

Interview with Murray Bookchin

A controversial anarchist talks about government, the Libertarian Party, Ayn Rand, and the evolution of his own ideas.

Jeff Rigggenbach

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There's certainly nothing precedent-shattering about the thought of a speaker at a national Libertarian Party convention stirring up controversy within the libertarian movement. Timothy Leary did it in 1977 at the national convention in San Francisco. And it had been done more than a few times before that. But for a speaker at a national LP convention to stir up the movement before he's even assumed his position on the speaker's platform, before the convention he's addressing has even convened—now, that's no mean feat. And Murray Bookchin, the man who did it at the 1978 convention in Boston, may well have shattered a precedent or two in the process.

*Actually, no role could possibly have made Bookchin more comfortable at the Boston convention than that of precedent shatterer: it's a role he's been playing for the past quarter-century. In 1951, 11 years before the publication of Rachel Carson's celebrated *Silent Spring*, the book that is usually credited with launching the ecology movement, Bookchin published an article on the environment called "The Problem of Chemicals" in the English socialist magazine *Contemporary Issues*. In 1965 he anticipated dozens of later, more influential books on the plight of the metropolis by publishing his own: *Crisis in Our Cities*.*

Ironically, it was neither Bookchin's views on ecology nor his views on the cities that touched off instant controversy upon announcement of his inclusion in the tentative program for the 1978 convention. Rather, it was his views on organization, and specifically on political organization. According to his critics, Bookchin opposes all hierarchy—all organization in which some carry out the orders and plans of others—as inherently unlibertarian. He also regards political parties, they said, as inherently unlibertarian. How could such a person be invited to speak at a convention of the Libertarian Party?

More or less formal protests were lodged against Bookchin's appearance by prominent and influential libertarians. But Bookchin was also used to being opposed by those whom he considered his allies—in the American labor movement of the '30s, in the American Communist movement of the late '30s and early '40s, even in the New Left movement of the '60s, where his famous pamphlet, "Listen, Marxist!" was widely regarded as heretical and blasphemous. But however much opposition he had encountered, through all his many changes in political direction, he had always managed to have his say. And he managed to have it again at the 1978 LP convention in Boston.

The convention was conveniently located for Bookchin, who lives these days between two homes: one in New York City, where he was born 58 years ago and has lived most of his life; and another in Vermont, where he teaches at Goddard College. He addressed a Saturday morning breakfast crowd of about 150 conventioners and won a standing ovation for his remarks, titled “Nonauthoritarian Forms of Organization.” Then he retired to the press room for interviews. REASON’s interviewer Jeff Rigggenbach was first in line, eager to learn more about this latest wrinkle in the unpredictable career of this Marxist-turned-anarchist. He had integrated, or claimed to have integrated, his anarchism with ecology and urban sociology. Had he now also achieved an intellectual rapprochement with the positions of Ayn Rand and Murray Rothbard? Rigggenbach led off with a question about the issue at the root of it all: the issue of government.

REASON: You’ve said you consider the word *libertarian* and the word *anarchist* to be interchangeable, yet there are people who call themselves “limited-government libertarians.” How does that idea strike you?

BOOKCHIN: I think they probably have not followed the logic of their premises through to their conclusions. The real problem is that “limited government” invariably leads to unlimited government. If history is to be any guide and current experience is to be any guide, we in the United States 200 years ago started out with the notion of limited government—virtually no government interference—and we now have a massive quasi-totalitarian government. I think that people who believe in limited government would benefit greatly by studying the logic in government itself and the role of power as a corruptive mechanism in leading finally to unlimited government. I feel that if people investigate the emergence of government, of State power—if they examine the logic of State power historically, and more specifically in the United States—they will find that the concept of limited government is not tenable once they adopt some type of libertarian principle.

REASON: Some advocates of libertarian limited government say that they are talking about something that hasn’t ever existed historically. They say, for example, that their limited government would not have the power to tax but would have to run lotteries and solicit contributions and that anyone who wanted to, in Herbert Spencer’s phrase, ignore the State, could do so.

BOOKCHIN: In which case they would have abolished the State. That’s the reality of the situation. If the State does not enjoy a monopoly of violence, which then gives it the power to order people’s lives and to compel them to obey decisions over which they have no control, or just limited control, then I think you have a consistently libertarian society.

REASON: Do you see a fundamental inconsistency in working toward libertarian ends by means of a political party?

BOOKCHIN: I think there is an inconsistency there, but I believe that people have to explore that inconsistency themselves. I’m not sitting in judgment on whether or not libertarians can participate in a political process whose very nature they oppose.

Look: the State is a professional apparatus that sets itself apart from the people and apart from the institutions that the people themselves create. It’s a monopoly on violence that manages and institutionalizes social activities. The people are perfectly capable of managing themselves and creating their own institutions. They have done so from time immemorial. The State always opposes these institutions. A bureaucracy opposes a village council or a village assembly or a town meeting. It tries to usurp their powers.

And my personal feeling is that when one tries to function within the State apparatus in trying to deal with it, take it over, one tends to build one’s own structure in a fashion that replicates the

State. And one does this almost unknowingly. One is gradually seduced into creating an executive such as the State has, a legislature such as the State has, a national bureaucracy such as the State has. Take a very striking case in point: the Russian Bolsheviks. Lenin created an alleged workers' party, which in every way reflected the Czarist machine, in order to deal with Czarism. And the danger and the hazards of trying to accommodate libertarian principles to the political process as we know it today is that one begins to dissolve the libertarian principles. So I would say that there *is* an inconsistency there that should be explored.

But this does not mean that I believe libertarians should not get involved in one or another level of the political process. They should. I find it perfectly consistent for libertarians to operate on the municipal or county level, where they are close to the people and where they may have a party or a federation that is made up of the social institutions, the residual social institutions that still remain, over and beyond what the State has managed to preempt and absorb.

I find it exciting, for example, that candidates for the Amsterdam City Council back in the '60s based their so-called party structure on neighborhood associations, food cooperatives, communes. Their "party," as it were, was built on neighborhood structures. It was not built from the top down—the national committee, the state committee, the local committee, the various bureaucracies, the salaried officials—but organically, from the bottom up, on the basis of institutions that already existed in the neighborhoods: child-care centers, people's markets, farmers' markets. It then coalesced organically, like an embryo in the womb of the mother, into a nationwide confederation—and, in Amsterdam, a very effective political structure. This is all-important in my opinion, because if people do not organize in this way, they will not develop the habits, the state of mind, the character structure, that will make it possible for them to finally create a libertarian society.

REASON: If the State disappeared tomorrow, would there be "chaos"?

BOOKCHIN: Yes, utterly. I say this ironically, not because I favor the State, but because people are not in the state of mind right now where they feel that they can manage themselves. We have to go through an educational process—which does not involve, in my opinion, compromises with the State. But if the State disappeared tomorrow by accident, and the police disappeared and the army disappeared and the government agencies disappeared, the ironical situation is that people would suddenly feel denuded.

REASON: Would you say that libertarians are right-wingers? A great many people in the national media and in national politics continue to regard libertarianism as some sort of splinter group of the William Buckley-style conservatives.

BOOKCHIN: I categorically deny that. The American left today as I know it—and believe me, I am very familiar with the American left—is going toward authoritarianism, toward totalitarianism. It's becoming the real right in the United States. We don't have an appreciable American left any more in the United States. What I saw of the SDS in the '60s was very abhorrent to me: Marxism, Leninism, almost the KGB mentality—a police politics that I found completely totalitarian in nature. And in Europe, I would say that today the real support for State power and totalitarianism comes from the Communist parties and the Socialist parties and, where they are sizable, the Trotskyist groups. They are the ones that really frighten me.

People who resist authority, who defend the rights of the individual, who try in a period of increasing totalitarianism and centralization to reclaim these rights—this is the true left in the United States. Whether they are anarcho-communists, anarcho-syndicalists, or libertarians who believe in free enterprise, I regard theirs as the real legacy of the left, and I feel much closer,

ideologically, to such individuals than I do to the totalitarian liberals and Marxist-Leninists of today.

REASON: What about people like Murray Rothbard—anarcho-capitalists?

BOOKCHIN: I would prefer not to give any reply to that, mainly because Murray and I have a bit of a history together, and I think there've been some grave misunderstandings, perhaps on both our parts. I would rather see them resolved than develop into heated controversy—despite, I think, a not very generous letter that appeared over his signature and Mr. Williamson Evers's signature in *Liberty*, the Massachusetts Libertarian Party publication. That letter grossly misrepresented my position on Marxism as being a “necessary ideology.” That's archaic, to say the least. I regard Marxism as the most sinister and the most subtle form of totalitarianism. There are people, of course, who profess to be libertarian Marxists. I believe they mean very well, and I even write in their periodicals; but I write very militantly that I regard Marxism as a very subtle form of what I would call the totalitarian ideology—all the more subtle because it professes to advance the notions of freedom. I don't think that the Soviet Union and China are accidents, aberrations; I think they follow from Marxism-Leninism. I think that Leninism comes out of Marx's basic convictions.

REASON: If you won't comment directly on Murray Rothbard's theories, will you comment on the general idea of a capitalist society that is also an anarchist society? Suppose we had a free society whose people chose to divide their labor, specialize in producing certain goods and services, and trade among themselves?

BOOKCHIN: I'd have no quarrel with them. I would say that *that* is not capitalism—though there are many different definitions. One would call that, in Marxist language—and there's a sense in which Marx does contribute to the fund of human knowledge, and we can no more dismiss him than we can Hegel or Rousseau or Spinoza or Darwin; you don't have to be a Darwinian to appreciate Darwin's views, and I don't have to be a Marxist to appreciate what is valid in a number of Marx's writings—and Marx would call that a form of simple commodity production rather than capitalism. But if you want to call it capitalism, do so. I don't want to get enmeshed in any semantic issues. My feeling is that whatever people elect to do, insofar as they don't deny the rights of others, every effort should be made to defend their right to do it.

I believe in a libertarian communist society. But, I believe that any attempt on the part of a libertarian communist society to abridge the rights of a community—for example, to operate on the basis of a market economy of the kind that you describe—would be unforgivable, and I would oppose the practices of such a society as militantly as I think any reader of your publication would. I want to make that very clear. On the other hand, where an attempt is made to expropriate, as was done in so much of the world, you know, in the name of free enterprise—in the names of God, whiskey, commerce, and Western civilization, to use Kipling's language—that, of course, I would oppose.

I have no quarrel with libertarians who advance the concept of capitalism of the type that you have advanced. I believe that people will decide for themselves what they want to do. The all-important thing is that they be free to make that decision and that they do not stand in the way of communities that wish to make other decisions. I could live beautifully in a society of the kind that you have described, as well as in a collectivistic one. However, if that collectivistic one assumed any totalitarian forms, any authoritarian forms whatever, I would oppose that. And not only that: I would join your community in fighting it. Let me make it very plain that if socialism, which is what I call the authoritarian version of collectivism, were to emerge, I would

join your community. I would migrate to your community and do everything I could to prevent the collectivists from abridging my right to function as I like. That should be made very clear.

REASON: Have you read Ursula K. Le Guin's recent novel, *The Dispossessed*?

BOOKCHIN: Yes.

REASON: What do you think of the anarcho-communist society in that novel? Is it something of the sort that you would like?

BOOKCHIN: No, it isn't. It's an anarcho-syndicalist society. And I think that Ursula Le Guin is conscious of the limitations of such a society. Anarcho-communism, or libertarian communism, is not anarcho-syndicalism. I feel close to the anarcho-syndicalists, primarily because they are antiauthoritarian, but I don't believe that society will be structured around factories or work places. I believe that a truly libertarian society will be structured around communities, not around economies: that the economy will merely become part of the community.

What I think Ursula, whom I greatly admire—it's been my pleasure to have contact with her on a more than purely literary basis, in the sense that we've exchanged good vibes with each other—what I think Ursula is trying to demonstrate is that in such an anarcho-syndicalist society, or for that matter, in an anarcho-communist society, you can create a kind of tyranny in the name of the libertarian ideal.

REASON: In Ursula Le Guin's anarcho-syndicalist society, there was no privately held land, but there was personal property. People owned books and other portable items. In your ideal anarcho-communist society would there be such personal property?

BOOKCHIN: There would be personal property, but there would only be private property to the extent that people elected to engage in the private property society. My concern over private property is that it no longer fosters individuality. The historic destiny of private property is that it has created a highly corporatized economy, and I have to ask myself why. What is it in the market that led 100 capitalists to dissolve into 10 as a result of rivalry and accumulation, 10 into 3, and I think if the system has its way, those 3 into 1?

REASON: Wasn't it the State that was responsible?

BOOKCHIN: The State certainly played a decisive role. But I also believe that it may have stemmed from the rivalry itself. Grow or die, devour or die. That's the one problem that I have to wrestle with. I have to wrestle with whether or not rivalry in the free market does not ultimately lead to concentration, corporatism, and finally totalitarianism.

There was a period of time, indubitably, in Jefferson's time, when the farmer, the yeoman—the American yeoman, standing on his land with his musket—represented a forward step for individuality. But today the millions that flow in and out of New York anonymously, through mass transportation, through the tunnels and over the bridges that lead into and out of the suburbs—these are among the most deindividualized people I've encountered in 57 years of living. Most of them are organization men and women and have become denuded of all personality and uniqueness. They're figments; they're creatures, in fact. They're creatures of the mass media and of the corporate world that has rendered them totally homogenized and anonymous. Now already the attempt to preserve what we in America would call private property, the rights of US Steel and the rights of General Motors, has become literally a step in the direction of the deindividualization of the American people and their reduction to masses.

REASON: Have you seen your image of an anarcho-communist society anywhere in fiction?

BOOKCHIN: Yes. In William Morris's *News from Nowhere*. That is my favorite utopia—one of my favorite utopias, anyway.

REASON: What do you think of Ayn Rand's novels?

BOOKCHIN: I have really mixed feelings about them. On the one hand, I have an admiration, even though I'm not likely to do that sort of thing myself, for Roark's behavior when he decided that his design was not being followed—which was a gross violation, by the way, of private property rights, because the building was his.

That aside, I am concerned that people who admire Rand are not often critical enough of the extent to which she has abridged the implications of these novels. Realistically speaking, Ayn Rand should not have opposed the antidraft movement and supported the Vietnam War effort—in effect, she supported military conscription. What higher property do you have than your own person? I totally agree, by the way, with John Locke's idea that one's body is literally the most precious property that exists. I would say that conscription is the most heinous violation of property that one can imagine. And I would agree that much with people who accept private property—that conscription is an unpardonable transgression, whether it be "corrupt" or not. The Spanish anarchists opposed conscription during the civil war in Spain as a gross expropriation of property, the most precious property that we have, our own physical beings themselves. But Rand accepts that when she supports military conscription, even indirectly. Also, she starts her politics from the premise that the State must have police power. She fails to take into account the inevitability that once you start with police power you're going to have a police State.

I think one must confront Rand on these limitations as well as admire certain things that she has said that I think *are* libertarian. I have very mixed feelings.

REASON: Left-wing anarchists ordinarily have nothing good to say about writers like Lysander Spooner, Benjamin R. Tucker, and Albert Jay Nock. What do you think about the individualist anarchists?

BOOKCHIN: I don't feel the individualist anarchists, particularly in the American tradition, including the Transcendental tradition of New England, in any way deserve the derogatory comments that are often made about them by the left. When one gets down to it ultimately, my anarcho-communism stems from a commitment to true individuality. My attempt to recover the power and the right of the individual to control his or her life and destiny is the basis to my anarcho-communism.

If anarcho-communism served to regiment the population in the name of libertarian unity, if it served in any way through collectivist measures to deny the rights of the individual instead of reconciling the rights of the individual with the collective, I would definitely stand completely on the side of the individualist who is trying to rescue above all that most precious thing that makes us human—consciousness and personality. Wherever people defend the rights of the individual, I stand with them above all, over and beyond any wishes relating to how an economy should be managed or how people should govern themselves. This is a very strong commitment on my part.

When I talk about self-management, self-regulation, self-government, the word I emphasize is *self*, and my concern is with the reconstruction of the self. Marxists and even many, I think, overly enthusiastic anarchists have neglected that self. I regard individuality as the most precious trait we have, because without it there is no creativity, there is no consciousness, there is no rationality. There is nothing that could make me speak more strongly to this point. I address myself to it as being the primary question.

My communism attempts basically to create a shared society, that's all; a shared society in which individuality will flourish, along with love, and along with mutual respect. I am not a

communist first and an individualist second. I am an individualist first, and I don't mean this in the shallow, purely egotistical sense of self-interest and everyone else be damned. I mean this in the true sense of enlightenment, recovery of personality, and the full development of personality.

REASON: You were a Marxist in the '30s. Obviously your ideas have changed.

BOOKCHIN: Oh, drastically. I was a Stalinist in the '30s. I had come from a Russian revolutionary family who simply were elated by the fact that the Czar was overthrown by this group known as the Bolsheviks. My family identified with anybody who overthrew the Czar. So they identified themselves intuitively with Bolshevism. I was raised as a red diaper baby, and I went through the communist children's movement at the age of nine, in 1930, and into the Young Communist League in 1936. The Spanish civil war brought me back. I'd already broken with the communists—or the Stalinists, more precisely—in 1935. But the civil war in Spain and the desire to aid the remarkable people struggling against Fascism brought me back to the Young Communist League, so that I could effectively participate, however far removed from Spain, in their struggle. By 1938 I was ready to be expelled. By 1939 I *was* expelled.

I then got deeply involved with the Trotskyists. I assumed simply that my enemy's enemies were my friends. But I learned that they were no different from the Stalinists, and they expelled me, which is the typical Marxist-Leninist way of dealing with dissenters. From that point on, I migrated by the 1950s into anarchism, increasingly emphasizing decentralization. Also, I made the all-important step of bridging my social philosophy with ecology. I did that in 1952 and went on to write a whole series of books developing an anarcho-ecological approach.

REASON: What do you think of combining anarchism with pacifism as Robert LeFevre does—holding that violence is under no circumstances justifiable, even in self-defense; that one should attempt to escape rather than return violence if one is attacked?

BOOKCHIN: I have a great admiration for pacifism, but I'm not a pacifist, mainly because I *would* defend myself if I were attacked, and I believe that the American people should defend themselves if any attempt is made to take over the government by coup d'état, whether by the military or the Marxists or any people who profess to be anarchists. But I do have an intense respect for pacifists, because I believe that ultimately, if we are to have a truly humanistic as well as libertarian society, violence will have to be banished on this planet.

I detest violence. I have a tremendous respect not only for human life but also for the animal life that I have to live with, and I believe that our destiny as human beings is to become nature-conscious as well as self-conscious, living in loving relationship and in balance and in harmony, not only with one another, but with the entire natural world. I have an enormous respect for it and to a great degree tend to follow it personally: pacifist strategies and approaches, and the pacifistic philosophy. But I will not call myself a pacifist for the very simple reason that if something like a Franco should arise in Spain again, or, for that matter, in America, and tried to take away whatever dwindling civil liberties and human rights we retain, I would resist them with a club if I had to. But my admiration for pacifism as an outlook and a sensibility is enormous. I just find that it gets me into contradictions, as it often gets many pacifists into contradictory positions and strategies.

REASON: You're something of a rebel academically, as well as politically, being a professor without a degree.

BOOKCHIN: Yes, though I have gone to college. I've had training in electronics engineering, of all things, and in languages. But I've never taken any degree, something I share with Lewis Mumford, I think.

Instead I've worked in the factories of this land, and I've thought freely and creatively. And I think that that has greatly enriched my capacity to abstract intellectually. The experience of being with workers, my encounters with management and my recognition of its foibles, my personal encounters with American industrial efficiency, my military experience—all of these things packaged together have greatly enriched my reading and my understanding, and I've written with what I hope is a reasonable fluency of style that is much more expressive than the academic stuff.

This style of mine is also a reflection of my thinking. My thinking is very flexible, and I hope that it will remain flexible and creative as long as biology permits me to think and that I will remain a rebel all my life. I will never compromise—I can now say with assurance at the age of 57—with my libertarian and my revolutionary commitments; they'll have to kill me first. They can't buy me out. I'm just not interested in what they have to offer. I've managed to stick it out, and the thing that has been the most rescuing, the most redeeming, feature of my life that has kept me alive, that has kept me more or less single-minded about my commitment to libertarian ideals once I escaped the trap of Marxist-Leninism—a childhood trap, to be sure—has been consciousness. Consciousness. That's why I prize individuality. Deny my individuality and I become an animal, mute, a mere creature of all the forces that act upon me. I will never surrender the rights of the individual—the complete rights of the individual—to any “ism” whatever.

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