

Green Anarchism

Andy Price

2019

Contents

Abstract	3
Introduction	3
Social Ecology	4
Society as Nature Rendered Self-Conscious	5
On Potentiality	6
Municipalism	7
Deep Ecology and Primitivism	8
Conclusion	11

Abstract

As the emergence of the green movement in the late 1960s ran alongside the resurgence of the anarchist tradition, it is perhaps no surprise that the two traditions would converge into what we would call today green anarchism. However, this was not simply an accident of timing: even the most cursory of surveys of the philosophies anarchism and ecology show clearly that the guiding principles of both are remarkably similar—participation, diversity, complementarity, and interdependence are the foundational principles of both areas of thought. Taking in the work of the three main contributors to green anarchism—Murray Bookchin, Arne Naess, and John Zerzan—as our starting point, and drawing on contemporary examples of green anarchism in practice, this chapter examines the broad contours of what it means to be both an anarchist and a green, and argues that if we follow either school of thought to the logical conclusions of their foundational principles, then the two positions are inseparable: all genuine green thinking is by definition anarchistic; all anarchist thinking is by definition green.

Introduction

As a theory of decentralised, non-hierarchical, and complementary forms of social practice, it should come as no surprise that anarchism, from its inception as a political and social theory, would reflect as well as draw upon ideas from within the study of the ‘green’—the study of the natural world. From the outset, the systematic study of the natural world—which would eventually become the science of ecology—had a lot to say to political movements about the organisation of life, both natural and social: after all, this was a realm that seemed to point to the very origins of human society from within the wider biosphere. To varying degrees, the classical anarchists of the late nineteenth/early twentieth century would all turn to examine and draw upon the natural: Peter Kropotkin most fully of course—‘combine’, he tells us in *Mutual Aid*, ‘this is what Nature teach us’¹—but so too Proudhon and Bakunin, all conceptualised a human *nature*, an ecologically given set of *essential* characteristics, that would form the basis of their views on social justice and the conditions of anarchism.²

However, it would take the long march of the twentieth century, the social carnage of its mid-century nadir, the breath-taking display of the destructive capabilities of human beings that would follow in the nuclear age—and the post-war burgeoning of new social movements in response to these developments—for the emergence of what we could accurately call a green anarchism. These troubling developments, as George Woodcock noted in his 1962 history of anarchism,³ represented ‘the real social revolution of the modern age’, that of a ‘process of [state] centralisation’. Therefore, anarchists, already predisposed to resisting state centralisation on lib-

¹ Peter Kropotkin, *Mutual Aid: A Factor in Evolution* (London: Freedom Press, 1993), 73.

² See, for example, Michel Bakunin, ‘The Paris Commune and the Idea of the State’, in *Writings on the Paris Commune* (St. Petersburg: Red and Black Publishers, 2008), JP Proudhon, *La Guerre et la Paix* (Antony: Éditions Tops, 1998). An important early contribution also came from Élisée Reclus, a French geographer and anarchist, who’s *L’Homme et La Terre* (1905) was one of the first radical works to address society’s relationship to and conception of the natural world. For a detailed introduction to his contribution, see John Clarke, *Anarchy, Geography, Modernity: Selected Writings of Élisée Reclus*, 2nd ed. (Oakland: PM Press, 2013).

³ George Woodcock, *Anarchism: A History of Libertarian Ideas and Movements* (New York and Cleveland: Meridian Books, 1962), 469.

ertarian grounds—anarchist who, for Woodcock, had already posed the ‘counter-ideal’⁴ to state centralisation—could not help but notice that alongside the social ills that the modern centralised state had brought forth, there were now also pressing ecological ills.

Indeed, by the middle of the 1960s, it was clear that the environmental damage from the rise of the centralised state was as severe as the social consequences. Pollution, environmental degradation, the impact of chemicals and pesticides on large-scale industrial agriculture, and nuclear accidents: as a threat to human habitat, the ecological ills in fact now seemed far more serious. As such, it should be no surprise that mid-century anarchist thinkers should turn to look at social-natural dynamics. Most importantly for our understanding of green anarchism today, is that when they did, inadvertently or otherwise, they highlighted the shared characteristics of anarchist projects of social decentralisation and diversity with the natural conditions of successful and flourishing ecosystems.

Social Ecology

The pioneer in this field, unquestionably, was the radical American social and political theorist, Murray Bookchin (1921–2006). Bookchin founded the school of social ecology, which, as its name suggests, focused explicitly on the relationship between society and the natural world, as a way to both explain the present ecological malaise in which society found itself *and* as a way to propose a new social and political settlement that would ameliorate that very destructiveness. In order to do this, the central problematic Bookchin attempted to examine was this: how can we understand ecology and evolution, and humanity’s emergence from within it, alongside trying to understand how and why human society finds itself in the present destructive of that very same ecology.

Bookchin had been addressing this problematic from the early 1950s onward. In 1952, he published a lengthy treatise on the problems of pesticide use in farming,⁵ and by 1962, he had published his first book-length exposition of ecological problems.⁶ Alongside this, he produced many articles and pamphlets on radical politics and treatises for the new social movements of the 1960s and 1970s.⁷ Later still, in his two major works,⁸ Bookchin would produce a distinct strand of green anarchism, based on a fully developed eco- and social philosophy that centred around the following claim: that ‘the natural world and the social are interlinked by evolution into *one nature that consists of two differentiations: first*, or biotic nature, and *second* or social nature’.⁹

As noted above, it was clear by the end of the twentieth century that this *second* nature had become ecologically destructive of the biosphere as a whole. However, by placing this second nature—human society—explicitly *as part of* the one nature whilst still conceding its destructive elements (in essence, conceding that human society is destructive of *itself*) Bookchin’s distinction

⁴ Ibid., 475.

⁵ Murray Bookchin [under the pseudonym, Lewis Herber], ‘The Problem of Chemicals in Food’, *Contemporary Issues*, June–August, 3:12 (1952).

⁶ Murray Bookchin, *Our Synthetic Environment* (New York: Alfred A Knopf, 1962).

⁷ See, for example, Murray Bookchin, ‘Listen, Marxist!’, *Anarchos*, May 1969; Murray Bookchin, ‘Spring Offensives & Summer Vacations’, *Anarchos*, 4 (1972).

⁸ Murray Bookchin, *The Ecology of Freedom: The Emergence and Dissolution of Hierarchy*, 2nd ed. (Montreal: Black Rose Books, 1982); Murray Bookchin, *From Urbanization to Cities: Towards a New Politics of Citizenship*, 2nd ed. (New York: Cassell, 1995).

⁹ Murray Bookchin, *Social Ecology and Anarchism* (Oakland: AK Press, 2009), 29, my emphases.

plays a pivotal role in the framing of his green anarchism. Rather than reduce the explanation of the ecological crisis to the idea that human society was a priori destructive of the biosphere—somehow *unnatural*—the Bookchin position allowed for the *exceptionalism* of human society to remain as a central part of the explanation of ecological degradation, and—more importantly still—allowed for that exceptionalism to remain a central part of the solution.

That is to say, Bookchin's claim that one evolution had produced two different natures—a first nature, which was nature as a whole; but also, a second nature, that was human society as separate and distinct entity—allowed for the possibility that we could identify human society as the cause of the ecological crisis, whilst still retaining human society as the only place from where a solution would emerge. As we will see shortly, this would prove a key sticking point for other contemporary versions of green anarchism. Staying with Bookchin for now, however, two immediate tasks stemmed from his central claim. First, with human society now identified as the cause *and* the cure of ecological degradation, the primary task was to explain what it is about human society that had become so destructive. However, equally as important, the second task was to explain what it is about human society that remains natural, part of evolution, part of the environment in which it lives—and how in that essential part of human society lay the key to a rational, ecological society.

Society as Nature Rendered Self-Conscious

To start with this latter point, Bookchin saw second nature, human society, as so much a natural part of evolution as a whole that it was in fact the ultimate expression of rational, ecological principles, in the form of evolution's most complex, developed life form. In this sense, second nature was the epitome, the very expression of evolutionary principles, and as such, not only had a responsibility to express, somehow, the interests of nature as a whole but it also had rich, revolutionary potential to become the consciousness of nature as a whole as 'nature rendered self-conscious'.¹⁰ In essence, human society had the potential to recognise itself as a product of ecological values and principles, to recognise the materials of its own creation, and to fold those values back into its own social forms for the benefit of nature as a whole.

Human society was thus for Bookchin because it was the product of an evolutionary striving that drove forward his view of nature as a whole: a striving complexification, a thrust for ever-increasing forms of complexity. As Bookchin explains, '[t]he universe bears witness to an ever-striving, developing ... substance, whose most dynamic and creative attribute is an unceasing capacity for self-organisation into increasingly complex forms.¹¹ Again, the most complex form—certainly in terms of its place in and impact on nature as a whole—was human society.

This self-organised striving for increasing complexity, in turn, is based on two further central characteristics. The first is *participation*—Bookchin claims that all life forms within an ecosystem do, to some degree, participate in their own life and evolution of the genus. No matter how faint this might be—for example, the plant in the shade that strives to reach the light—nor how complex—the genome sequencing of human science labs—all of these different forms of differ-

¹⁰ Murray Bookchin, 'Thinking Ecologically: A Dialectical Approach', *Our Generation*, 18, Spring/Summer (1987): 35–36.

¹¹ Murray Bookchin, 'Towards a Philosophy of Nature: The Bases for an Ecological Ethics', in Tobias, M. (Ed), *Deep Ecology* (San Diego: Avant Books, 1984), 229.

entiation are just different stages on a ‘graded continuum’ of this striving for complexity, with human society at the far end of that continuum’.¹²

The second characteristic of this striving, and itself a direct by-product of the first, is that of *differentiation*. That is, that in individual ecosystems, and in evolution as a whole, the countless different forms of life, all involved in the striving described above, lead, quite naturally, to increasing diversity of life forms within an ecosystem. Life becomes more diverse, and, in a positive feedback mechanism, the more diverse an ecosystem, the more options each individual life form has—through interaction with evermore and evermore complex forms—in ensuring its own survival and continuation. There are infinitely more ‘pathways’ for each life form to ‘choose’ to take, not matter how dim that choice is in the plant which strives for the light. Again, in evolution as a whole, this produces the most complex life form of them all: human beings and the social structures they create. The key for Bookchin here is if human society can become aware of this, the potential for them to become ecological stewards of the very values and principles that produced (and sustained) them.

On Potentiality

However, this was no simple reductionism for Bookchin, of evolution as a whole to some desired social outcome. This *potential* for human society to become nature rendered self-conscious remained, clearly, exactly that: solely a potentiality. That is, the essence of human society had somehow been supplanted by something altogether different: a highly ecologically destructive society. How had this happened and how had society developed into the ‘highly aberrant forms’,¹³ which had led human society away from its ecological essence? For Bookchin, it was in the concepts of hierarchy and domination where the social ills of our time lay. More pernicious and ingrained than economic classes, these two concepts had denuded the individual of any meaningful participation in social and political life.

Bookchin traced the long historical development of the emergence of hierarchy and domination—and their ultimate expression in the centralised power of the modern nation state—in *The Ecology of Freedom*. There, he described not just the physical, material effects of the emergence of domination and centralisation but also the psychological effects, the emergence of a new mind-set of domination, a new ‘epistemology of rule’, that presented the concept of domination and hierarchy as somehow natural, an accepted facet of social life.¹⁴ Crucially, it was these developments that led directly to the attempt on behalf of human society to dominate the natural world: once domination is set as a characteristic of human-to-human relationships, society begins to view its relationships to the natural world through the prism of domination, a realm to control, master, and exploit.

Importantly, Bookchin notes that this control, this mastery, is always illusory: it is as impossible to dominate the natural world for humans, as it is for sheep to dominate the field in which they graze. However, the mind-set is the problem: once hierarchy and domination are set as natural parts of social and political life, elites led the way in attempts by society as a whole to

¹² Murray Bookchin, ‘Freedom and Necessity in Nature: A Problem in Ecological Ethics’, *Alternatives*, 13:4, November (1986), 31.

¹³ Bookchin, ‘Thinking Ecologically’, 33, emphasis added.

¹⁴ Bookchin, *Ecology of Freedom*, *passim*.

‘escape’ from a wild nature, to tame it, and to exploit it in the process of assuring mastery over it, all in the name of progress and growth. This becomes a mutually reinforcing phenomenon: the more centralisation and hierarchy there is in society, the bigger the projects of mastery and domination become, and in turn, the more centralisation, hierarchy, and domination there is in social and political life.

Ultimately, against the self-organising principles of diversification and participation in ecology as a whole—principles that should have carried through from the natural to the social realm—hierarchy and domination lead to what we have now: the top-down, simplified, non-diverse, and directive form of social organisation that is the nation state in the era of advanced capitalism. All of the characteristics of the state cut against the grain of natural evolution lead to the social ills we are all too familiar with, and ultimately produce a human society destructive of its own habitat. It is no accident then that the central leitmotif of Bookchin’s social ecology is that *all ecological problems are first and foremost social problems*.¹⁵ That is, to resolve the ecological crisis, we must first solve the problems of social hierarchy and domination. As such, the central aim of Bookchin’s political programme is twofold: to oppose and replace the nation state *and* to build a society that is more fully aligned to green principles he had identified in his ‘eco-philosophy’.

Municipalism

So how does Bookchin propose to do this? The very first thing Bookchin points to is the need for a new conception of politics. Against the politics of the state, of politicians and centralised parties, of bureaucracies and representative democracy—what he calls ‘politics as Statecraft’—Bookchin called for a reconceptualisation of politics as ‘politics as originally conceived’.¹⁶ By this, Bookchin meant a return to the face-to-face, directly democratic politics of the Athenian city state. Essentially, this was a call for a *devolved* politics, based in the first instance on the participation of the people of a devolved area in the decisions that would affect their community.

The location of these devolved communities, for Bookchin, was the municipality, a location he saw as the most immediate realm of every day existence.¹⁷ By municipality, he meant the smallest, most local realm of politics in large nation states. Of course, these differ markedly across different states, but they could be anything from the French commune to the Swiss canton. Where the municipal has no developed political structure—in unitary political systems like the UK (and, despite its federalist structure, the de facto centralism of the states of the US)—it was important for Bookchin that people realised that the municipal itself still existed. This was the realm where people lived and worked, shared public transport systems and amenities, where they socialised and raised families. If there were no political structures already extant in a municipality, then they should be created, from scratch, outside the structures of the nation state.¹⁸

For Bookchin, in his home city of New York, this could be at the level of the neighbourhood, or the block, or whatever suited whichever city. The important thing is that assemblies should be created to discuss the issues a neighbourhood faced. Direct, face-to-face assemblies should be

¹⁵ Andy Price, *Recovering Bookchin: Social Ecology and the Crises of Our Time* (Porsgrunn: New Compass Press, 2012), 158.

¹⁶ Bookchin, *Urbanization to Cities*, 260.

¹⁷ Bookchin, *ibid.*, 240–241.

¹⁸ For discussion of the municipal in social ecology, see: Janet Biehl, *Libertarian Municipalism: The Politics of Social Ecology* (Montreal: Black Rose Books, 1998).

created in any form or format—they could be neighbourhood watch groups, a local action group to resist a particular state policy, or a more general discussion group on the issues a particular neighbourhood faces. That they would be self-constituted, and thus bear no legal or state power should not be a concern: the most important point for Bookchin, at this late stage of advanced capitalism, is that the individuals that made up any particular municipality were reintroduced to the experience of being an active citizen.

Indeed, the central target of the early stages of this municipal project was not, in fact, the overthrow of the nation state. Rather, the target of these first steps was the participants themselves: in order to move towards a new politics, the denuded individual of advanced capitalism had to be re-schooled in the art of social and political collectivism and cooperation, in the art of citizenship. And it was in these early steps towards assemblies that may be devoid of any legal-constitutional power that this re-schooling could begin. ‘No one who participates in a struggle for social restructuring’, Bookchin claims, ‘emerges from that struggle with the prejudices, habits, and sensibilities with which he or she entered it’.¹⁹

Of course, the ultimate, more long-term aim of this re-schooling would be a much bigger aim. It would be a re-schooling of, ultimately, the ecological citizen—the individual who is socially and ecologically aware of the importance in evolution as a whole of complementarity, of diversity, and of participation. Crucially, once an individual is aware of this, they would be aware too that the nation state and capitalism in its advanced, neoliberal form cuts against the grain of all of these principles and that doing so threatens the continued existence of human society itself. As this awareness spreads, as different municipal forms spread, confederated into larger political units, Bookchin argued that a new ‘dual power’ would emerge, a power which rested on the fact that people could see clearly that the nation state was contra to their own social and ecological interests. In this moment of political *and* ecological awakening, legitimacy would drain from the nation state and its centralised forms.²⁰

Finally then, we see in Bookchin’s conceptualisation of social ecology a clear example of green anarchism: green in the sense that it is based on a thorough, systemised eco-philosophy that attempts to place human society in an evolutionary process that helps us to see humanity’s natural part and role therein and anarchist in the sense it provides a project of devolved, participatory, and horizontal political forms that has the ultimate aim of challenging the nation state, replacing the epistemology of rule that has emerged from millennia of the centralisation of power, and instilling in newly active citizens a sense of the importance of their own participation in the continuation of human social and political forms.

Deep Ecology and Primitivism

At the same time Bookchin was formulating his theory of social ecology, another version of green anarchism emerged and offered a different analysis of the problem of ecological degradation; and as we will see below, a radically different set of solutions. Deep ecology emerged from the work of Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess, who in 1973 argued that, in light of the growing ecological crisis, there was a need for ecological understanding of the relationship of society to nature based on ‘a rejection of the man-in-environment image in favour of a relational, total field

¹⁹ Bookchin, *Urbanization to Cities*, 264.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 264.

image'.²¹ This 'total field image', in short, was premised on a rejection of humanity as the marker of value in the human and nonhuman world: in this new image, Naess argued, the deep ecologist views the world of life not as a human being at the centre but as one part of a wider community, stemming principally from 'an awareness of the equal right of all things to live and blossom into their own unique forms of self-realization'.²²

This for Naess was a call for a 'biospherical egalitarianism' between society and nature, where the 'inherent value' of all life would be acknowledged, irrespective of the use of these life forms to humanity.²³ As he would later write, '[e]very living being has a right to live', and 'nature does not belong to man'. Not only was the intrinsic value of all beings to be drawn out in defiance of whether or not they were useful to humanity or not: they were valuable even if harmful to humanity. 'Nature is worth defending' wrote Naess, 'whatever the fate of humans'.²⁴

If we substitute Naess's use of 'image' for 'mind-set', to match the terminology we used with Bookchin, we see that in philosophical terms, these two forms of green anarchism share the same starting point: to rethink human society's sense of itself and its place in the wider ecology. For Naess, human society's sense of itself thus far in the history of civilisation had been framed around an acute *anthropocentrism*. It was this mind-set that had led human society to its destructive apogee. Under this view, the natural world had forever been seen as a store cupboard, there to satisfy human needs, allowing ecological degradation to persist as a natural consequence of human progress. Naess called for a rethinking of this approach a move towards a mind-set of *biocentrism* or *ecocentrism* which would create the basis for his 'biospherical egalitarianism'.

In 1985's *Deep Ecology*²⁵ two US academics, Bill Devall and George Sessions—in conjunction with Naess—would develop this philosophy further. Here, they outlined the 'platform principles' of deep ecology in an attempt to provide a base for a politics programme of deep ecology. Again, there was much here in common with Bookchin's social ecology: as Devall-Sessions-Naess argued, the '[r]ichness and diversity of life forms [in the biosphere] contribute to the realisation of these values and are also values in themselves', and, in line with social ecology, human society was now reducing this richness and diversity.²⁶ However, where deep ecology would differ from social ecology was in its explanation of this negative effect and on the role of human society in reversing this problem.

This would emerge from the fourth platform principle outlined by Devall and Sessions: 'the flourishing of human life and cultures is compatible with a substantial decrease of the human population. The flourishing of nonhuman life *requires such a decrease*'.²⁷ As such, the notion of reducing human population became a central one in deep ecology. Indeed, Devall and Session would go on to warn that although 'the stabilization and reduction of the human population will take time ... the extreme seriousness of our current situation must be realised', and 'the longer we wait' in dealing with the population problem, 'the more drastic will be the measures needed'.²⁸

²¹ Arne Naess, 'The Shallow and the Deep, Long-Range Ecology Movement: A Summary', *Inquiry*, 16 (1973), 95.

²² *Ibid.*, 96.

²³ *Ibid.*, 96.

²⁴ Arne Naess, 'Identification as a Source of Deep Ecological Attitudes', in Tobias (Ed), *Deep Ecology* (San Diego: Avant, 1984), 268, emphases added.

²⁵ Bill Devall and George Sessions, *Deep Ecology: Living as if Nature Mattered* (Utah: Gibson Smith, 1985).

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 70.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 70, emphasis added.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 71, 72.

It would be left to other deep ecologists to suggest those drastic measures, and though they were often problematic, we can see that in their initial form, they certainly constituted a form of green anarchism. Warwick Fox, for example, called for the creation of small, devolved, and ecologically rational 'bioregions', defined as 'areas possessing common characteristics of soils, watersheds, plants and animals'. These should eventually 'replace the nation state'²⁹—again, not unlike Bookchin's dual power. Devall and Sessions also called for a move towards bioregions, and whilst it was never made entirely clear what these would look like, they do point to devolved, anarchist forms. 'Hunter gatherer communities do seem the best model', they argued, as 'a natural way to organize'.³⁰ In this sense, this would return humanity to the position of the ecologically integrated hunter gatherer, who had a knowledge of wildlife in a region, of where food and water comes from, of what your region needs—essentially, a return to a 'rich ecological awareness' evident in tribes people, which engendered a knowledge of the 'the spirit' of lakes, trees, and animals.

However, there were two further developments of this approach, in both anarchist thought and practice. In terms of the latter, the radical direct action group *Earth First! (EF!)* would constitute themselves explicitly on the principles of deep ecology and advocate radical action to oppose the state and capitalism and to address the population problem. For the former, they called for 'monkey-wrenching', a term taken from the Edward Abbey novel, *The Monkey Wrench Gang*, 1984,³¹ which referred to direct physical resistance to tree felling, road building, and so on—spiking trees to stop them being felled by the logging company's chainsaw, lying down in front of road building equipment, destroying farming and industrial machinery. In short, it was a distinct strand of anarchist, direct action.³²

And on the 'population problem' that Devall and Sessions had highlighted earlier, *EF!*—like deep ecology generally—strayed into some highly problematic territory, which included welcoming diseases like AIDS, and championing the rights of malarial mosquitoes, and calling for the mid-1980s famine in Ethiopia to be allowed to 'run its course'—all in the name of population control.³³ We need not delve too far into these matters from our present vantage point, but when we look back at the history of green anarchism, we should note this late twentieth-century foray into dangerous territory as a salutary reminder of the sensitivity and care required when thinking of ecological concerns.

In terms of further *theoretical* developments in green anarchism post the emergence of deep ecology, the foremost of these was the emergence of anarcho-primitivism. Stemming in large part from the writings of John Zerzan,³⁴ primitivism was a claim for the superiority of pre-civilisation society. For primitivists, the move to agriculture, and later to a civilisation based on technology, had ultimately been one long process of self-alienation and self-enslavement on the part of humanity.

²⁹ Warwick Fox, 'Deep Ecology: A New Philosophy of our Time?', in *Philosophical Dialogues*, Arne Naess and the Progress of Philosophy (Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 1984), 155.

³⁰ Devall and Sessions, *Deep Ecology*, 187.

³¹ Edward Abbey, *The Monkey Wrench Gang* (London: Penguin, 2004).

³² For a good discussion of one example of this direct action, see Jeff Shantz, *Green Syndicalism: An Alternative Red/Green Vision* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2012).

³³ See Price, *Recovering Bookchin*, for a detailed discussion of some of the more problematic elements of deep ecology.

³⁴ See John Zerzan, *Elements of Refusal* (New York: Left Bank Books, 1998); *Questioning Technology* (New York: Freedom Books, 1998); *Future Primitive and Other Essays* (New York: Autonomedia, 1994).

At the core of this development—and of the development of technology as such—was the emergence of the division of labour in late tribal/early agricultural society. The emergence of specialisation, separation, and competition, between the sexes originally, and ultimately between different groups in society—coalescing around changing technologies—would lead to private property, greed, and expansion. Ultimately, they would lead to the most developed form of this alienation and self-enslavement: the large-scale industrial technology of twenty-first-century society.

The ecologically destructive side effects are plain to see, but for Zerzan, this *division* of society into competing factions, and the technology and growth this has brought, only serves to increase that division the more it develops, creating what Zerzan calls the ‘symbolic life’. The incredible, productive power of technology makes the corporeal world seem real: however, the rise of unhappiness, of depression, and of mental illness generally points to the fact that something is badly amiss, and underneath the seeming irreplaceability of life under advanced capitalism non-symbolic life—non-fragmented, united—is making itself felt.

In response to this, Zerzan calls to a return to society before the division of labour: technology and the division of labour needs to be rethought. Of course, this means the breakdown of society into small, gatherer-hunter formations. This may necessitate the forceful reduction of technology: for attacks on technology, on machinery, often through violent means, a position the primitivists shared with the deep ecologists. Science, too, had to be rethought; for Zerzan, science is a ‘symbolic’ form of language, a way of understanding civilisation, but not of understanding the true needs of the human community, which are rooted, for primitivists, in the pre-division of labour prehistoric world.³⁵

Conclusion

It is clear then that as an increased ecological awareness came into contact with radical politics throughout the latter half of the twentieth century, it would be the anarchists that would turn to examine the links between politics and ecology: thinkers and activists within anarchism saw the affinities in the study of the natural world with their own approaches to politics. Thinkers like Bookchin, Naess, and Zerzan explored the links between ecological knowledge and political knowledge and produced some fascinating insights into the nature of societal development out of the natural world, and attempted to explain why the relationship between both realms had become antagonistic. And yet, there remains much to be done here: this is still, historically speaking, a young area of philosophical and political exploration—the mid-1980s’ wrong-turn on behalf of some within deep ecology showed just how young it is. But as green anarchism matures, we can expect many more insights into the relationship of nature to society and insights into how anarchism can work at making this relationship *non*-antagonistic.

³⁵ See John Zerzan, ‘Author Index’, at <http://www.primitivism.com/author-index.htm>, Accessed 11 August 2017.

The Anarchist Library
Anti-Copyright



Andy Price
Green Anarchism
2019

The Palgrave Handbook of Anarchism (edited by Carl Levy & Matthew S. Adams), chapter 16, pp.
281–291, DOI: 10.1007/978-3-319-75620-2_16.

theanarchistlibrary.org