Anonymous
Review: Anarchism, Marxism and the Future of the Left
2001

by Murray Bookchin
AK Press, Edinburgh and San Francisco, 1999

As Murray Bookchin’s latest testament to himself as one of the great thinkers of the 20th Century, this book could be more accurately entitled ‘Anachronism, Marxism and the Suture of what’s Left’. It is also his latest apoplectic rejoinder to the plen-

tiful and vociferous critics who are apparently trying to secure our illustrious author an early grave.

The Great Debate is one of a number of things that make this book incredibly hard going. At every turn, potentially serious theoretical analysis of the role of technology, the apparent demise and possible future of the Left and the current state of anarchism as a revolutionary social force is undermined by petty swipes at and less petty character assassinations of his critics — a vanguard of white male anti-civilisation anarchists based in the US. He (and his critics) end up engaged in such tedious point scoring — focusing on details of ancient tribal life which professional anthropologists cannot agree on, for example — that much of their argument will be meaningless to most readers.

As befits the irritating pomposity of Bookchin’s approach ‘interviews’ appear throughout the book, interspersed with essays some of which have appeared in previous works by the same author and some of which are previously unpublished. Although the interviews do not read as such (they appear to be sentences put into the mouths of named others with a written reply by Bookchin) they are apparently genuine. However, we

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I disagree fundamentally with much of what Murray Bookchin has to say — about technics, the workability and desirability of city society and confederalism, the arrogance of Bookchin’s belief in humanity’s stewardship of and superiority over “first nature”, and his uncritical belief in progress. But whether or not you agree with him, his ideas are much better articulated in his other books. His ideas on coherence, or lack thereof, do strike a chord as we flounder into the 21st Century. As we face the risk of being driven deeper underground, there is a possibility that cynicism and pessimism could come to play a corrupting or paralysing role in informing what Bookchin refers to as “adventurism”, but which I would call “fight”, as we experience a more profound sense of how high the walls are that are closing in. Unfortunately, even Bookchin’s more valid points are overwhelmingly diverted into mutually debasing personal diatribe in this and recent works. This is a collection of memoirs and rejoinders masquerading as historical and theoretical essays of worth. Bookchin is an anachronism — and he is as removed from the movements of today as he is from his glory-days in the earlier part of the twentieth century. This volume is desperately trying to make his position clear (reneging pathologically on previously held opinions) and to have the last laugh at his critics. I think some of Bookchin’s work is worth having a look at, but this is definitely not one of them.
ing the concept of ‘future’ from civilisation’s odious progeny ‘progress’ nor that “to alter the world” can mean that further entangling ourselves in advanced technics is something we may decide not to pursue. But then the man is obsessed with ideas of progress and regress to which he attaches very conventional value judgements. The idea of living in a state of “everlasting immediacy” is sharply dismissed as living in a state of “asocial bliss” backed up by some spurious reference to the Lotus Eaters in Homer’s Odyssey! For such a rationalist, Bookchin’s reasoning often eludes me.

Bookchin makes so many patently ridiculous statements in this book that you could be forgiven for thinking he is one of those pathologically insane members of society that he repeatedly bars from any of his theoretical citizens’ assemblies. The notion of mental illness as a largely class-based symptom of a diseased society seems to have escaped his analysis, along with the idea that humans may have worked out that “we share a common humanity” before the emergence of the city state.

Beyond these criticisms I think Bookchin may have a point when he talks about the need for coherence and a politics beyond that of imagination and the liberation of desire. Just as Ward Churchill argued in *Pacifism as Pathology* that non-violent action in, for example, the American civil rights movement did not achieve change without a simultaneous, grassroots, armed attack on the State, isn’t it likely that the contemporary radical grassroots direct action network challenging life as we know it cannot effect much more than cosmetic social change (and a more liberatory way of life for the few radical but not yet revolutionary networks and individuals in the West), without the collateral existence of a strong popular resistance?

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erything. Despite the best efforts of a century and more of an-
archist and libertarian activity, it was not until Murray came
along that anyone really got it.

‘Part Two: The New Social Movements’ is dominated by his
essay ‘Whither Anarchism? A Reply to Recent Anarchist Crit-
ics’, a largely pedantic trashing of his critics and their ideas.
The final chapter of the book ‘The Future of the Left’ describes
Bookchin’s blueprint for a municipalist utopia: a step-by-step
guide to revolution — a programme of city-based, peaceful,
bottom-up social reform (this ‘inventor’ of non-hierarchical
society doesn’t see that bottom-up is just top-down from an-
other angle). Even if I agree with him that contemporary rad-
cal grassroots networks are probably not yet revolutionary in
practice, his proposal for a new society does not become revolu-
tionary just because it is practical. The former has the potential
to be, and elements of Bookchin’s programme such as educa-
tion and public self-management outside the State may con-
tribute to revolution. His “democratised communities” sound
very much like a misguided reworking of Marx’s misguided
notion of encouraging a capitalist state in order to bring about
the overthrow of capitalism.

A hindrance to clarity in the structure and content of this
volume of essays is that Bookchin’s thinking is clearly encum-
bered with a sense of his own temporal advance. He is obsessed
with history, criticism and the treating of ideas and events
within their proper historical context. Is this an underhand way
of asking us to treat him within his proper historical context?
His notion of historical relativity is extremely dubious — it be-
comes an apology for anything, and as dubious as his argu-
ments in favour of technology are. Aside from the fact that it is
actually keeping him alive (much to the chagrin of Bob Black
and Co.) Bookchin proposes that wishing to smash the hege-
mony of technology is arguing about “our attitude toward a sit-
uation that already exists” (p.286) and that to question whether
something should exist when it already does is futile and that

we should simply accept that it exists and work out how to
use it better! Umm… so because capitalist society exists, there
is no point wishing we didn’t live in a capitalist society? We
just need to learn how to live in a better kind of capitalist soci-
ety! After all, as he writes of classical Athens, a society cannot
rise above itself. Of course, that’s not what Bookchin means
— he is simply contradicting himself in that typical Bookchin
way, hence when talking about the struggle against capitalist
society, he writes that “if our capacity to rationally project our-
selves succumbs to “what is”, then we become “realists” in the
worst possible sense. We allow our thinking to bog us down in
the pragmatics of what exists today.” (p.347)

The issue of technics is a big sticking point with Bookchin’s
ideas and this seems to place him most firmly in the Leftist
tradition rather than with any contemporary anarchist mores.
Bookchin believes that technology is great — indeed, he be-
lieves technics is the answer to our problems. According to
Bookchin, “we could even use genetic engineering… in such
a way as to restore “wild” areas.” (p.286). That is — and this is
the subtext — after the geneticists have fiddled with his age-
inducing telomeres and have somehow managed to house his
brain in a younger, healthier body. (Then perhaps he and his
critics could find a dark alley and enjoy the fist-fight they so
obviously need.)

The debate over technics is integral to Bookchin’s (tellingly
Marxist) attitude to ‘first nature’ — that there is a non-human
world which the human has a moral imperative to control and
lead in the right evolutionary direction. How nature can be
a ‘non-human’ world I don’t really understand but there you
have it. I have a similar problem with a fully biocentrist atti-
tude to the ‘human’ world. Bookchin writes that our “capacity
to go beyond the animal level, to inquire about the future, to
alter the world, to use language — all are fundamentally hu-
man attributes.” For Bookchin though, it doesn’t seem to follow
that to “inquire about the future” may also include dislocat-