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Bookchin remembered

Iain McKay

August 16, 2006

Murray Bookchin died at home on the 30th of July at the age of 85, surrounded by his family. From the 1960s onwards, Bookchin was, rightly, considered one of the world's leading anarchist thinkers. His death, while not unexpected, is still a sad day for our movement.

It is hard to know where to start. Bookchin contributed so much to the development of anarchism over since the 1960s that to summarise his work is difficult, if not impossible. I still remember how thrilled I was to read "Post-Scarcity Anarchism" – this was an author who knew what anarchism was about. Reading "Toward an Ecological Society" and "The Spanish Anarchists" confirmed this.

Bookchin placed ecological thought and concerns at the heart of anarchism and vice versa. His account of the Spanish Anarchist movement is unsurpassed and his critique of Marxism and Leninism still essential reading. His argument that only a free and open society (i.e. libertarian socialism) can resolve the problems confronting the environment remains as true today as first formulated in the 1960s.

The negative effects of hierarchy, statism and capitalism on the ecosystem have reached such proportions that even key

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Retrieved on 26th October 2020 from libcom.org

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sections of the ruling elite cannot ignore them – although, of course, their solutions will be technological fixes (what Bookchin termed environmentalism) rather than genuine solutions which tackle the root causes rather mere symptoms (ecology). A clear and thoughtful writer on many subjects, Bookchin’s works have enriched anarchist thought and he will be solely missed.

Saying that, his legacy is not unproblematic. His ideas on social ecology, while essential for any modern anarchist, were tied to a strategy (libertarian municipalism) which was inherently reformist. The idea of anarchists standing in local elections to provide a legal base for creating popular assemblies was always doomed to failure, for reasons anarchists had explained to Marxists since the 1860s. We are, in other words, direct actionists for good reasons!

Then there is his critique of the working class as a force of social change. Here, I think, he most showed that his initial political experience was with Marxism (he joined the Communist youth organization at age 9, expelled a few years later he became a Trotskyist for a short period before becoming an anarchist).

Sadly, this early experience seemed to have shaped his notion of what “proletarian” and “worker” meant, limiting it to those wage slaves in mass production industries rather than all people who sell their labour to a boss. Such a definition of “worker” always seemed to me to be narrow and a handicap to political analysis. As confirmed when his ideas were used by those who would later turn against him to attack class struggle anarchists as “workerists” (indeed, those who attack “workerist” anarchists always seem to me to have an understanding of class far more in common with “vulgar” Marxists than the people they are attacking).

That said, Bookchin correctly placed hierarchy back at the heart of contemporary anarchism after some (particularly syndicalists) focused it more on to (economic) class. I think that

few, if any, class struggle anarchists today have such a narrow focus – even if some of our opponents claim we do – and that is thanks, in large part, to Bookchin’s work (even if, at times, he appeared to throw the baby out with the bath water!). Similarly, few, if any, anarcho-syndicalists or other class struggle anarchists today would be as uncritical of existing technologies and the division of labour they imply as they appeared to be before Bookchin’s work on the subject.

The last five years of his life saw him distance himself from, then vigorously attack, the anarchism he had done so much to enrich and develop (for example, his account of Spanish Anarchism in volume 4 of his “The Third Revolution” utterly contradicts his early praise and analysis, coming across as a bitter tirade by someone ignorant of his subject and his introduction to the last edition of “Post-Scarcity Anarchism” mars a classic book).

This flowed from the polemics produced by his “Social Anarchism versus Lifestyle Anarchism” and conducted (by both sides) with increasing personal abuse and venom. Having recently reread that book, I still find his critique valid, if flawed in parts. By concentrating on minor mistakes as well as Bookchin’s own reformist strategy, his critics managed to ignore the very valid critique of technophobia, primitivism and related nonsense it contained. Sadly, rather than dismiss his critics as being not his kind of anarchist and moving on, he ended up agreeing with them that anarchism was inherently individualistic!

However, his later attempts to deny that social ecology was a form of eco-anarchism can, and will, be forgotten in favour of his early works. So while Bookchin may have tried to trash his own legacy in the last years of his life (undoubtedly a product of the Alzheimer’s disease he suffered from), anarchists (I hope) will be more generous and remember, apply and develop the contributions of a great, if flawed, comrade.