social Ecology – p.81

For the historical legacy and contemporary potential of this approach, see:

☒ The Rise of Urbanization and the Decline of Citizenship

<sup>8</sup> ☒ Neighborhood Power – p.34–37, 46

☒ The Politics of Social Ecology – p.55

local zoning board, and establishing community land trusts to take properties off the real-estate market.<sup>9</sup>

It would be wise for the popular assembly to be very deliberate in how it acquires funding for its community technology and social projects. If funding comes from a source that is not aligned with the movement's long term goals then that source will use its power as a funder to co-opt the movement toward its own reformist agenda. An alternative means of acquiring funding can be realized by demanding that popular assemblies be given direct control over deciding how municipal taxes are spent. This form of municipal funding falls under the name of "participatory budgeting." While participatory budgeting has been implemented in various reformist ways, gaining directly democratic control over municipal taxes for the purpose of funding popular assemblies as a dual power would mark an important step in expanding the political and economic power of those assemblies.<sup>10</sup>

Popular assemblies could use the funds acquired through participatory budgeting to establish neighborhood owned microfactories that are administered by workers hired from within their respective neighborhoods and paid a living wage. Microfactories are small factories that are capable of producing a variety of goods by employing, to the extent possible, small-scale automated machinery and digital manufacturing techniques. Microfactories would enable neighborhoods to establish a degree of economic self-reliance. Popular assemblies should cooperate with other assemblies in their city and region in order to decide which type of goods each microfactory should focus on, so as make best use of their economic power without unnecessarily duplicating their efforts. Residents should be encouraged to buy neighborhood manufactured goods rather than from corporate retail outlets. If successful, microfactories would be a secondary source of revenue for the popular assembly, further strengthening their economic power.<sup>11</sup>

It is doubtful that any city government would grant neighborhood assemblies any degree of control over municipal budgets that could be used at the expense of the existing power structure. In order to realize these goals, popular assemblies must gain political power within the city government. Neighborhood assemblies should run candidates for local office on a Communalist platform that connects the neighborhoods' minimum program with the maximum program of an ecological society. As with the educational campaigns already mentioned, these campaigns should only seek to gain the backing of those who support the long term vision of fully transforming the institutions of our society. Otherwise the whole movement will become reformist, and defeat its own potential as a revolutionary force. Candidates should be considered spokespeople for the assemblies themselves, and remain fully accountable to the assemblies. Once elected, it will be their responsibility to do everything in their power to assist in strengthening the power of the popular assemblies. Participatory budgeting should be implemented to the furthest extent possible, highly progressive taxes should be put in place, any regulations or red tape that interferes with the popular assemblies' goals should be removed, regulations for corporations should be increased, and control of city property within the neighborhoods should be transferred to the assemblies themselves.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> ☒ Neighborhood Power – p.83–96

☒ Chodorkoff, Dan, "Occupy Your Neighborhood" [www.social-ecology.org](http://www.social-ecology.org)

<sup>10</sup> ☒ Legard, Sveinung, "Democratizing the Municipality, The Promise of Participatory Budgeting" [socialecology-london.wordpress.com](http://socialecology-london.wordpress.com)

<sup>11</sup> ☒ For similar concept, see the RepLab proposed by OpenSourceEcology [opensourceecology.org](http://opensourceecology.org)

<sup>12</sup> ☒ The Politics of Social Ecology – p.63–72



The newly empowered popular assemblies should then be capable of realizing many of their minimum demands. This scenario would greatly expand the Communalist movement's role as a dual power alongside that of the existing State apparatus. This situation necessarily creates a tension with the State that cannot last due to the fact that the strength of the assemblies' movement is realized at the expense of the State's ability to control them. This tension should not only be welcomed, but cultivated. The assemblies should make every attempt to expand their power or else the State will succeed in usurping them. To make this attempt, assemblies should work to achieve their maximum demands by entering into a phase of action meant to serve as a transition from our existing hierarchical society to that of a fully emancipated, ecological society. One of the most important steps to take is for city charters to be changed for the purpose of giving popular assemblies the power to decide municipal policy for themselves without the need for consent of the city council or any other representative authority. This power could then be expanded further by expropriating corporate assets and placing them under the control of the city's neighborhood assemblies' confederation. Patents and copyrights pertaining to those assets should be eliminated, and all knowledge should be made freely available over the Internet so that people throughout the world can contribute to ushering in a new eco-technological revolution with liberatory potentials that reach far beyond those that exist today. As well, banks should be expropriated and all debts relieved in full. Empty buildings and the property of landlords should be confiscated so that housing can be provided for all, and to eliminate the wasteful and exploitative burden of rent.<sup>13</sup>

By implementing the provocative actions of the transitional program, society will have entered into a revolutionary situation. It should be noted that the power elite will not accept this development passively, and at some point will go on the violent offensive. Hopefully by that point large numbers of men and women will defect from the military and join the cause of social freedom. Nonetheless, for the Communalist movement to survive and for the State and capitalist system to be defeated, the State must be divested of its monopoly of violence. This action requires the creation of a network of defensive civic militias that remain under the full control of the popular assemblies.<sup>14</sup>

To complete the revolution, the money system must be abolished, and the workings of the new directly democratic society should be clearly defined by writing bylaws at the assembly and various confederal levels. With these structures in place all of the efforts needed to achieve urban decentralization and the liberatory use of technology can be coordinated between the numerous assemblies through their confederal delegates.

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<sup>13</sup> ☒ The Politics of Social Ecology – p.121–130

<sup>14</sup> ☒ The Politics of Social Ecology – p.167–168

# Conclusion

It is intended that the revolutionary strategy presented here avoids the pitfalls of pragmatism with its willingness to compromise any ideal in exchange for minor reforms, and of purism with its inability to engage the present situation in a manner that is capable of addressing pressing issues. The Communalist alternative seeks a harmonization of means and ends by developing a minimum program that is linked to an emancipatory vision via a transitional program. Communalism aims to reach people under their current circumstances, to touch them with the realization of what could be, to bring to their consciousness the desire for a completely transformed society, and to empower them to act in cooperation with those living around them. We are all trapped into participating with the current system in one way or another. But we can refuse to give to it our loyalty. With the potentialities of an ecological society in mind, we can keep in the forefront of our consciousness how irrational and dehumanizing bourgeois society is.

If you are trapped behind a desk at an office or school, unemployed, working at a meaningless job, stressed or in debt, alone or depressed, sickened by the destruction of the environment, disgusted by the commercialization of life, outraged by injustice, have loved ones locked in a prison, or angered by police violence, government surveillance, and the militarization of society, then you are urged to turn toward the liberatory alternatives in Communalism. A different kind of society is truly possible for us to achieve together. Let us begin to take the steps necessary for collectively freeing ourselves from the irrational system that enslaves us.

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Due to being a comprehensive ideology, aspects of Communalism are studied under specific terms which relate to the ideas being covered. The socio-historical analysis of the development of hierarchy and freedom is discussed under the name of social ecology. The ethics and philosophy of Communalism is titled dialectical naturalism. Finally, the political approach of Communalism is often referred to as libertarian municipalism. Additionally, the term Communalism itself was adopted rather late in the development of these ideas. Previously, this collection of ideas was rooted under the ideology of anarchism. Some people who identify with these ideas may still consider themselves social anarchist rather than Communalist. Nonetheless, for the sake of presentational simplicity and ideological clarity we have chosen to use the term Communalism here in this text.

# Resources

## Introductory Readings

- Social Ecology and Communalism – Murray Bookchin [new-compass.net](http://new-compass.net)
- Remaking Society – Murray Bookchin [www.abebooks.com](http://www.abebooks.com)
- Communalism as Alternative – Eirik Eiglad [new-compass.net](http://new-compass.net)
- The Politics of Social Ecology – Janet Biehl [www.abebooks.com](http://www.abebooks.com)
- Toward Climate Justice – Brian Tokar [new-compass.net](http://new-compass.net)
- Ecology of Everyday Life – Chaia Heller [www.abebooks.com](http://www.abebooks.com)

## Digging in Deeper

- The Ecology of Freedom – Murray Bookchin [www.abebooks.com](http://www.abebooks.com)
- From Urbanization to Cities – Murray Bookchin [www.abebooks.com](http://www.abebooks.com)
- The Philosophy of Social Ecology – Murray Bookchin [www.abebooks.com](http://www.abebooks.com)
- The Third Revolution (4 volumes) – Murray Bookchin [www.abebooks.com](http://www.abebooks.com)
- Recovering Bookchin – Andy Price [new-compass.net](http://new-compass.net)

## Biographies

- Ecology or Catastrophe: The Life of Murray Bookchin – Janet Biehl [www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com)

## Groups & Supportive Websites

- New Compass [www.new-compass.net/](http://www.new-compass.net/)
- Institute for Social Ecology [www.social-ecology.org/](http://www.social-ecology.org/)
- TRISE: Transnational Institute of Social Ecology [www.trise.org/](http://www.trise.org/)
- Blog: Biehl on Bookchin [www.biehlonbookchin.com/](http://www.biehlonbookchin.com/)

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