

# **Beyond Bookchin (excerpts)**

**New FE book examines the work of North America's best known anarchist**

David Watson, Steve Welzer

# Contents

<b>Introduction by Steve Welzer</b>	<b>3</b>
Drawn to Eco-Anarchism . . . . .	3
Bookchin the Modernist . . . . .	4
<b>Beyond Bookchin (excerpts)</b>	<b>5</b>
Abbreviations for books by Murray Bookchin cited in the following essay: . . . . .	5
Excerpts from <i>Beyond Bookchin: Preface for a Future Social Ecology</i> by David Watson .	5
A “Symbiotic Rationality” . . . . .	6
Progress and Other Mirages . . . . .	9
The social ecologist as technocrat . . . . .	11
A New Definition of Capital . . . . .	12
Bookchin’s “unbridgeable chasm” . . . . .	15
Social ecology and its discontents . . . . .	18

## Introduction by Steve Welzer

The text which begins on the following page is excerpted from *Beyond Bookchin: Preface for a Future Social Ecology*, a new title co-published in fall 1996 by Black & Red, Detroit, and Autonomedia, Brooklyn. Its author is *Fifth Estate* staff member David Watson.

In Murray Bookchin's extensive writings on ecology and anarchism spanning four decades, he has tried to take us beyond Marx toward a more fundamental critique, a holistic rationality, a deeper freedom. He is recognized in many anti-authoritarian circles as an anarchist luminary and elder of significant importance to the extent that some identify themselves as "Bookchinites." Under the watchword of "coherence," Bookchin has sought nothing less than the full explanation. But David Watson's latest book shows that Bookchin's work ultimately falls far short of its pretensions, and thus fails to guide us toward the promised "pathways to a green future."

Bookchin's elaboration of a radical philosophy he has called social ecology is self-consciously part of an important transition of thought, from a "red" to a "green" analysis and critique. Yet, despite his pivotal role in the initiatory phases of that process, Bookchin has opened doors through which he could or will not pass. It is left to others to explore the full implications of the emerging ecological-communitarian radicalism.

### Drawn to Eco-Anarchism

During the mid-1970s, while Bookchin was working on his magnum opus, *The Ecology of Freedom*, the group of activists publishing the *Fifth Estate* was also addressing the question of a post-marxist radicalism. Their attention was drawn to alternatives such as eco-anarchism (several pieces by Bookchin were reproduced in FEs with positive commentary), council communism, and situationist theory.<sup>1</sup>

At that time, the *Fifth Estate* staff was prone to describe themselves as "libertarian communists." But the group was exploring critiques from disparate sources and, as one staffer recently wrote, "We decided the dictum, 'All isms are wasms' was correct and began extending the anti-authoritarian critique beyond the obvious oppression of capitalism and the state to uncover deeper roots of the repression of the human spirit and the biosphere."<sup>2</sup>

In the late 1980s, when Watson (often using the pseudonym George Bradford) wrote several essays critical of deep ecology, it was widely assumed he must be a Bookchinite. However, those

---

<sup>1</sup> Through Fredy Perlman, who was living in Detroit at that time and contributing articles occasionally to the paper, Fifth Estaters had direct contact back to the 1968 events in Paris. See Lorraine Perlman, *Having Little, Being Much: A Chronicle of Fredy Perlman's Fifty Years* (Detroit: Black & Red, 1989).

<sup>2</sup> Peter Werbe, "History of the Fifth Estate, Part I: The Early Years," in FE #347, Spring 1996.

who read the essays carefully could see that Watson was far from sympathetic to Bookchin's alternative to deep ecology.<sup>3</sup>

In a footnote to his essay, "Return of the Son of Deep Ecology," [FE #331, Spring, 1989] Watson [writing as George Bradford] pledged to-examine Bookchin's work in depth at a later time. *Beyond Bookchin* fulfills that pledge and at the same time represents one of the fullest expositions of the evolving-perspective of the Fifth Estate over the last fifteen years.

Many of those who thought they could find a way forward from a tattered and discredited marxism or antiquated anarchism through the "coherence" of Bookchin's social ecology have either been thoroughly disillusioned or learned to tolerate a very uneven and idiosyncratic stream of work from an increasingly cantankerous pen.

## **Bookchin the Modernist**

Although Bookchin's work prompted important discussions in new left, counter-cultural and ecology circles about technology, ecology and the prospects for social transformation, Watson demonstrates that Bookchin has been far too much the modernist to comprehend the implications of the "holocaust of holocausts" unfolding in our time.<sup>4</sup>

In *Beyond Bookchin*, Watson expresses the hope that a viable, healthy, open social ecology may yet be realized, and affirms that such a project is a worthwhile undertaking. Consequently, Bookchin's social ecology only serves as a springboard for deeper discussions of technology and freedom, the nature of rationality and spirituality, and the potential sources for a radical, ecologically oriented politics. The following excerpt gives only a sense of the book; much had to be sacrificed due to space constraints—including detailed discussions on technology and work, contrasting modern and primal notions of plenitude, and Bookchin's libertarian municipalism. Readers are urged to read the entire exposition, available from the FE Bookstore and other radical and alternative book sellers.

Steve Welzer is editor of *The New Jersey Greens Journal*.

---

<sup>3</sup> *How Deep is Deep Ecology?* (Ojai: Times Change Press, 1989), and "Return of the Son of Deep Ecology: The Ethics of Permanent Crisis and the Permanent Crisis in Ethics," in *Fifth Estate*, Volume 24, Number 1 (Spring 1989), both written under the pseudonym George Bradford.

<sup>4</sup> Reference in David Watson (Lewis Cannon), "Earth Day? We Want a Festival of the Oppressed!" *Fifth Estate* Earth Day Special, Spring 1990.

# Beyond Bookchin (excerpts)

## Abbreviations for books by Murray Bookchin cited in the following essay:

APN: “A Philosophical Naturalism,” in *Society and Nature*, Vol. 1, Number 2 (September-December 1992)

EF: *The Ecology of Freedom* (1984)

HCP: “History, Civilization, Progress: Outline for a Criticism of Modern Relativism,” in *Green Perspectives* 29 (March 1994)

PSA: *Post-Scarcity Anarchism* (1971)

RS: *Remaking Society: Pathways-to a Green Future* (1990)

SALA: *Social Anarchism or Lifestyle Anarchism: An Unbridgeable Chasm* (1995)

SEVSDE: “Social Ecology versus ‘Deep Ecology’—A Challenge for the Ecology Movement,” in *Green Perspectives* 4/5 (Summer 1987)

TES: *Toward an Ecological Society* (1980)

## Excerpts from *Beyond Bookchin: Preface for a Future Social Ecology* by David Watson

A unique figure in twentieth century American radicalism, Murray Bookchin was one of a small handful of individuals to raise the black flag of anarchy in the 1960s to a generation of dissidents looking for pathways to a new politics. Bookchin’s utopian concerns and his exploration of the-idea of a social ecology revived valuable chapters of neglected social history for many radicals.<sup>1</sup>

Like the idea of a social ecology itself, of course, these concerns belonged to the ferment of the era, and social ecological concerns can be found in the work of many writers.<sup>2</sup> Radical ecology is made up of overlapping, complementary and contradictory strands of thought, originating both in our contemporary experience of social and ecological loss as well as from a continuous renewal of marvelous legacies stretching back into prehistory—a common heritage that continues to nourish visionaries and revolutionaries.

Bookchin’s work, the product of decades, is frequently rich and always problematic. Yet it has received little systematic discussion or critique, even in radical circles. Now that he has more

---

<sup>1</sup> Bookchin’s work was seriously limited from the very beginning. Nevertheless, as in the case of Noam Chomsky’s famous 1967 essay, “Objectivity and Liberal Scholarship” (in *American Power and the New Mandarins* [New York: Pantheon/Random House, 1969]), his early writings introduced many young radicals, including this writer, to anarchist ideas and a radical critique of Leninism.

<sup>2</sup> Lewis Mumford, for example, proposed a kind of social ecology and gave early evidence of a green, bioregional, municipalist outlook as early as the 1930s. Numerous contemporary radical and utopian writers suggest the general idea of a “social ecology”—even if Bookchin tended to codify the term.

recently assumed the mantle of lone defender of civilization, turning contemporary ecological discussion and green politics into a kind of kulturkarnpf, an assessment of his work may be timely. His recent essays—increasingly vituperative, dismissive, pessimistic, almost paranoid—suggest the time may be overdue to ask what kind of social ecology ought to survive the passing of Bookchin.<sup>3</sup>

“Rarely have the concepts that literally define the best of Western culture—its notions of a meaningful History, a universal Civilization and the possibility of Progress—been called so radically into question as they are today,” he begins one typical recent essay, laden with indignation, written as a corrective to what he labels “the farrago of human self-denigration that marks the present time.”<sup>4</sup> In such “decadent and desperate” times as ours, hopes for a renewed movement of contestation rooted in what he thinks best in our culture have not materialized. (HCP: 12)

But that History, Civilization and Progress are now questioned cannot be entirely lamentable. While these ideological constructs might represent in some sense what is “best” in Western culture, they have also typically served as core mystifications concealing what is worst. The contemporary doubt haunting the idea of progress signals not only potential dangers of further dehumanization, but that the official story no longer commands the loyalties it once did, that a new vision might be possible.

In such dire times, fraught with peril and latent potential, correctives may be useful, even crucial. Nevertheless, if true to its basic intuitions, a perspective grounded in subtle notions of diversity and complementarity would also practice its ideals by maintaining a certain humility about its own intellectual niche within that vast, variegated social and historical reality, both passing away and coming into being. Instead, retreating to his bunker, Bookchin continues to treat social ecology—as interpreted by him alone—as the last word on transformation to an ecological society, correspondingly failing to expand ecological discourse at a time of great change, instability and destruction.

“Tragically, Bookchin’s radical notion of an ecological politics grounded in-social critique and the promise of liberatory transformation now seems far less than what it might have become. Still mired in the transition from a red to a green radicalism, his once complex, ambiguous ideas have fossilized into dogma. Social ecology will outlast its founder and realize its radical potential only if social ecologists can abandon his compulsions and elaborate new orders of thinking. The task of renewing social ecology—if it can be renewed—will be the work not of Bookchin but of others. It is to them that this challenge is- addressed.

## A “Symbiotic Rationality”

Bookchin claims to “impart rationality not only to social but also to natural history.” (EF: 141), but the coherence in his notion of reason is itself unsound. Given the marvels of evolution, he

---

<sup>3</sup> Telling examples of this tendency can be found in his “Comments on the International Social Ecology Network Gathering and the ‘Deep Social Ecology’ of John Clark” (September 1995, probably available through his newsletter *Green Perspectives*); the October 1995 (Number 33) issue of the newsletter, especially “Theses on Social Ecology in a Period of Reaction”; and his recent book *Social anarchism or Lifestyle Anarchism: An Unbridgeable Chasm* (Edinburgh and San Francisco: AK Press, 1995) cited in the text from here forward as SALA.

<sup>4</sup> Murray Bookchin, “History, Civilization, Progress: Outline for a Criticism of Modern Relativism,” in *Green Perspectives* 29 (March 1994), p. 1 (cited in the text from here forward as HCP). See also Murray Bookchin, *Remaking Society: Pathways to a Green Future* (Boston: South End Press, 1990) p 13 (cited in the text from here forward as RS).

says, “we cannot help but speculate about the existence of a broadly conceived telos and a latent subjectivity in substance itself that eventually yields mind and intellectuality.” (EF: 364) But his teleology of freedom turns out to be only a variant of the ideology of bourgeois progress and human mastery, a mastery exercised by a “life-form...that expresses nature’s greatest powers of creativity.” (RS: 36, which is, in fact, “-nature itself rendered self-conscious.” (EF: 315) His viewpoint privileges human reason as “the self-reflexive voice of nature” (EF: 365, rather than a part of the larger landscape-of subjectivity. This logic converts his cautionary statements against hubris into subtle (and not so subtle) insinuations of it.

Bookchin warns that he does not “metaphysically oppose nature to society or society to nature” (RS: 65), but in his paradigm, evolution itself is meant to transcend the passive stagnation of “mere animality” and “the incomplete, aborted, irrational ‘what-is— in nature and society by discovering “the very objective reality that ‘Nature’ connotes...”(TES: 62, HCP: 10)<sup>5</sup> Adaptation, he writes, is “merely animalistic.” (HCP: 5) “Unless human mentality validates its claim to ‘superiority’ by acquiring a better sense of meaning than it has today,” says Bookchin, “like it or not, we are little more than crickets in a field, chirping to one another.” (EF: 236)

Bookchin’s attempts to “validate [humanity’s] claim to ‘superiority— result in tautological failures, and his perspective is little more than a standard textbook idea of anthropocentric progress. By becoming human, we prove ourselves not only unique, but a higher stage in nature’s growing subjectivity—if we accept circular definitions. It is quite possible to celebrate human uniqueness, mind and creativity without, zero-sum fashion, diminishing non-human nature. We are not the voice of nature. If we listen carefully, we may be lucky enough to hear a few notes, and perhaps chime in with our own peculiar croak. But a very special kind of listening is needed—or many kinds of listening. We are a small strand in time and space—a simultaneously wise and foolish insect born at noon who will not even see the planet’s dusk, let alone the night. The night will have to be dreamed. For us, the question, “What is mind?” can only be a starting point, not a problem with an “answer.” Bookchin turns an adventure into a joyless program.

“The notion that there is only one kind of reason,” Bookchin rightfully argues, “is utterly false.” (RS: 108) The contemporary “revolt against reason,” he explains elsewhere; “rests on a highly misguided belief that only one kind of reason can-exist . that the only alternative to our present reality is a vaporous mystical world”, (APN: 69) Bookchin considers any and all mysticism and extra-rational modes of knowing “vaporous.” Characteristically, he approaches a holistic understanding of reason only to succumb to reified hyper- rationality and scientism.

“Libertarian rationality,” he comments, is “a symbiotic-rationality “symbiotic,” prolific rationality capable of diverse ways of knowing, this participatory consciousness and complementary respect for otherness that Bookchin-frequently claims to represent: what kind of rationality would it imply?” “Feeling, sentiment and a moral outlook we surely need,” our philosopher says. (APN: 62) But mythic thinking and ritual, meditative and other extra-rational and irrational modes of consciousness are strictly verboten—or, should one say, taboo”? Extra-rational and intuitive modes of thought “are not strong barriers to manipulation,” he avers. (RS: 109)

Bookchin fetishizes explanation, judging extra-rational modes of-thought worthless because, as his associate Janet Biehl puts it, they “cannot replace clearly valid and tested scientific explanations...In fact, they do not explain anything at all.” Mixing myth, metaphoric thinking and science

---

<sup>5</sup> Murray Bookchin, “A Philosophical Naturalism,” *Nature and Society* 2, p. 77 (cited in the text from here forward as AP’N).

produces “not better science [but] confusion.”<sup>6</sup> But nothing, not even science or social ecology, explains anything definitively. All explanations are matters of credibility and persuasion, just as all thinking is fundamentally metaphorical.<sup>7</sup> That people apply different forms of knowledge inappropriately doesn’t invalidate these modes. Nor does Biehl’s argument recognize the degree to which science itself is imbued with irrational and magical thinking.

This doesn’t mean that scientific reasoning can’t help us to know or explain anything, only that there are other ways of knowing, and some experiences that can only be known by these alternative modes, not by analytic or even so-called dialectical rationality. Certainly Bookchin dimly recognizes this possibility when he notes the legitimacy of conventional and analytic forms of reason, provided no excessive claims are made for them. (APN: 70, 80) But he never imagines that this might also be true of metaphor and mythopoesis—the basis for poetry and art. Instead, forgetting every wise word he’s written about instrumental reason and in defense of animist insight, he privileges, as he puts it in another context, “hierarchical rationality over sensuous experience.”<sup>8</sup>

We are condemned to be modern. We can’t escape the facts of our history or of living in an age dominated by instrumental rationality, even as we look for-ways out of it—though there may be some naive, self-described primitivists’ who think otherwise. But it has become our historic responsibility to acknowledge the continuing importance of myth, at a level beyond science,—in realizing a more organic, holistic relation to the world. A future social ecology would transcend both anti-Enlightenment reaction and Bookchin’s reified Enlightenment counter-reaction, which remain only fragmented polarities within bourgeois modernity. Social ecology must discover a post-Enlightenment politics.

“We have yet to fully assess the meaning of human history,” writes Bookchin in a moment of relative humility, “the paths it should have followed, and the ideas that are most appropriate in the remaking of society based on reason and ecological principles.” A “crisis-ridden society like our own,” he continues, “must evaluate the *entire* history of ideas and the alternatives—opened by social history in the past” (emphasis in original). (RS: 116–17) Exactly so. An evolved reason will coax into being, with a little luck, a rounded, vital synthesis of primal, archaic and modern. As Gary Snyder has remarked, “The philosopher might despise mystification, but will respect the mysteries.”<sup>9</sup>

---

<sup>6</sup> Janet Biehl, *Rethinking Ecofeminist Politics* (Boston: South End Press, 1991), p. 92)

<sup>7</sup> As Joseph Weizenbaum puts it, “[S]cientific demonstrations, even mathematical proofs, are fundamentally acts of persuasion...Scientific statements can never be certain; they can only be credible.” And credibility has psychological, not ultimate objective meaning—implying belief based on intuition. Weizenbaum argues that our dependence on language makes not only the terms of theoretical utterances, but words in general, metaphoric. Because a theory “is first of all a text, hence a concatenation of the symbols of some alphabet...[and] a symbolic construction in a deeper sense as well,” its symbols “grope for their denotation in the real world or else cease to be symbolic.” Because they can only approach denotation, “the symbolic terms of a theory can never be finally founded in reality.” See *Computer Power and Human Reason* (San Francisco: W. H. Freeman and Company, 1976), pp. 15–16.

<sup>8</sup> Murray Bookchin, *Toward an Ecological Society* (Montreal-Buffalo: Black Rose Books, 1980), p. 63 (cited in the text from here forward as TES).

<sup>9</sup> Gary Snyder, *The Practice of the Wild* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1990) p. 58.



## Progress and Other Mirages

Bookchin's one-dimensional idea of rationality informs his increasingly vituperative defense of history, civilization and progress—terms which, unless one happens to be a very serious-minded philosopher, are wildly mutable metaphors. His recent essays typically contain the obligatory challenge to what he calls “a new pessimism toward civilization as such...a widespread assault against the ability of reason, science and technology to improve the world for ourselves and life generally.” (RS: 121)

Of course, the problem isn't that people are questioning technology (which they are), but the massive, if dysfunctional, resignation to runaway technics, market forces and the corporate state, and in the ubiquitous sigh of oppressed and oppressor alike, that “you can't stop progress.” It's sad Bookchin feels the need to watchdog such an arsenal of domination. His recent harangues against contemporary skepticism about civilization's claims lack any sensitivity to dialectical possibility, treating such doubt—to use his own formulation against him—as fixed, precisely defined, and clearly determinable,” rather than open, formed of contradictions, evolving and carrying potentially transformative negation. (APN: 63).

Despite his disclaimers, his idea of history capitulates to bourgeois and marxist notions of progress. In one place he says that “capitalism, like the nation-state, was neither an unavoidable ‘necessity,’ nor was it a ‘precondition’ for the establishment of a cooperative or socialist society.” Yet in the same few pages he approves of Bakunin's argument that the state was a “necessary evil” for progress. Bakunin's “recognition that humanity developed as much through the medium of ‘evil’ as it did through the medium of ‘virtue,’ touches upon the subtle dialectic of civilization itself,” he argues. “Biblical precept did not curse humanity in vain; there is an ancient recognition that certain evils could not easily be avoided in humanity's ascent out of animality.” (RS: 89, 84) “To be expelled from Eden,” he consoles the reader, “can be regarded, as Hegel was to say, as an important condition for [Eden's] return” on a new level. (EF: 113, 63, 141).

Of course, Bookchin considers the pre-state societies of hunter-gatherers and horticulturalists to be anything but an Eden.<sup>10</sup> Explaining the emergence of horticulture as “a ‘watchful interest’ nourished by grim need,” he concludes that without this “advance,” “society would have been mired indefinitely in a brute subsistence economy living chronically on the edge of survival. Nature...is normally ‘stingy,’ an un giving and deceptive ‘mother.’ (EF: 59, 64) Consequently, he categorically dismisses the now famous thesis of Marshall Sahlins that aboriginal societies were, for the most part, “affluent” societies that enjoyed plenty because their needs were few and easily met, as not only “fashionable,” but “simplicistic” and “regressive.”<sup>11</sup> Bookchin doesn't deny that foraging societies may have toiled significantly less than people in so-called civilized societies—from peasants to office workers—but surmises that these early societies had to “answer to very strict material imperatives” in a world “often harsh and insecure, a world ruled by natural necessity.” The leisure of primal peoples could not be “*free* time that fosters intellectual advances beyond the magical, artistic and mythopoeic. To a large extent, the ‘time’ of a community on the edge of survival is ‘suffering time’.... when hunger is the all-encompassing fear....” (EF: 67, 58, 69, 81, 67)

---

<sup>10</sup> Lewis Mumford, on the other hand, described them as existing in conditions “more or less corresponding to Hesiod's Golden Age.” See *Technics and Human Development: The Myth of the Machine Volume One* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Jovanovich, 1966), p. 181.

<sup>11</sup> See Marshall Sahlins, *Stone Age Economics* (New York: Aldine Publishing Company, 1972).

It would be difficult to find a passage more charged with the Hobbesian lie in its ethnocentric dismissal of the cultures of aboriginal peoples—proof of Stanley Diamond’s remark that progress is “the basic apology for imperialism.”<sup>12</sup> Of course, as Sahlins has noted, “Scarcity is the judgment decreed by our own economy...Having equipped the hunter. with bourgeois impulses and paleolithic tools, we judge his situation hopeless in advance.”<sup>13</sup> In fact, nature has for the most part been not stingy but profuse, even profligate in sharing its riches, which explains the prodigality and “laziness” of the people the Europeans encountered everywhere in their conquests. Civilizing missionaries, entrepreneurs and others may not have approved of the perceived misuse of leisure among primary peoples in less “advanced” mythopoeic activities, but they had to wear thick ideological blinders to observe that their new wards both scabbled desperately to eke out a bare existence, and were lazy and spent their afternoons lying in hammocks.

Bookchin’s notion of social evolution is clearly linked to technological development and an expansion of production. According to Bookchin, science, technology, universal reason all “*potentially* offer the hope of a rational and emancipatory dispensation of social affairs” (SALA: 35, emphasis in original). Yet this *potentiality* has been around for several thousand years, without the necessity for twentieth century “post-scarcity” technology. To think otherwise is to fall into the very technological determinism of which- he accuses others. After a few thousand years of empire-and-State societies, and a few hundred years of industrial capitalism, the potential pre-conditions for freedom are just not doing their job.

Bookchin wants to socialize and rationalize bourgeois “need” the way marxists want to socialize production to escape “strict material imperatives,” positing a super-abundance based on an alternative vision of mastery. Thus we read that in the future revolutionary society “the most pressing task of technology will be to produce a surfeit of goods with a minimum of toil.” With Bookchin’s “liberatory” technology, “Free communities would stand at the-end of a cybernated assembly line with baskets to cart the goods home.” (PSA: 130, 133) Instead Of a redeemed relation to being and the object itself, he presents the fantasy of an industrial cornucopia.

Bookchin’s scenario fails to acknowledge what may be the greatest problem for a future sane society, that the industrial bribe of technology in the service of capitalist abundance has everywhere—even where its dubious benefits have proved the most meager—tended to undermine the capacities of human beings to resist it, to choose another way, another kind of plentitude. The recognition that less could be more might come from a radical rejection of the fetishism of artifactual abundance without having to go through Bookchin’s transitional period of surfeit. transformation isn’t a question of “better delivery,” of much, much more of the same, but rather a new relationship to the phenomenal world—something akin to what Sahlins calls “a Zen road to affluence, departing from premises somewhat different from our own.”<sup>14</sup>

---

<sup>12</sup> Stanley Diamond, *In Search of the Primitive* (1974; New Brunswick and London: Transaction Books, 1981) p. 38.

<sup>13</sup> Sahlins, *Stone Age Economics*, p. 4. Sahlins might reply to Bookchin, “When Condorcet attributed the hunter’s unprogressive condition to want of ‘the leisure in which he can indulge in thought and enrich his understanding with new combinations of ideas,’ he also recognized that the economy was a ‘necessary cycle of extreme activity and total idleness. ‘ Apparently what the hunter needed was the assured leisure of an aristocratic philosophe.” (pp. 35–6)

<sup>14</sup> Sahlins, *Stone-Age economics*, p. 2.

## The social ecologist as technocrat

Bookchin is certainly correct in stressing, “We need a clearer image of what is meant by ‘technics.’” (EF: 220). Unfortunately, his own confusion about technics is palpable. “The industrial machine seems to have taken off without the driver,” he writes, but “the driver is still there.” Sixty pages later we read, “A look at technics alone reveals that the car is racing at an increasing pace, with nobody in the driver’s seat.” (EF: 239, 302) The problem of human agency is indeed thorny. In distinct ways a “driver” can be said to be and not to be present. But Bookchin only stays on the surface of such an inquiry; confusion and contradiction plague his work.

Objecting to the contemporary “grim fatalism” about technology (EF: 220–3), Bookchin always insists on its promise. From the beginning, his utopianism has been decidedly rooted in the faith that the new technics created by modern industrial capitalism have brought about preconditions, if not necessarily the actual conditions, for a rational, free society. To be sure, he has also written, sometimes eloquently, about the pathological destructiveness of modern technological arrangements. But if he believes that some forms (e.g., nuclear power, but this only after promoting it) are inherently evil, for the most part he stresses that “technology as such” is not the problem but rather more fundamental “economic factors.” (SALA: 28)

Intriguingly, just when Lewis Mumford was reaching his gloomiest conclusions about modern technology, Bookchin appeared as its febrile enthusiast.<sup>15</sup> While more recently Bookchin has tempered his enthusiasm for technological development, a celebration and defense of technological progress continue to permeate his work. “For the first time in the long succession of centuries,” he enthuses, “this century—and this one alone—has elevated mankind to an entirely new level of technological achievement and to an entirely new level of the human experience.” (PSA: 10)

“Utopia...once a mere dream in the preindustrial world, increasingly became a possibility with the development of modern technology,” “a development that opens the possibility of the transcendence of the domain of necessity.” (TES: 28, 270) Only the “technical limits of past eras” prevented utopia. (RS: 121) Abundance, “indeed luxury, will be available to all to enjoy because technological development will have removed the economic basis for scarcity and coercion.” (EF: 33031)

Bookchin’s idea of progress proves almost indistinguishable from a Krushchevite threat to out-do capitalism. “Bourgeois society,” he insists, “if it achieved nothing else, revolutionized the means of production on a scale unprecedented in history. This technological revolution, culminating in cybation, has created the objective quantitative basis for a world-without class rule, exploitation, toil or material want.” “It is easy to foresee a time, by no means remote, when a rationally organized economy could automatically manufacture small ‘packaged’ factories without human labor...Machines would make and repair most of the machines required to maintain such a highly industrialized economy.” (PSA) Only “bourgeois control of technology” prevents its liberatory potential from being realized. With the new technology, “The means now exist for the development of the rounded man, the total man...” (PSA: 33–4, 105, 17)

According to Bookchin, capitalism misuses modern technology. “Every warped society,” he says, “follows the dialectic of its own pathology of domination, *irrespective of the scale of its technics*” (EF: 241, emphasis added). “Capitalist social and economic relations *“blatantly* determine

---

<sup>15</sup> Mumford’s *The Pentagon of Power* and Bookchin’s *Post-Scarcity Anarchism* both appeared in 1970–71.

how technology will be used.” (SALA: 29) To those who recognize the fallacy that technology is a neutral tool to be used or-abused by the one who wields it, Bookchin offers a disclaimer: because technology is shaped by social forces, our concepts about it “are never socially neutral.” (EF: 226) This statement is simply an evasion; the idea that technology is not neutral logically implies not only that our concepts shape and determine technology, but that the technological relations and requirements imposed by our technology also shape our concepts and social relations. Technological arrangements themselves generate social change and shape human action, bringing about imperatives unanticipated by their creators. Technological means come with their own repertoire of ends.

The ecological crisis is a dramatic example of this phenomenon. No one but a marxist of the crudest variety could believe that technological dysfunction and disaster are the results only of corporate capitalist greed. As Bookchin himself has noted about oil spills, “even the sturdiest ships have a way of being buffeted by storms, drifting off course, foundering on reefs in treacherous waters, and sinking.”<sup>16</sup> “Not only capitalist grow-or-die economic choices, but a complex petrochemical grid itself makes disasters inevitable.

“We cannot avoid the use of conventional reason, present-day modes of science, and modern technology,” Bookchin asserts (though he doesn’t explain why we must put up with “present-day modes of science” and technics). “But we can establish new contexts in which these modes.... have their proper place....” (EF: 240) Present-day modes of science and technology apparently never establish contexts; “the ecological impact of human reason, science, and technology depends enormously on the type of society in which these forces are shaped and employed.”<sup>17</sup> Because he assumes that the type of society in which technologies emerge determines their impact, Bookchin doesn’t consider the possibility that a mass technological society might itself come to constitute a “type.” “Capitalism—not technology, reason or science as such—produced an economy that was systematically anti-ecological.”<sup>18</sup>

## A New Definition of Capital

Here, too, Bookchin’s error clearly resides in his marxism. For Marx, the workers become appendages of the machine because the machines and labor process are owned and controlled by the capitalists. The former confront the material products of their labor—machines and industrial apparatus as well as commodities—as an “alien power” because it all “belongs to some other man than the worker.”<sup>19</sup> This schema does not take into account the life processes involved as cultural and epistemological contexts in their own right. Alienation is not limited to a problem of who owns or who directs mass technics. Commenting on Marx’s passage, Langdon Winner argues that the governance imposed by this “other man” is not decisive; “the steering is inherent in the functioning of socially organized technology itself”—which is to say that the owners and bosses

---

<sup>16</sup> Murray Bookchin, “Death of a Small Planet,” *The Progressive*, August 1989.

<sup>17</sup> Murray Bookchin et al, *Defending the Earth: A Dialogue Between Murray Bookchin and Dave Foreman*, edited and with an introduction by Steve Chase (Boston: South End Press, 1991), p. 32.

<sup>18</sup> Murray Bookchin, “When the Earth comes first, people and nature suffer,” *The Guardian*, August 3, 1988.

<sup>19</sup> Karl Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1974), p. 70.

must steer at the controls their technology provides. As the monster says to Doctor Frankenstein, “You are my creator, but I am your master.”<sup>20</sup>

Technology socializes those who operate it because mass industrial technics require that they operate within it. While people may think of the vast webs of ‘instrumental and economic relations as simple tools to be either used properly or abused, one does not simply apply an Archimidean lever to a global petrochemical grid, or a communications-informatics grid. We are increasingly enclosed in them, functioning as cogs within them.

Bookchin dramatically reveals himself to be an acolyte of the technological mystique when he argues for advanced technology ‘to protect nature from itself—for example, from “ice ages, land desiccation, or cosmic collisions with asteroids.” NASA will apparently be turned into a municipalist organization—and with no division of labor, either. “If there is any truth to the theory that the great Mesozoic reptiles were extinguished by climatic changes that presumably followed the collision of an asteroid with the earth,” he explains, “the survival of existing mammals-might well be just as precarious in the face of an equally meaningless natural catastrophe unless there is a conscious, ecologically-oriented-life-form that has the technological means to rescue them.” (RS: 38)

Of course, it probably won’t be a “meaningless natural catastrophe” that extinguishes mammal life, but a series of “meaningful” catastrophes set off by the very megatechnic civilization Bookchin portrays as nature’s only hope. His projection is a Rube Goldberg nightmare filled with lurid delusions of grandeur and scientific hubris. Not only would we need a massive missile system (reminiscent of Ronald Reagan’s Star Wars fantasy) to deflect asteroids, but a complex technics advanced enough to deflect entirely unimagined threats—suggesting, among other things, a genetic engineering arsenal of colossal proportions. Bookchin fails to notice that our defense systems, antibodies and fail-safe backups will likely do us in long before the threats arrive.

Equally significant is his comment that it would hardly be anthropocentric, except under exploitive capitalist conditions, of course, “to turn the Canadian barrens—a realm that is still suspended ecologically between the highly destructive glacial world of the ice ages and the richly variegated, life-sustaining world of temperate forest zones—into an area supporting a rich variety of biota.” He continues, “I frankly doubt that a case can be made against a *very prudent, nonexploitative, and-ecologically guided* enterprise of this kind...unless we put blinkers on our eyes that narrow our vision to an utterly dogmatic and passive-receptive ‘nature-oriented’ outlook.”<sup>21</sup> Presumably, this is what he means when he postulates a “more advanced interface with nature” (EF: 39) and “a new, eminently ecological function: the—need to create more fecund gardens than Eden itself.” (EF: 303) One swoons imagining the Eden Bookchin might make of the Canadian barrens.

“It may well be,” notes Bookchin, “that we still do not understand what capitalism really is.” (RS: 128) Indeed,- Bookchin’s dichotomy between technics and corporate and state institutions, of the need to choose between a concept of technological society or capitalism, is specious; the matrix of social relations-is more complex than he suggests. To speak of technological society is in fact to refer to *the technics generated within capitalism*, which in turn generate new forms of

---

<sup>20</sup> Langdon Winner, *Autonomous Technology: Technics-out-of-Control as a Theme in Political Thought* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1970), pp. 36–40; Frankenstein quoted by Winner, p. 311.

<sup>21</sup> Murray Bookchin, “Recovering Evolution: A Reply to Eckersley and Fox,” in *Nature and Society* 2 (Sept-Dec. 1992), p. 170.

capital. The notion of a distinct realm of social relations that determines this technology is not only ahistorical and undialectical, it reflects a kind of simplistic base/superstructure schema.

We need a larger definition of capitalism that encompasses not only market relations and the power of bourgeois and bureaucratic elites but the very structure and content of mass technics, reductive rationality and the universe they establish: the social imaginaries of progress, growth, and efficiency; the growing power of the state; and the materialization, objectification and quantification of nature, culture and human personality. Only then can we see that commodification, and the objectification of nature and human beings, are moments in the same social process. Market capitalism has been everywhere the vehicle for a mass megatechnic civilization—the nuclear-cybernetic-petrochemical-communications-commodity grid being developed globally. But technicization is the armature of the economic-instrumental culture now extinguishing vast skeins in-the fabric of life,-and transforming the planet into an enormous megalopolis, with its glittering high tech havens and wasted, contaminated sacrifice zones. It makes no sense to layer the various elements of this process in a mechanistic hierarchy of first cause and secondary effects. There is no simple or single etiology to this plague, but a synergy of vectors.

For a writer whose ideas are based on a notion of potentiality, Bookchin's static idea of technology fails dismally to see technics in their full development—not only the dubious potentiality of their evolution into a liberatory society, but other potentialities that do not fit his schema. We do not yet fully know the real meaning of—industrialism; it is still being played out in our very being, somatically and genetically, and in the myriad ripples and feedback loops now traveling through both. human societies and the natural world.

In Bookchin's simplistic view of technology, "free municipalities" will one day stand with shopping bags at the end of their cornucopic assembly line, picking and choosing only the technics and products they rationally desire, while somehow avoiding the accompanying "accidents," side effects and toxic residues.

Yet for those who have the courage to look clearly at life today, the claims of mass technics are already dramatically eroded by decades, even centuries of catastrophe, imperial plunder and war, the unprecedented' dislocation of human communities and the ongoing eclipse of the human spirit. A new perspective now haunts the industrial capitalist necropolis. As inchoate and embryonic as it may now be, this "epistemological luddism," as Winner has called it, does not propose "a solution in itself but...a method of inquiry" that, instead of focusing on obfuscatory notions of "use" and "misuse," "insists that the *entire structure* of the technological order be the subject of its critical inquiry."<sup>22</sup> Bookchin's great theoretical and personal tragedy was to become this sensibility's vociferous opponent, misrepresenting and conflating its inevitable errors and excesses with its genuine insights and wisdom and positing his regressive marxian ideology—incapable even in its own time of confronting the twentieth century technological phenomenon—as an ostensibly more radical alternative.

We have no choice but to face the legacy that modernity has given us. We Cannot evade the responsibility to think critically and rationally about the crisis we face. But reason is whole. A future social ecology, worthy of its desire for redemption and renewal, would recognize that it is not in scientific rationality and technological mastery but in other domains—starting from an authentically dialectical understanding that reorients life around perennial, classic and aboriginal

---

<sup>22</sup> Winner, *Autonomous Technology*, pp. 325–35, 226.

manifestations of wisdom we have yet to address fully—where firm ground, if any, must be found. Revolution will be a kind of return.

## Bookchin’s “unbridgeable chasm”

Despite its radical intent and its virtues, Bookchin’s work was already flawed early on, only to become increasingly unsound and inadequate in its “maturity.” His most recent writings are consonant with the direction of his work and reflective of its underlying failings. This is particularly true of *Social Anarchism or Lifestyle Anarchism: An Unbridgeable Chasm*.

This book is little more than a tirade—sporadically insightful, but mostly manipulative, filled with misrepresentation, and seething with rancor. The “unbridgeable chasm” follows a familiar pattern: like Bookchin’s denunciation of deep ecology, it is a bipolar *Gotterdammerung* between social ecology and its enemies on which the fate of the cosmos depends. It follows that those whom Bookchin criticizes are never well-intentioned people with erroneous ideas; they are *invariably* misanthropic eco-brutes, reactionary nihilist yuppies, dishonest and fashionable post-modern obscurantists, opportunist academics and careerists, self-indulgent new age charlatans, and now—as I and some others (with whom I have very little in common) are characterized in this latest work—accomplices of “neo-Heideggerian reaction” (read: proto-fascists) and “lifestyle anarchists.”

Bookchin’s notion of “lifestyle anarchism” is a freakish caricature. He blames this monster for “supplanting social action and revolutionary politics,” arguing that because a “growing ‘inwardness’ and narcissism of the yuppie generation have left their mark upon many avowed radicals...what passes for anarchism in America and increasingly in Europe is little more than an introspective personalism that denigrates responsible social commitment; an encounter group variously renamed a ‘collective’ or an ‘affinity-group’; a state of mind that arrogantly derides structure, organization, and public involvement; and a playground for juvenile antics.” (SALA: 9–10)

Bookchin is hardly the first to point out the problems of structurelessness and irresponsibility, but here he tars young anarchists (most of them are probably in their twenties and thirties) as cynical in an age when so many other young people are trying to work their way into capital’s hierarchy. To attack the personalism, eccentricities and excesses of many anarchists today while ignoring the positive work this small milieu has carried out in groups like Food Not Bombs, Seeds of Peace, Earth First!, various support groups for native peoples, collectives like 404 in Detroit (which generated a countercultural scene and also fed homeless people and helped organize demonstrations over numerous important issues) is nothing less than reprehensible.

There is undeniably a tiny nihilistic milieu that conforms to some of Bookchin’s descriptions of lifestyle anarchism. But the group of writers he critiques in *Social Anarchism or Lifestyle Anarchism*—L. Susan Brown, Hakim Bey, John Zerzan and me—not only do not represent a single current but have almost nothing in common, except perhaps the fact that Bookchin has various reasons, known only to him, for disliking each of them.<sup>23</sup> It would be one thing to raise objections

---

<sup>23</sup> It’s particularly absurd to lump my work with John Zerzan’s; there is probably no person on planet Earth who has given Zerzan more consistent argument than I have. Bookchin, of course, sees only likeness where years of disagreement have elaborated sharp differences (all “primitivists,” like all cows in this universe, are one color).

to each writer's work, but this is a case of festering acrimony. Bookchin fabricates a coherent political tendency, a kind of conspiracy, in order to purge all his enemies in a single round-up.

Bookchin's arguments about technology in SALA reiterate earlier polemics and are addressed at length in my book.<sup>24</sup> One aspect, however, is worth note here. Bookchin takes pains to argue that Lewis Mumford "was not an anti-technologist...nor was he in any sense of the word a mystic who would have found anti-civilizational primitivism to his taste. On this score, I can speak from direct personal knowledge of Mumford's views, when we conversed at some length, as participants in a conference at the University of Pennsylvania around 1972." (SALA: 31) Of course, no one has ever claimed that Mumford was an "anti-technologist" or primitivist, or denied that he saw technics as "potentially a vehicle of rational human purposes."<sup>25</sup> Bookchin was surely fortunate to spend a few minutes chatting with Mumford; but he might have picked up something more recent than *Technics and Civilization*, written in the early 1930s, to evaluate Mumford's views.

Though Bookchin argues that Mumford's later works do not "reveal any evidence that he relented" in his optimism toward technology and rejection of primitivism (SALA: 32), as *The Pentagon of Power* so forcefully reveals, Mumford clearly evinced an increasing ambivalence about technology's promise, and grave doubts about the realization of its rational potential. Even in 1959, he expressed regret about his earlier naive hopes about technology; in the 1963 edition of *Technics and Civilization* he wrote that contemporary reviewers had "properly characterized"

---

<sup>24</sup> Bookchin briefly quotes two *Fifth Estate* articles I wrote as examples of anti-technological and neo-primitivist "lifestyle anarchism" to denounce me for opposing "technology as such.. a facile body of notions [which] comfortably bypasses the capitalist relations that blatantly determine how technology will be used." (SALA: 28-9)

Of course, the essay does nothing of the sort; Bookchin apparently hopes his readers haven't seen my work, which contains long passages discussing the complex relations between mass technics and economic relations. He resorts to his threadbare argument that capitalism carried out massive destruction of ecosystems with relatively simple technology before industrialism. Modern technology and machines, he says, "were created long after capitalism gained ascendancy." (SALA: 35) Here Bookchin doesn't even pay close attention to the fragments he quotes, for example my comment that mass technics—"a product of earlier forms and archaic hierarchies—have now outgrown the conditions that engendered them." (SALA: 28-9) See "Revolution Against the Megamachine: Stopping the Industrial Hydra" (FE #333, Winter 1990), and "Civilization in Bulk: Empire and Ecological Destruction" (Fifth Estate, Spring 1991), both written under the pseudonym George Bradford.

<sup>25</sup> Mumford, *Technics and Civilization*, p. 301, quoted by Bookchin (SALA: 31). On this same page Mumford writes, "As the machine tended toward the pole of regularity and complete automatism, it became severed, finally from the umbilical cord that bound it to the bodies of men and women; it became an absolute. That was the danger Samuel Butler jestingly prophesied in *Erewhon*, the danger that the human being might become a means whereby the machine perpetuated itself and extended its domination."

Mumford warns that a total rejection of the machine could lead to the "sterile absolute of the organic: the raw primitive." Bookchin would like to believe that asking how technics might be reunited to this "umbilical cord" will make one a raw primitivist. But Mumford was willing to raise the question of autonomous technology in the 1930s, and to speak in terms that might be 'labeled, in some sense, primitivist.

Those who read the prologue to Mumford's more recent *Technics and Human Development*, as even Bookchin recommends, will find an attempt to redeem technics from modern technology, and human personhood from technics. It is fair to call it a protest against the machine; what is uniquely human, he argued, is not tool-making but the "capacity to combine a wide variety of animal propensities into an emergent, cultural identity: a human personality." "At its point of origin," he writes, "technics was related to the whole nature of man...thus technics, at the beginning, was broadly life-centered, not work-centered or power-centered. As in any other ecological complex, varied human interests and purposes, different organic needs, restrained the overgrowth of any single component."

When Mumford says that "technics supported and enlarged the capacities for human expression," he is not talking about mass technics, but an organic technics. (p. 9) Perhaps Bookchin thinks the critique of technology is a rejection of technics "as such," but that simplistic dichotomy has nothing to do with any serious work on this subject.



the book's "hopeful character," but he now downplayed this aspect, congratulating himself instead for having detected "the regressive possibilities of many of our most hopeful technical advances."<sup>26</sup>

In the 1920s Mumford believed that technological development was linked to human progress, but by the 1930s his view was tempered with the insistence that new values and institutions were required to redirect technology toward rational choices—a perspective parallel to Bookchin's view today. After the Second World War Mumford turned more deeply pessimistic, becoming "convinced that technology and science were irrational at their core...On occasion he predicted that industrial society was as fatally doomed as Roman society in the third century had been," as two Mumford scholars have noted.<sup>27</sup>

Far from dismissing it as parochial and limited compared to the unfolding rational potentiality to come, Mumford also pointedly defended the "archaic moral culture" and the "basic communism" of the neolithic society of rural villages: "though it still maintained many effete, irrational customs, it also kept close to the ultimate realities of life, human and divine: birth and death, sex and love, family devotion and mutual aid, sacrifice and transcendence, human pride and cosmic awe. Even the lowliest tribes," he continues, "retained a sense of their own importance and value as conscious beings, participating in a social scheme that did not depend for its significance on their tools and their bodily comforts. This cultural reservoir retained by its very backwardness some of the essential organic components that megatechnics, concerned only with removing all limitations on productivity and power, neglected or contemptuously extirpated."<sup>28</sup>

Lewis Mumford's life spanned the age of the ancient megamachine's full reemergence in modern form. His deepening critique of technology and rejection of a technologically premised utopia, his defense of archaic societies and of the extra-rational, irreducibly spiritual side of the human personality, are not only kindred to a reasoned primitivism but signposts suggesting the path to a future social ecology. Though he may not have completely thought through the processes and period he long studied, he evolved along with them—evidenced by his unequivocal call for "mechanical simplification and human amplification."<sup>29</sup> A century after his birth, and twenty-five years after his most visionary work, we will have to make up our own minds about the relationship between technology's potential benefits and the inherent defects that have effaced them—precisely the theoretical and practical task of a critical luddite politics.

I believe that people have the capacity, in fact the duty, to make rational and ethical choices about technics, but I have come to believe that an emergent technological system has become a powerful force within culture, a repository of meaning, a fundamental problem. If this makes me a "Heideggerian reactionary," so be it. I no longer put my hand over my" heart when I hear History, Civilization and Progress invoked, or Science, Medicine and Technology, or even Theory, for that matter. I am also generally sympathetic to the claims of those modes of thinking, sensibilities and cultures that have been bulldozed on our way to the Future. Like a growing number of people today, little by little I have come to look on the "poetry of the past" with different eyes.

---

<sup>26</sup> Mumford, *Technics and Civilization*, unpaginated introduction to the 1963 Harbinger edition; see also Lewis Mumford, "An Appraisal of Lewis Mumford's *Technics and Civilization* (1934)," *Daedalus* 88 (Summer, 1959).

<sup>27</sup> Thomas P. and Agatha C. Hughes, "General Introduction: Mumford's Modern World," in *Lewis Mumford: Public Intellectual* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), pp. 5–6.

<sup>28</sup> Mumford, *Ibid.*, p. 351.

<sup>29</sup> Mumford, *The Pentagon of Power*, p. 286.

Hence my tentatively elaborated project of redeeming our idea of aboriginal and tribal societies from civilization's Hobbesian mystique, a perspective that has with time broadened to a new appreciation of aspects of other civilizations (in the plural)—archaic and vernacular societies, the myriad *multiverses* now being extinguished by a monolithic global work machine. At one time I might have described this sensibility not only as a kind of neo-primitivism but as *social ecology*. Bookchin; unfortunately, has reified the social ecology idea into a program allowing no difference, no unanswered questions, no doubt. Ignoring distinctions between a reasoned primitivism and more simplistic varieties, he brands the renewed respect for aboriginal wisdom and lifeways a “prelapsarian mentality,” only “an edenic glorification of prehistory and the desire to somehow return to its putative innocence” (SALA: 26, 36)—a familiar accusation is commonly leveled at anyone who questions modern civilization's superiority or affirms early modes of life.<sup>30</sup>

## Social ecology and its discontents

The contemporary crisis requires a mixture of common and uncommon sense that can show us collectively how to draw on our whole experience—from our primordial, animist kinship with the phenomenal world, to the wisdom bequeathed to us by archaic civilizations, to modern traditions of revolution, freedom and return that have their deepest roots in the first unrecorded revolts against the earliest states. We must be both unsentimental and generous, finding ways to enhance diversity, communal responsibility and autonomy in whatever context we find ourselves. There can be no single programmatic way to do this, only a multiplicity of attempts, institutions and communities made by people in the process of rediscovering themselves.

Bookchin's latest polemics, following his work as a whole, reveal a deep desire for social transformation and a growing disappointment that radicals have so far failed to create viable alternatives to the ruling exterminist system. I share his desire, his disappointment and his apprehensions. The present period of massive decomposition and destruction is depressing and terrifying. The thunder on the horizon has steadily grown as this century approaches its end; we cannot know at what thresholds we stand, what catastrophes await.

I agree with Bookchin that an authentically radical social ecology beyond the “bare bones” of the scientific discipline (TES: 67), an ecological *sensibility* and ethical perspective that discerns the connections between natural and social history, between social crisis and ecological crisis, is essential in halting humanity's present inertia toward social and ecological apocalypse. I share his hunger for a social movement that can become the-seed of the new society within the shell of the old, for a redemption of desire and imagination, his insistence on the possibility of a different kind of organic reason.

---

<sup>30</sup> This is where he adds, “Anyone who advises us to significantly...reduce our technology is also advising us, in all logic, to go back to the ‘stone age’...” Like the “technology as such” line, this is how he fashions an argument to suit his purposes, exploring the logic and implications of a critique of technics by blurring those who advocate significant change with those who want “drastic” change, and conflating critical luddite views with a handful of ironists and the tiny number of feckless souls who literally believe such a thing possible.

Somehow, “in all logic,” it doesn't seem obvious that a significant, or even “drastic” reduction of late twentieth century technology, means the digging stick and bow and arrow, though in this day and age Bookchin may find some naïf who thinks it does. Certainly, we cannot make difficult social and ethical decisions vanish by mechanistically imposing a theoretical rejection of mass technics on them. The process of transformation must come from people themselves, emerging from the crisis not only theoretically but practically.

“We desperately need coherence,” he writes. “I do not mean dogma. I mean a real *structure* of ideas that places-philosophy, anthropology, history, ethics, a new rationality, and utopian visions in the service of freedom...” Then he goes on, not to declare that such a structure will be developed collectively by human beings confronting our unique and precarious destiny, but that he is actually going to build it “in the pages that follow.” The state of coherence, *c’est moi*.

Bookchin’s whole Faustian project of dialectical coherence could be said to share the fate of History, Civilization and Progress: in constructing and defending a system (and in the marxist sense, a tendency) based on his personal intuitions and insights, he could not avoid resorting to the mortar of his folly and idiosyncrasy, and subsequently sacrificed both a genuine, individual, partial coherence (in the sense of wholeness or integrity), and the principle of diversity, to polemical expediency. Bookchin has therefore not done justice to the important values and insights in his own work, values that would have survived better had he been less “coherent” and more “intuitive,” humble, and skeptical. After all, it is possible to be wrong about some things while being right about the main things. In contrast, system-building is a kind of Tower of Babel—arrogant, elaborate and abstract—that must simply collapse under its own Weight. Bookchin’s social ecology has now reached such a state of collapse...

The Anarchist Library  
Anti-Copyright



David Watson, Steve Welzer  
Beyond Bookchin (excerpts)  
New FE book examines the work of North America's best known anarchist  
1996

Fifth Estate #348, Fall, 1996. <[fifthestate.org/archive/348-fall-1996/beyond-bookchin-excerpts](http://fifthestate.org/archive/348-fall-1996/beyond-bookchin-excerpts)>

**[theanarchistlibrary.org](http://theanarchistlibrary.org)**