

Review: The Next Revolution by Murray Bookchin

Anarcho

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Murray Bookchin (1921–2006) was for four decades a leading anarchist thinker and writer. His many articles and books – *Post-Scarcity Anarchism*, *Toward an Ecological Society*, *The Ecology of Freedom* and a host of others – are libertarian classics and influential in the wider green movement. However, in 1995 he became involved in a vicious polemic over various negative aspects of (primarily American) anarchism with the publication of his *Social Anarchism or Lifestyle Anarchism* which, in 1999, saw him break with anarchism completely, denouncing it as inherently individualist. Still considering himself a libertarian socialist, he now called his politics “Communalism” rather than “Social Ecology” or “Social Anarchism.”

This context is important in order to understand this often contradictory collection of essays, for the work combines articles written between 1992 and 2002 and so ones before and after his break with anarchism. This means he indicates the anarchist pedigree of his “Commune of communes” in some chapters (63, 95) while proclaiming anarchism as being against organisation in others. So following a preface by the late, great, Ursula Le Guin and an introduction by Debbie Bookchin and Blair Taylor, we have nine chapters by Bookchin on a range of subjects written over a range of times and this produces the key flaw in the work: denunciations of anarchism sit next to praise for it.

What of these denunciations? It is hard to take them seriously. It is depressing to read someone who has actually *read* anarchist thinkers come out with the same sort of nonsense as a hack of a Marxist party parroting claims made by others about people they have obviously never read. Just as sad is that every one of his claims against anarchism can be refuted by quoting from his early works. For his list of anarchist flaws – individualism, primitivism, etc. – were once directed at his own ideas by Marxists and he refuted them with flair.

Space precludes using Bookchin to refute Bookchin, so I will concentrate on a few issues.

Sadly, post-break Bookchin is not above selective quoting when it comes to anarchism – for example, he quotes Kropotkin on rejecting majority rule (10) when he surely knew that on the page in question Kropotkin was discussing “parliamentary rule, and representative government altogether.” Also, after decades of denouncing syndicalism for impoverishing anarchism, he turned around and proclaimed the superiority of the former as regards the latter – while also ignoring how he had shown that the first of the revolutionary anarchists had advocated syndicalism as a

tactic. Likewise, Bookchin asserted post-break that “anarchists conceive of power essentially as a malignant evil that must be destroyed” (139) yet also quotes Bakunin on the need for the “development and organization of the nonpolitical or antipolitical social power of the working class in city and country.” (12) As he himself noted long ago, “power” can mean two things, power *to do* and power *over*, and for the former to flourish, it needs the latter to be destroyed. So power over – hierarchy – must be destroyed if we want power to manage our own lives.

Bookchin points to the Spanish Revolution as evidence of Anarchism’s failure here. Yet his discussion of this (“Anarchism and Power in the Spanish Revolution”) ignores the circumstances in which the CNT decided to postpone the social revolution in favour of caricatures on anarchist theory. He position is that anarchism is blind to the need for institutions to replace the State and this blindness lead the CNT not to “seize power.” Yet anarchism has anyways been clear on what to do in a revolution – replace the State by federations of workers’ organisations. The CNT obviously failed to do so in July 1936 with obvious negative results – but the question, as Bookchin surely knew, is why they failed to apply anarchist ideas. To understand that needs context – essentially fear of isolation and the real possibility of having to fight both the Republic and the Fascists if social revolution was pursued – which Bookchin fails to provide.

Instead, we get the same superficial analysis that embarrasses Marxist journals. The only difference is that Bookchin calls this new system a “government” rather than “state.” So Bookchin post-break was against the State but for government – “government” being used to describe collective decision making. Just as Engels equated agreement with authority, Bookchin came to equate governance with government. This is hardly convincing.

So the post-break articles present a travesty of anarchism by someone who knew better. Given Bookchin’s revisionism, it is unsurprising that the authors of the introduction assert that popular assemblies were “viewed with suspicion by anarchists.” (xviii) This in spite of Proudhon praising the popular clubs of the 1848 revolution, Bakunin urging federation by *quartier* (neighbourhood) and Kropotkin pointing to the popular assemblies of the Great French Revolution – just as Bookchin did!

Ironically, many of the traits of “anarchism” Bookchin came to deplore and which caused his break with anarchism could be traced to certain elements of his 1960s works – even if these were selectively used and exaggerated to the point of travesty by others, they were there as his critics in the 1990s reminded Bookchin in their polemics against him. Bookchin seems like someone who found it hard to admit being wrong – and so broke with anarchism rather than admit this. Yes, some self-proclaimed anarchists have silly notions (primitivism obviously springs to mind) and some tendencies can have little in common with the main current of social anarchism. Likewise, some anarchist have little time for long term strategy and involve themselves in small-scale, insular projects. Yet this is not anarchism as such. Rather than expect all anarchists to come together it is far better to organise with like-minded people and ignore those whose politics and activities are a dead-end. Instead, Bookchin rejected anarchism – talk about cutting off your nose to spite your face!

So what of any substantive points between his new politics and anarchism? This are just a few. One is the question of “majority rule.” As he put it in a particularly overheated passage:

‘It is primarily by giving priority to an ideologically petrified notion of an “autonomous individual” that anarchists justify their opposition not only to the state but to any form of constraint, law, and often organization and democratic decision-

making based on majority voting. All such constraints are dismissed in principle as forms of “coercion,” “domination,” “government,” and even “tyranny”—often as though these terms were coequal and interchangeable.’ (160–1)

Ignoring the awkward fact – which Bookchin was once aware – that the likes of Proudhon, Bakunin, Kropotkin, Malatesta, etc. not only did not speak in those terms but also explicitly attacked such notions, we should note that majority decision making within freely joined associations is hardly the same as majority rule. In addition, anyone acting in the manner Bookchin describes within an anarchist group would be asked to leave, and rightly so. Nor, for that matter, is “consensus” an “authentic” anarchist principle (25) – you would be hard pressed to find any classical anarchist thinker – “authentic” or otherwise! – discussing it. Kropotkin mentions it in passing, when discussing the Russian *mir* and that is about it.

Why are anarchists concerned about talk of majority rule? It is quite simple: majorities have often oppressed minorities – we need only think of sectarianism, sexism, racism, homophobia and such like to see that the majority need not always be right. Ironically, Bookchin admits this (94) but does not attempt to square it with his fetishization of “majority rule.” And this is an issue. For example, he proclaims that a community which joins a confederation “may withdraw only with the approval of the confederation as a whole.” (15) So Bookchin’s “libertarian” confederation provides less rights than the UK (with regards the referendum on Scottish independence) and the European Union (with regards Brexit). Yet why is it just at a confederal level? If this is a good and democratic principle, why does it not apply to *every* association? So a worker can only leave their job if the majority of the workplace agrees? So a family can only leave a community if the majority of the local citizenry approve? A wife or husband from a family? Simple: for it would clearly be unfree.

Similarly, his “libertarian” democracy appears less than that guaranteed by our statist ones for he argues that after losing the debate “the minority must have patience and allow a majority decision to be put into practice” (61) and there would be “the commitment of municipal minorities to defer to the majority wishes of participating communities.” (88) Yet, today, the right of minorities to protest exists (if always under threat by the State, always ready to proclaim its “undemocratic” nature). Would libertarian municipalism really not allow minorities to protest, to use direct action, when the majority acts in ways which we cannot wait addressing or simply cannot be undone?

A more flexible perspective is needed, particularly given Bookchin admits that there is no “guarantee” that “a majority decision will be a correct one.” (88) What if the majority make racist, sexist, homophobic or ecologically destructive decisions? Can an “unswerving opposition to racism, gender oppression, and domination as such” (135) be limited to mere words or can minorities protest against them by direct action? If so, then his fetishisation of majority rule needs to be reviewed. True, Bookchin stressed the importance of minority rights (25) – but to do so automatically means admitting (implicitly at least) the flaws of his position and the validity of anarchist concerns over terms like “majority rule.”

Still, this has little bearing on the day-to-day decisions of freely joined associations in which majority-decision making will, undoubtedly, be the norm – with even a written constitution, when appropriate – in the struggle against oppression today and any future free society. Those who fetishise consensus (and there are a few, I am sure) can associate with those who feel the same – and leave the others to get on with changing the world rather than just discussing it.

Yet does Bookchin actually advocate majority rule? The answer is no, for he indicates (52–3) that all revolutions are the work of active minorities and that he does not expect the majority of a population to take part in his neighbourhood assemblies. So we have decisions being made by a majority of a minority, in other words *minority rule*. So for all his bluster, his “democratic” politics ends up recognising the key role *minorities* play in social change and that they often have to push forward in the face of the indifference of the majority: as Kropotkin, Goldman and many other anarchists indicated.

So we are left with Bookchin agreeing that the majority cannot, say, ban women from leaving the house without being accompanied by a man nor that neighbourhood assembly decisions are invalid unless a majority of people in the community attend. Which makes you wonder why he was so focused on majority rule to the extent of destroying his own legacy.

As for “libertarian municipalism,” it is clear why few anarchists embraced it: “Communalists do not hesitate to run candidates in municipal elections who, if elected, would use what real power their offices confer to legislate popular assemblies into existence.” (30) The notion of standing in local elections as a means of creating popular assemblies and then federating them was always unconvincing. Particularly given the all-to-correct predictions of anarchists on the effects of electioneering. Indeed, Bookchin himself repeats these and provides examples of it (83–4) – but seems to think this only happens at a *national* level. He also seems unaware that the national State can and does control the autonomy of local municipal councils and this strategy could easily mutate into *national* electioneering in the mistaken view of ensuring needed reforms for the local strategy. Electioneering is indeed a slippery slope which even the repeated experience of history does not seem to affect.

Anarchists, regardless of Bookchin’s revisionism, are well aware of the need for federations of community assemblies in both the struggle for liberation and as part of the structure for the post-capitalist society. Kropotkin, for example, discussed their role in his book *The Great French Revolution* and indicated that “the libertarians would no doubt do the same today.” However, these were viewed as a genuine dual-power created in opposition to the State – a community syndicalism, as it were – rather than something bestowed by a suitably enlightened local municipal council. Nor was this considered the only means – Kropotkin also advocated a syndicalist strategy as both a means of winning reforms now and for providing the framework of managing workplaces during and after a social revolution. Bookchin knew all this and so it is depressing to read him pretend otherwise.

Rejecting Bookchin’s electioneering does not mean rejecting building federations of community assemblies, especially within the context of building other federations of associations (such as radical unions). Likewise, his notion of dissolving all associations into a single communal one does not take into account the complexities of modern life. Such community assemblies would be the forum for overseeing the others – to protect against, say, workplaces becoming proprietary as Bookchin rightly warns (19, 72) – but they can hardly be called upon to actually *manage* them on a day-to-day basis.

Kropotkin and other anarchists bemoaned the State and its attempts to centralise all aspects of social life and place them in the hands of a few representatives who had no real notion of what they were deciding upon. Doing the same but at the base of society may not be as problematic but it does have issues – not least, the volume of issues that would need to be discussed. So there is a pressing need for a functional federalism as well as a communal federalism. This suggests a diverse associational life embracing *all* aspects of the world – so if Kropotkin and Malatesta

argued that syndicalists focused on one aspect of society (the economic) and ignored the other two (community and leisure), Bookchin likewise focused on one (the community) at the expense of the others.

So, to conclude. This is a mixed selection of articles – with the pre-break ones being by far the best. The post-break ones often just repeat what Bookchin previously – rightly! – called anarchism but with snide anti-anarchist remarks added.

Where does that leave Bookchin’s legacy?

I still remember the joy I experienced reading *Post-Scarcity Anarchism* thirty years ago – here was someone who both understood anarchism and built upon it. Yet in the last decade of his life he produced works which were marred by anti-anarchist tirades which he surely knew were nonsense. Which leaves us with a conundrum: if you utilise his earlier works, could not his later works be quoted to show that even a leading anarchist eventually saw its deep flaws? If you embrace his later anti-anarchist works, how could you reference in good-faith his earlier contributions?

Yes, Bookchin did do the latter but then he also sought to rewrite his past to suggest he had seen through anarchism at a very early stage or had never “really” been an anarchist at all. This was all very unbecoming – particularly given the numerous quotes from the early 1990s proclaiming his long-standing and continuing commitment to anarchism.

Ultimately, Bookchin left a wealth of books and articles between the 1960s and 1990s which anarchists today can draw upon, even if his strategy of “libertarian municipalism” is deeply flawed. So while *The Next Revolution* does contain important pieces which activists today would benefit from reading, it pales against his earlier works. These should be read first, simply to ensure that when reading the anti-anarchist remarks in this book the pre-break Bookchin will be fresh in your memory to refute them.

The Next Revolution: Popular Assemblies and the Promise of Direct Democracy

Murray Bookchin

Edited by Debbie Bookchin and Blair Taylor

Preface by Ursula K. Le Guin

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