Domesticating the Dialectic

A Critique of Bookchin's Neo-Aristotelian Metaphysics

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27 Sep 2008 & 5 March 2009

Contents

Dialectic at Work

The topic of this discussion is ecological philosopher Murray Bookchin's peculiar conception of dialectic. I call his use of dialectic its "domestication." Bookchin himself called his project "ecologizing the dialectic," and since "ecology" comes from *oikos*, the household or domestic sphere, one might think that Bookchin's "domesticating the dialectic" could mean something like "ecologizing" it. Don't think that. Bookchin did not in fact develop an ecological dialectic, but instead used dialectic — in a form that I will call "immanent dialectic" — in a purely instrumental manner to legitimate a fundamentally neo-Aristotelian and nondialectical metaphysics. Authentic dialectic remains the "ruthless critique of everything existing" (including the existing dialectician). Bookchin's instrumentalization of dialectic "domesticates" it in the sense that it robs it of its wildness, its ferociousness, its bite. Bookchin tames it and turns it into nothing more than a philosophical workhorse doing menial metaphysical labor. His dialectic is to ecological dialectic what a factory farm is to a herd of wild horses.

In a sense, Bookchin's concept of immanent dialectic is implicitly an apologia for his own life and politics, and a rationalization of the failures of that life and politics. This conception rests on the assumptions that the truth of a being is within that being, that dialectical development is above all the process of the unfolding of that truth, and that the challenge for practice is to destroy the barriers that stand in the way of that process.[1] His conception of the problematic for the revolutionary movement is analogous. In his own eyes, he had personally discovered the ultimate socially transformative truth (dialectical naturalism) — which also contained the secret of revolution, the key to the liberation of humanity — and had entrusted this treasure to his small group of disciples. The essence of political praxis was thus the struggle to spread the truth as handed down from the master, to put it into practice (libertarian municipalism or Communalism), and to fight against all the forces that wrong-headedly fail to accept it.

For Bookchin, the forces to be combatted vehemently for standing in the way of the March of History were not only those allied explicitly with capitalism, the state, and reactionary ideologies. Indeed, the most dangerous impediments to revolution (that is, to the acceptance of Bookchin's ideas) were on the Left, and these became his obsessive objects of unrelenting attack and indeed venomous abuse. His preferred targets varied over time but included Marxists, social democrats, anarcho-syndicalists, post-modernists, deep ecologists, ecofeminists, bioregionalists, and, above all, the accursed "life-style anarchists" who ultimately impelled him to withdraw from the anarchist movement in disgust and to judge it a hopeless failure, much like every other tendency on the Left. Bookchin was constitutionally incapable of confronting any of his opponents in a dialectical manner. He never treated adherents of contending positions as subjects worthy of dialogue, or their positions as possible sources of truth to be developed dialectically. Rather, he saw them as mere obstacles, as resistant Things that stood in the way of the teleological March of History and the coming to fruition of the Bookchinite revolutionary movement.

Even though, after decades of preaching such sectarian politics, Bookchin saw his World Historical movement still limited essentially to a small circle of primarily young, male, middle-class,

[1] This "immanent dialectic" is not to be confused with "immanent critique," the dialectical process of demonstrating internal contradictions in an ideology or form of consciousness by developing its presuppositions fully. "Immanent dialectic" is pseudo-dialectic that seeks to remain within the limits of immanence, whereas immanent critique begins with what is immanent in order to pass beyond those limits through the power of the negative. There is in reality no "immanent dialectic."

and almost exclusive Anglophone disciples in Vermont and a few other places, he was not moved to rethink his position. Rather, he became more frustrated, angrier, and even more entrenched in abstract ideology. He became a paradigm for what we might call the Unhappy Political Unconsciousness. For him, the truth remained in the realm of immanent possibility, the world still awaited the teleological unfolding of this truth, and those who stood in its way remained mere Things.

How could he justify such a hopelessly ineffectual, callously insensitive, intellectually self-destructive, and politically suicidal problematic? The answer is simple: it required only a correct understanding of dialectic.

A Vegetative Dialectic

Bookchin called his philosophical position "dialectical naturalism" and claimed that a form of "dialectical reason" was central to his theoretical project. Particularly in his later life, he depicted himself as a defender of both dialectical reason and "Reason" in general against what he saw as the dire threats posed to it by dangerous tendencies ranging from neo-primitivism to post-modernism. An understanding of Bookchin's peculiar conception of dialectic depends on comprehension of the place in his thought of what he conceived of as this upper-case Reason.

Marcuse once wrote that "it is the idea of Reason itself which is the undialectical element in Hegel's philosophy."[2] Reason for Hegel entailed a belief in a teleological metaphysics that interpreted the realms of Ideas, Nature, and World History as aspects of the eternal self-expression and temporal unfolding of universal Spirit. This dogmatic metaphysics was elaborated and defended through the most subtle and incisive dialectical analysis, but it was itself resistant to dialectical critique. Hostile and unperceptive critics have identified dialectic with such a teleological metaphysics in Hegel and other dialectical thinkers. In doing so, they have falsely equated dialectic with the most non-dialectical dimensions of these thinkers' philosophies.

Bookchin engages in a similar travesty of dialectic. There is some irony in this, since he does so from the standpoint of its supposed champion, rather than that of an opponent. Nevertheless, it is precisely the most non-dialectical aspects of Hegel's thought (basically the Aristotelian teleological elements) that Bookchin adopts as his model for dialectic. As a result, his writings are replete with pseudo-dialectical musings, though quite contrary to the case of Hegel, it would be difficult to find even a single example of subtle and incisive dialectical analysis in defense of his larger undialectical project.

There is a passage from Hegel that Bookchin repeatedly invokes as a kind of proof text to purportedly establish the true meaning of dialectic. It goes as follows:

> Because that which is implicit comes into existence, it certainly passes into change, yet it remains one and the same, for the whole process is dominated by it. The plant, for example, does not lose itself in mere indefinite change. From the germ much is produced when at first nothing was to be seen; but the whole of what is brought forth, if not developed, is yet hidden and ideally contained within it. The principle of this projection into existence is that the germ cannot remain merely implicit, but

[2] Herbert Marcuse, "A Note on Dialectic," in *Reason and Revolution: Hegel and the Rise of Social Theory* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1960), p. xii.

> is impelled towards development, since it presents the contradiction of being only implicit and yet not desiring so to be. But this coming without itself has an end in view; its completion is fully reached, and its previously determined end is the fruit or produce of the germ, which causes a return to the first condition."[3]

Bookchin calls this passage "one of [Hegel's] most trenchant accounts of the dialectic," by which he means that it is penetrating and incisive, and thus a faithful standard by which one can know dialectic when one sees it, as in his own works.

However, the passage is also "trenchant" for Bookchin in the root sense — from the French, *trancher*, meaning to cut or slice, or metaphorically, to "define" something by cutting it off from other possible meanings. Bookchin does precisely this. He disjoins this limited meaning from the context of a larger, richer sense of dialectic that pervades Hegel's thought and the entire history of dialectical philosophy. The advantages of this tack are great in terms of his practico-theoretical project. If one can tame dialectic by defining it in terms of immanent teleology, one is shielded from the troubling implications of its truly radical form — that wild dialectic that threatens all fixed concepts and dogmatic thought.

The Virtues of Self-Contradiction

Bookchin is quite clear about his acceptance of the model of dialectic as internal teleology. He states that in "dialectical causality" we understand the development of a being by the principle that "insofar as the implicit is fully actualized by becoming what it is constituted to be, the process is truly rational, that is to say, *it is fulfilled by virtue of its internal logic*."[4] According to this teleological model, the primary contradiction (and the only one that Bookchin usually discusses) is immanent or internal to the being. He sees the "nature of a being" as being "contradictory" when that being "is unfulfilled in the sense that it is only implicit or incomplete. As mere potentiality, it has not 'come to itself,' so to speak."[5] Dialectical contradiction is thus seen as the contradiction between a being's potential and the actualization of that potential. As Bookchin expresses this elsewhere, "dialectical contradiction exists within the structure of a thing or phenomenon by virtue of a formal arrangement that is incomplete, inadequate, implicit, and unfulfilled in relation to what it 'should be.'"[6]

This idea that the goal of the dialectic is what a being "should be" is an important one for Bookchin. He states that:

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[3] G.W.F. Hegel *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, Vol. 1, trans. E. S. Haldane and Frances H. Samson (New York: Humanities Press, 1955), p. 22, quoted in Murray Bookchin, *The Ecology of Freedom* (Palo Alto, CA: Cheshire Books, 1982), p. 285 and also in *The Philosophy of Social Ecology* (Montreal: Black Rose Books, 1990), p. 28 in the introduction and p. 171 in the concluding essay.

[4] Murray Bookchin, "A Philosophical Naturalism" in *The Philosophy of Social Ecology: Essays on Dialectical Naturalism*, 2nd ed. revised (Montreal: Black Rose Books, 1995), online at `http://dwardmac.pitzer.edu/Anarchist_Archives/bookchin/philosonatural.html`. Emphasis added. This text is Bookchin's most detailed explanation of his conception of "dialectic" and is the introduction to what he thought of as his most philosophically sophisticated work. Note: all references to this article use the online version, which does not have page numbers.

[5] *Ibid.*

[6] *Ibid.*

> it would be philosophically frivolous to embrace the "what-is" of a thing or phenomenon as constituting its "reality" without considering it in the light of the "what-should-be" that would logically emerge from its potentialities. Nor do we ordinarily do so in practice. We rightly evaluate an individual in terms of his or her known potentialities, and we form understandable judgments about whether the individual has truly "fulfilled" himself or herself.[7]

This then is the nature of Bookchin's immanent dialectic: its focus is the unfolding of the potentiality that is inherent within a being and the basis for normative judgment lies in the degree to which this immanent potential is realized.

Levins and Lewontin have identified a major failing of "bourgeois thought" to be its undialectical, ideological perspective in which "change is often seen as the regular unfolding of what is already there." This criticism also identifies perfectly the failing of Bookchin's conception of dialectic. Levins and Lewontin note that the problem they pinpoint "also contaminates socialist thought when the dynamic view of history as a history of class struggle is replaced by the grand march of stages."[8] The dialectical clash of heterogeneous yet interrelated elements is replaced by the orderly unfolding of what is already known by the revolutionary ideologists to be there. Bookchin is a paradigm case of the leftist variety of this malady. Such identitarian thinking contaminates not only his view of the sweeping course of history but his interpretation of social and natural phenomena in general.

Thus, it is clear that Bookchin's position is not only Aristotelian but teleological, and that he confuses dialectic with internal teleology. Nevertheless, he goes to great lengths in an attempt to deny his acceptance of teleology. He does this through the erroneous claim that a teleological viewpoint implies that development is "inevitable," "preordained" or "predestined." For example, he protests: "I'm not a teleologist, I don't believe that any development is inevitable,"[9] and claims that the term "teleology" is "redolent with notions of a predetermined, inexorable end."[10] He argues that his "dialectical eductions" have "no teleological referent" because "neither the rational unfolding of human potentialities nor their actualization in an eternally given 'Totality' is predestined."[11] And he explains that his position affirms only that there is an "end in view," not that the end is "preordained, to state this point from an ecological viewpoint rather than from a theological one."[12]

Bookchin's protests against possible charges of theological thinking are telling. Elsewhere he says that he does not "have recourse to theistic 'perfection' to explain the almost magnetic eliciting of a development."[13] But the term "elicited" implies the question "elicited by what?" And

[7] *Ibid*. In this passage we see Bookchin as the representative of patriarchal "Reason" offering his stern judgment on "frivolous" (read "maternal") unconditional love and acceptance of beings as they are. It is impossible in this short discussion to discuss the role of patriarchal values in Bookchin's thinking; however, they are quite evident in his developmentalism, his self-conscious Prometheanism, his call for "muscularity of thought," and his contempt for what he labeled "passive-receptive" outlooks.

[8] Richard Levins and Richard Lewontin, *The Dialectical Biologist* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985), p. 276.

[9] Murray Bookchin, "Interview with Murray Bookchin in the Summer of 2000," *Harbinger: A Journal of Social Ecology*, Vol. 2, No. 1, online at `http://www.social-ecology.org`

[10] Murray Bookchin, *The Ecology of Freedom*, p. 284.

[11] Murray Bookchin, "History, Civilization, and Progress," online at `http://dwardmac.pitzer.edu/anarchist_archives/booko`

[12] Murray Bookchin, *The Philosophy of Social Ecology*, p. 171.

[13] Murray Bookchin, "A Philosophical Naturalism."

"magnetic" raises the question of the nature and location of the magnet. To say that a magnet acts magnetically certainly implies no theology. To say that plants develop because they are "magnetically" drawn toward their actualized state may or may not imply a theology. But when the magnetic force is extended to the point at which it draws society and indeed the entire evolution of life on earth toward a certain political and social order, one must wonder whether some unidentified God is not lurking somewhere in the background with a large magnet.

Whether or not Bookchin was aware of such dangerous implications of his teleological thinking, he seemed rather desperate to distinguish himself from the deluded individuals who actually accept teleology. But who is it that he has in mind when he refers to those true teleologists who believe in the inevitability of everything that seems to be headed in some direction? Specifically, he contrasts himself with those who accept "medieval teleological notions of an unswerving predetermination in a hierarchy of Being."[14] He distinguishes his views from those archaic notions by his awareness that what is "brought forth" in development "is not necessarily developed: an acorn, for example, may become food for a squirrel or wither on a concrete sidewalk, rather than develop into what it is potentially constituted to become — notably, an oak tree."[15] Presumably, the truly teleological thinkers have been incapable of noticing that acorns were sometimes eaten by squirrels, though it seems hard to believe that this would have gone unnoticed even in the Middle Ages. (Perhaps he was thinking of the Extremely Dark Ages).

Bookchin could have avoided his numerous embarrassingly ill-informed discussions of teleology had he consulted the philosophical literature on the subject, a good introductory philosophy text, or minimally, a competent philosophical dictionary. For example, *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy* gives a standard, non-controversial definition of teleology as "the philosophical doctrine that all nature, or at least intentional agents, are goal-directed or functionally organized."[16] It is also noted that Aristotle introduced the idea of "internal teleology," the view that each kind of being has a final cause and that "entities are so constructed that they tend to realize this goal."[17] This "internal teleology," which asserts "tendency," not "inevitability," is precisely what Bookchin adopts from Aristotle and mislabels "dialectical development."

Problems with Conventional Reason

Bookchin exerts considerable effort on what he conceives of as a "critique of conventional reason" from the standpoint of his supposed dialectical reason. The result of his labors is a striking example of rationalization and self-deception and a quite convincing demonstration of the fact that his own thinking, while sometimes lacking in rationality, is eminently conventional. His depiction of a stark dichotomy between the two types of reason is a ruse to disguise the fact that the teleological logic that he defends is a quite conventional form of non-dialectical thinking.

In order to demonstrate this supposed opposition, Bookchin contrasts "a fairly static, formal, and basically syllogistic logic," certain "formal kinds of reason" that are "modeled on mathematics, particularly geometry," and "the schematic deduction of fixed conclusions based on rigidly stated premises" with his dialectical reason, which, he says, focuses on growth, potentiality and

[14] *Ibid*.

[15] *Ibid*.

[16] Robert Audi (ed.), *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 905.

[17] *Ibid*.

"the *fluid* eduction of ever-differentiated phenomena from generalized, nascent, indeed seed-like beginnings into richly developed *wholes*."[18] Strangely, and quite falsely, he also claims that this formal, deductive kind of reason is the kind "we use for matter-of-fact problems in everyday life."[19] In a similar analysis, he proposes that conventional reason:

> is based on an analysis of phenomena as precisely defined, and whose truth depends upon the internal consistency and their practicality. It focuses on a thing or phenomenon as fixed, with clear-cut boundaries that are immutable for analytical purposes. We know an entity, in this widely accepted notion of reason, when we can analyze it into its irreducible components and determine how they work [sic] as a functioning whole, so that knowledge of the entity will have operational applicability. When the boundaries that "define" a developing thing change — as, for instance, when sand becomes soil — then conventional reason treats sand as sand and soil as soil, much as if they were independent of each other.[20]

He also claims that this form of reason assumes "fixity," "independence," and "mechanical interaction" of phenomena and things, so that causality is merely "a matter of kinetics."[21]

Bookchin's contention that conventional reason (whether analytical, theoretical, deductive, inductive, instrumental, technical, or empirically scientific) cannot take into account changes of one thing into another is just unthinking nonsense. Ordinary chemistry utilizes conventional reasoning. But take a simple reaction: $CaOH_2O0$ $Ca(OH)_2$. Chemistry doesn't consider CaO, H_2O and $Ca(OH)_2$ as "independent" of one another. They are substances that are interrelated (interdependent, connected) as part of a chemical reaction. Furthermore, chemistry can explain what happens on the molecular and atomic levels that makes such a reaction possible. In other words, CaO is not just CaO but rather a substance with a certain structure that makes some reactions possible and others impossible. Thus, substances are far from "independent of each other" from the standpoint of ordinary, conventional, non-dialectical chemistry. Chemistry is certainly not the only science that refutes Bookchin's naive characterization. He also claims that conventional reason "cannot systematically explore processes of becoming, or how a living entity is patterned as a potentiality to phase from one stage of its development into another."[22] Yet this is exactly what biological science does quite well and in minute detail, while his "dialectical" process of "eduction" is satisfied with such profundities as that acorns regularly grow into oak trees, while human embryos typically develop into human beings, and that the life-cycles of such living beings consist of various "phases." The natural sciences in general could never have developed had they followed Bookchin's model of conventional reason, seeing "things" as having "clear-cut boundaries," being "immutable" and being "independent of one another."

A further examination of Bookchin's most definitive text on dialectic shows the degree to which his position is a parody not only of conventional reasoning but also of dialectic itself:

> The dialectical thinker who examines the human life-cycle sees an infant as a self-maintaining human identity while simultaneously developing into a child, from a

[18] Murray Bookchin, "A Philosophical Naturalism," The emphasis is Bookchin's.
[19] Murray Bookchin, *Remaking Society: Pathways to a Green Future* (Montreal: Black Rose Books, 1989), p. 108.
[20] Murray Bookchin, "A Philosophical Naturalism."
[21] *Ibid*.
[22] *Ibid*.

> child into an adolescent, from an adolescent into a youth, and from a youth into an adult. Dialectical reason grasps not only how an entity is organized at a particular moment but how it is organized to go beyond that level of development and become other than what it is, even as it retains its identity.[23]

This passage exhibits particularly well the kind of pabulum that Bookchin continually passed off as dialectical analysis. If one looks carefully at Bookchin's various discussions of the kind of process he describes here, one finds that his consistent "explanation" of how a being is organized to become "other than what it is" while "retaining its identity" is simply that it has the potentiality to do so. What one never finds is any careful philosophical analysis of the meaning of concepts such as "otherness" and "identity," much less a theoretical account of how these concepts are transformed in the process of dialectical development. It is clear that Bookchin's inept caricature of conventional reason has the function of creating a foil beside which his quite uninformative pseudo-dialectical analysis might seem to reveal some deep insights concerning the nature of things.

Hatching the Cosmic Egg

At one point Bookchin explains to his readers that "an egg patently and empirically exists, even though the bird whose potential it contains has yet to develop and reach maturity." This probably comes as news to few of those readers. However, what follows is a quite momentous contention: "Just so, the given potentiality of any process exists and constitutes the basis for a process that should be realized."[24]

"Just so!" It seems not to have occurred to Bookchin that there is a crucial difference between determining the potentialities of a bird's egg and determining those inherent in a social phenomenon, a social practice, a social institution, or a social order. The biological development of members of a various bird species has been observed innumerable times, and certain well-grounded generalizations can be made based on observed regularity. And of course there is the fact that we know quite a bit about ornithology and reproductive biology. On the other hand, specific social phenomena are historically conditioned in enormously complex ways (as any truly dialectical approach would recognize), there are no strictly analogous cases that can be observed as a basis for empirical generalizations, and there is, in fact, no science of society with the predictive powers of natural science.

Bookchin takes another stab at justifying the application of his immanent dialectic to society in his book *The Modern Crisis*. There he says that "really dialectical ways of process-thinking" are able to "seek out the potentiality of a later form in an earlier one," to "seek out the 'forces' that impel the latter to give rise to the former," and to "absorb the notion of process into truly evolutionary ways of thought about the world."[25] When we become adept at such thinking, we discover that "what is potential in an acorn that yields an oak tree or in a human embryo that yields a mature, creative adult is equivalent to what is potential in nature that yields society and what is potential in society that yields freedom, selfhood, and consciousness."[26] However,

[23] *Ibid*.
[24] *Ibid*.
[25] Murray Bookchin, *The Modern Crisis* (Philadelphia: New Society Publishers, 1986), p. 15.
[26] *Ibid*., p. 13.

the "what" that is common to all three of these cases and how it can be "equivalent" in each is explained neither here nor in any of the other similar *ex cathedra* statements on such topics that Bookchin made over several decades.

The general assumption that Bookchin uses to legitimate such groundless speculation is that the valid scope of the process of "dialectical eduction" is quite vast. "Even in the seemingly most subjective projections of speculative reason, *Wirklichkeit*, the 'what-should-be,' is anchored in a continuum that emerges from an objective potentiality, or 'what-is.'"[27] Bookchin's own *Wirklichkeiten*, the products of his own subjective projections, include, for example, what the future of human society "should be" and even what the future of life on earth "should be." A fundamental problem with such subjective projections, including Bookchin's own, is that they are at best descriptions of certain apparent tendencies abstracted from the context of a vast multitude of variables and of complex and often mutually contradictory developments. The language of "anchoring" implies that hypotheses about social development (e.g., that the libertarian municipality must be the basis for emancipatory social transformation and for a new free ecological society everywhere, independent of historical and cultural context) have a kind of deductive or at least inductive basis.

There are two fatal flaws in Bookchin's position. First, he presents no evidence that he has discovered any teleological development of human society that encompasses the past, present, and future of humanity and that is analogous to the healthy growth of a plant or animal across its life cycle. And second, he presents no evidence of how (whether or not he has discovered such a teleology), he would establish a normative basis on which to judge that any particular development of humanity constitutes what "should be."

The Overdetermination of the Will

As has been noted, the political is one of the areas in which Bookchin thought he was particularly apt in eduction, foreseeing the quite specific forms of political organization that would successfully enable humanity to arrive at its ultimate telos. In a late interview, Bookchin explains how the immanent dialectic is expressed in the sphere of political engagement. He asserts that future social transformation depends on the growth of his (presently nearly non-existent) libertarian municipalist movement. He foresees that the movement will establish and control an evergrowing number of municipal assemblies that will move progressively from reformist to revolutionary demands, eventually reaching the point of constituting a system of "dual power" that challenges that of the state.[28] He concludes that "because, ultimately, as this political culture expands and grows, gaining the support of an ever greater number of people, it would have to end in its final 'vision' if the movement presses forward in a dialectical manner to its ultimate demands."[29]

Though he labels the movement's development "dialectical," what is striking is how abstract and undialectical is his formulation of this revolutionary process. In Bookchin's mind, the movement unfolds very much as his proverbial seed grows, according to its internal laws of devel-

[27] Murray Bookchin, "A Philosophical Naturalism."

[28] Murray Bookchin, "Interview With Murray Bookchin" in Janet Biehl, *The Politics of Social Ecology: Libertarian Municipalism* (Montreal: Black Rose Books, 1998), p. 169.

[29] *Ibid*.

opment. Of course, it needs a generic capitalist and state system against which it struggles for survival and growth, and it needs the rest of the Left to stand aside and allow History to finally move on. But he exhibits no awareness that the dynamics of a political movement can exist only in relation to specific state formations, to a specific configuration of the global nation-state system, to certain specific configurations of local, national, and regional capital within the context of the global capitalist system, to certain specific, evolving cultural practices and historically developing institutions, and to certain specific determinations of selfhood and character structure that have an enormous effect on the agents who might take part in the movement. In short, any such movement is confronted by a multitude of forms of otherness that condition the nature of such a movement and its members, the manner in which it and they might develop, and the way in which it and they must dialectically interact with the social whole and all its elements. Thus, every historical situation (revolutionary, pre-revolutionary, or otherwise) is overdetermined by a multitude of dialectically interacting conditions.

In spite of all this, Bookchin's supposedly "dialectical" and "eductive" exposition of human history, of capitalism, of contemporary society, and even of social ecological crisis are all rife with *underdeterminations*. Without fully adopting the Althusserian model of social theory, one can easily see the difference between a serious attempt to account dialectically for the nature of social phenomena and the possibilities for transformation and Bookchin's vague musings on development and directionality in history and foolhardy claims about "educing" the destiny of humanity on the basis of impressionistic observations of history. An example is his discussion of what he calls the "forms of freedom"[30] or the "history of freedom,"[31] in which he selects phenomena scattered across history and reassembles them in an entirely idealist manner as a supposed historical legacy that can either be developed or "eroded." He makes no attempt to relate that abstract legacy to the actually existing rich history of struggle for freedom and justice throughout the world, and to the specific social conditions that might make freedom and justice into historically grounded realities rather than mere abstract ideals. Indeed, in his most explicitly political texts, he rejects that living history of struggle with contempt and focuses instead on the importance of the miniscule tendency influenced by his own thought.[32]

In the end, Bookchin's politics turns out to be a strange amalgam of abstract rationalism and strategic voluntarism. On the one hand, there is the abstract theory of dialectical naturalism, which remains the theoretical basis for his movement, but which seems increasingly out of touch with history and reality. On the other hand, there is the historically ungrounded program of libertarian municipalism, which must simply be propagated with diligence by the small remaining band of Bookchinites. The long-term strategy remains the creation of a condition of dual power to challenge the state and capitalism, but the result after decades has been electoral support in the low single-digits in the few municipalities in which the revolutionary municipalists have been able to raise their filing fees. *Wirklichkeit* has so far been a notorious failure in getting the troops

[30] See Murray Bookchin, "The Forms of Freedom," in *Post-Scarcity Anarchism* (Berkeley: Ramparts Press, 1971), pp. 141169.

[31] See Murray Bookchin, "The Legacy of Freedom" in *The Ecology of Freedom*, pp. 167191.

[32] An example of Bookchin's typically sweeping dismissal of the diverse experience of people in many cultures and movements is his statement that "the 'Third World revolutions' are nationalist rebellions, not 'patriotic' revolutions that speak for humanity." [*The Modern Crisis*, p. 132.] Anyone who has studied or worked with contemporary revolutionary movements around the world can only be appalled at his idea that there is no evidence within them of solidarity with humanity and concern for global justice.

out to the polls. In the absence of the needed ethical substance, the highest expression of revolutionary praxis becomes the process of reading and rereading Bookchin's works and planning renewed efforts to run candidates in local electoral campaigns.

Keeping "Dia" in "Dialectic"

The prefix "dia" comes from the Greek preposition *diá*, meaning "through, between and across" and is related to *dýo*, "two." The rudiments of dialectic can be seen even in these etymological origins, which contain the idea of duality or otherness, on the one hand, and relatedness between the opposing elements on the other. Radical dialectic has always preserved these two crucial and inseparable moments: that of negation and opposition, and that of relation. All dialectical development encompasses both at once. This is what Bookchin misses. For him, the dialectical moment of relatedness *par excellence* take place within the being (or political movement) in its processes of self-development. The crucial (nondialectical) moment of negation takes place in its defensive struggles against external threats to its teleological unfolding.

There is another famous passage from Hegel that says much more about the nature of radical dialectic than does Bookchin's preferred one concerning the dialectic of plants. In the "Preface" to *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel explains that:

> … the life of Spirit is not the life that shrinks from death and keeps itself untouched by devastation, but rather the life that endures it and maintains itself in it. It wins its truth only when, in utter dismemberment, it finds itself. It is this power, not as something positive, which closes its eyes to the negative, as when we say of something that it is nothing or is false, and then having done with it, turn away and pass on to something else; on the contrary, Spirit is this power only by *looking the negative in the face, and tarrying with it.*[33]

What then, is radical dialectic really about in this sense of "looking the negative in the face" and "tarrying" with it? It is the view that change and transformation take place through negation, contradiction, and unexpected reversals of the course that conventional thinking quite reasonably and incorrectly expects. It claims that reality is always one step ahead of conceptualization, so that, as Heraclitus advised, "Always expect the unexpected, or you will never find it," (it being the deviously dialectical truth). It holds that a thing always is not what it is and is what it is not. It contends that determination is negation and that opposites interpenetrate. It recognizes that the objects of investigation are always in motion, and that therefore the categories of analysis are themselves transformed in the process of dialectical inquiry. It asserts that phenomena are conditioned by the wholes (and partial wholes) of which they are a part (and also not a part). And all of this ruthlessly explodes uncritical notions such as that one can understand the nature of a being by looking at the way in which, barring external impediments, its inherent potentialities quite smoothly and rationally move toward their full actualization.

Some examples of authentic dialectical analysis illustrate how sadly this dialectical dimension is lacking in Bookchin's thought.

Radical dialectic is exhibited classically in Hegel's master-slave dialectic. There he shows that independent being and dependent being, contrary to all conventional expectations, begin

[33] G.W.F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), pp. 1819. Emphasis added.

to transform themselves into their opposites — not because of any mere Bookchinite unfolding of latent potentialities within beings, but because of the work of the negative. This includes the self-transforming work of coming to grips with and negating the real of nature, or the self-transforming work of not coming to grips with and not negating that real. It includes the self-negating work of looking death in the face and seeing necessity transformed into contingency. It includes the work of negating social reality through creating ideology and of struggling to negate ideology on behalf of social reality, and of one's creative negation of that reality.

It is exhibited in Marx's dialectical view of labor in which, where conventional reason might see the subject's labor as the production of the object (or perhaps as the Bookchinite unfolding of immanent potentialities of the worker), he sees labor as a dialectical process in which the subject is also produced through dialectical interaction with the other in specific forms of the social labor process and of human metabolism with nature. It is also exhibited when, applying the doctrine of internal relations, he shows that interrelated phenomena, far from having some Bookchinite identity in themselves, are dialectically "identical," generating one another and indeed having no meaning apart from one another. Thus production is not merely production, but "at the same time consumption and consumption is at the same time production. Each is simultaneously its opposite."[34]

It is exhibited perhaps most radically in the Indian philosopher Nagarjuna (circa 150–250 C.E.). According to the tetralemma in Buddhist dialectic, when we consider whether some X can be attributed property Y, we must consider the ways is which X is Y, X is not Y, X both is and is not Y, and X neither is nor is not Y. For Nagarjuna, after we consider the truth of all these dialectical possibilities, we then consider the ways in which all of these attributions lead to contradiction. His negative dialectic is carried on in the practice of Zen, which uses, for example, the dialectical strategy,"When someone asks you a question with being in mind, answer with non-being in mind. When someone asks with non-being in mind, answer with being in mind, etc." Zen mind is dialectical mind. Zen practice is dialectical medicine for the non-dialectical mind. No wonder Bookchin dismissed it (and indeed all of Asian philosophy) as mystical nonsense.

It is exhibited in the dialectical concept that phenomena generate otherness not as mere opposition but as a supplement. This means that beings do not develop by making a smooth Bookchinite transition from potentiality into fully actualized reality. As Adorno states it, "the name of dialectics says no more, to begin with, than that objects do not go into their concepts without leaving a remainder, that they come to contradict the traditional norm of adequacy. Contradiction … indicates the untruth of identity, the fact that the concept does not exhaust the thing conceived."[35] Beings are pervaded with negativity; from a dialectical perspective the facile assumption that development leads merely to ever-increasing "wholeness," an uncritical concept dear to Bookchin, is an illusion.

It is exhibited in the dialectical recognition that all thought takes place from and is deeply conditioned by a perspective. Dialectical inquiry involves a process of critical reflection on its own (that is, someone's, some culture's, some class's, some gender's, some species') perspective, and a willingness to allow that perspective to shift and be transformed. This insight is expressed in the concept of the 'Parallax View" that Zizek adapted from Karatani. In such a view, shifting between

[34] Karl Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (New York: International Publishers, 1970), p. 196; also online in *Marx-Engels Internet Archives* at `http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1859/critique-pol-economy/appx1.htm`.

[35] Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1973), p. 5.

two perspectives (whether cultural, as when an outsider is able to absorb the ethos while retaining the alien perspective, or philosophical, as when one is capable of adopting the perspective of two or more critical theories and juxtaposing them) presents a new insight that goes beyond each.[36] Radical dialectic demolishes all "identity theory" in the most sweeping sense, including the assumption of the sort of godlike neutral perspective that Bookchin naively adopted.

Finally, it is exhibited in the kind of deeply dialectical view of the natural world that is exhibited well in some of Gary Snyder's reflections on nature. For example, he writes that if we look at evolution not from the perspective of the individual organism (and thus not from Bookchin's standpoint of immanent unfolding), but rather

> from the side of the "conditions" and their creative possibilities, we can see these multitudes of interactions through hundreds of other eyes. We could say a food brings a form into existence. Huckleberries and salmon call for bears, the clouds of plankton of the North Pacific call for salmon, and salmon call for seals and thus orcas. The Sperm Whale is sucked into existence by the pulsing, fluctuating pastures of squid, and the open niches of the Galapagos Islands sucked a diversity of bird forms and function out of one line of finch.[37]

Despite all his self-promotion as an "ecological dialectician," Bookchin's discussions of the natural world neglect such dialectical interaction in nature and focus almost entirely on human action upon nature or the ways in which human action upon nature comes to affect humanity (thus human action upon humanity through the mediation of nature).

The "Truly Real" is the Rational

I have spent some time in showing that Bookchin's "dialectical naturalism" is not, in fact, at all dialectical. However, I would be remiss in my duty if I did not point out at least briefly how defective it also is as a form of "naturalism." Bookchin clearly demonstrates the anti-naturalist nature of his naturalism when he explains that "dialectical naturalism asks which is truly real — the incomplete, aborted, irrational 'what-is,' or the complete, fully developed, rational 'what-should-be.'"[38] Thus the conclusion that Bookchin draws from his dialectical inquiry into the nature of things is that the *Wirklichkeit* that he can vaguely and uncritically "educe" as the future destiny of society and nature is more real than what is.

To say the least, to call a view "naturalism" that maligns "what is" as "aborted" and dismisses it as "irrational" is a bit ironic. One reason why Bookchin was horrified by Nietzsche was that that philosopher — from a radically naturalistic perspective — clearly and justly diagnosed the sort of statement that Bookchin makes as a formula for nihilism. Nevertheless, it seems only

[36] See Kojin Karatani, *Transcritique: On Kant and Marx* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2005); and Slavoj Zizek, *The Parallax View* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2006).

[37] Gary Snyder, *Practice of the Wild* (Emeryville, CA: Shoemaker & Hoard, 2004), p. 117. This kind of ecological dialectic was developed extensively in the anarchist tradition in the work of Elisée Reclus, which was never cited by Bookchin. See John Clark, "The Dialectic of Nature and Culture" in John Clark and Camille Martin (eds.), *Anarchy, Geography, Modernity: The Radical Social Thought of Elisée Reclus* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2004), pp. 1942.

[38] Murray Bookchin, "A Philosophical Naturalism." When Bookchin states that "dialectical naturalism says" or "social ecology says," this can be translated with absolute precision by the statement "Murray Bookchin says."

appropriate that someone who uses the word "dialectical" for a thoroughly undialectical position should adopt an anti-naturalist position in the name of naturalism.

Bookchin's nihilism is grounded in the teleology that he mislabels "dialectic." He was obsessed with a future that he thought he could will into existence, and he seethed with resentment against a presently existing world that showed no indication of moving toward the telos that he had revealed for it. Lost in his illusion of the future, he could only in the end dismiss the present with contempt. In truth, existent reality has much more truth, more value, and more reality than does the imaginary future that he depicts as "true reality." Bookchin had no comprehension of what Gary Snyder meant when he said that one can find the "good, wild, and sacred" in everyday life, or what the surrealists have discovered in their quest for "the marvelous" in all the details of the world around them, or even what Thoreau meant when he said that "God himself culminates in the present moment."

Bookchin was enthralled in his own fundamental fantasy, in which he depicted himself as personally creating the new world-historical revolutionary ideology, self-consciously authoring the new Grand Narrative of Revolution that would allow humanity to break definitively with the society of domination and enter into the promised land of freedom. This fantasy allowed him to assemble a collection of philosophical commonplaces and imagine it to be that long-awaited philosophy that would finally both understand the world adequately and also succeed in changing it according to that understanding.

Despite all evidence that history (in the unfortunately actually existing, lowercase sense) was not on his side, Bookchin could sustain this politico-Messianic fantasy as long as he had a small group of devoted disciples to whom he could propound his theory — small "study groups" in Vermont devoted to his own works, and a scattering of followers elsewhere. The result was a life and philosophy of denial, based on an abject failure to engage dialectically with other perspectives, with the complexities of history, and with the painfully persistent resistance of the real. Faced with the failure of his political and theoretical project, Bookchin's only recourse was finally to take refuge in his pseudo-dialectical fortress of immanence and defend it from all assaults by a hopelessly depraved external world. We might well look to Hegel for an acute assessment of the fate of such an undertaking:

> It is just as foolish to fancy that any philosophy can transcend its present world, as that an individual could leap out of his time or jump over Rhodes. If a theory transgresses its time, and builds up a world as it ought to be, it has an existence merely in the unstable element of opinion, which gives room to every wandering fancy.[39]

[39] G.W.F. Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, trans. S.W. Dyde (Kitchener, ON: Batoche Books, 2001), p. 19.

Reply by Janet Biehl

CNS readers, upon encountering John Clark's contribution to the recent *CNS* symposium on Murray Bookchin, may well have thought they had fallen into a mud bath. Actually, it's just the latest installment in Clark's vilification campaign against his former and once-revered mentor, ongoing now for nigh unto fifteen years. The sophomoric mockery, personal insults, ad hominem invective, and pervasive loathing are standard operating procedure on Clark's part — he seems to mistake them for wit. In any case, those interested in Bookchin's reaction to this type of thing may consult a piece he wrote in response to Clark ten years ago — yes, it was happening even then: `http://dwardmac.pitzer.edu/Anarchist_Archives/bookchin/turning.html`.

Now, in 2008, a defender of Bookchin might well respond to the symposium piece in kind, making disdainful remarks about Clark. But really, in a high-minded journal it's far more illuminating to wash the mud off ourselves and discuss issues of substance.

Dialectical philosophy is the subject under discussion here, dialectics being an ancient school of thought that went through many permutations over the millennia and reached a culmination in the work of Hegel. Hegelian dialectic (to oversimplify) concerns itself with the interactions of phases of consciousness, which it sees as partial and limited; concepts are always inadequate and one-sided, and when they encounter an "other," their boundaries are demolished and they reciprocally influence each other. As Hegel wrote in *Logic*, dialectic is "this immanent going beyond, in which the one-sidedness and limitedness reveals itself for what it is, namely, as its negation. It is the nature of everything finite to sublimate *[aufheben]* itself."[1] That is, contradiction upsets previously established phases, generating a succession of new ones — indeed, generating development, as identity is transformed while partial insights are also retained

Dialectical philosophy is essentially retrospective in nature, describing processes of development rather than making fast and sure predictions about the future. Marx (again to grossly oversimplify) tried to change this situation by making dialectic scientific, replacing Hegel's logical categories of consciousness with social processes. While the Marxian dialectic too was retrospective — social systems of primitive communism, slavery, feudalism, and capitalism arrived in determinate order — it was also predictive, maintaining that the coming system, the one that would "transcend" or "sublate" capitalism, would be socialism.

Other philosophers have built on the Hegelian-Marxian dialectic, not least among them Bookchin, who had absorbed the tradition in his Marxist youth. His renovation of dialectic is distinctive for his attempt to ecologize it — that is, to root it not only in historical and social processes but also in natural evolution. There Bookchin rightly saw increasing differentiation and complexity, as well as increasing consciousness, culminating in human rationality. He looked at history and saw a social-revolutionary tradition, in which each generation of revolutionaries built on its predecessors, addressing new conditions, learning from the past, and further elaborating liberatory ideas and institutions. These social and ecological processes, he

[1] Hegel, *Logic*, trans. W. Wallace (London: Clarendon Press, 1892), p. 81.

believed, show that even amid setbacks and digressions and defeats, people retain within them the potentiality to construct a free, rational, ecological society.

Clark, who hangs out his own shingle as a dialectical philosopher, takes quite a different approach. Long an aficionado of Asian philosophy, he has made it his project to marry the Western dialectical tradition with Taoism and Buddhism. In this curious effort, the third-century Buddhist philosopher Nagarjuna plays a prominent role. For his part, let it be known, Hegel didn't think much of Asian philosophy, writing that there

> what is highest and the origin of things is nothing, emptiness, the altogether undetermined, the abstract universal … But if Philosophy has got no further than to such expression, it still stands on its most elementary stage. What is there to be found in all this learning?"[2]

Undeterred by such considerations, Clark plunges in with a remarkable statement: "Zen mind is dialectical mind."[3]

Now, if the Hegelian-Marxian dialectic sees contradiction between partial phases as generative of developmental change (and in Marxism's case, of revolutionary socialist politics), can the same really be said for Zen Buddhism? To my mind, where dialectical contradictions generating change speak to the *vita activa*, paradoxes like those of Zen speak to the *vita contemplativa*. I will leave it to the reader to determine the success of Clark's effort.

To return to Bookchin. For heuristic purposes — that is, to illustrate what he meant by development — Bookchin found it helpful to use simple analogies from plant growth. Such analogies are very helpful in this particular respect; Aristotle and Hegel used them too. But the growth of an acorn into an oak is in fact an instance of hard teleology, which is commonly understood to mean the existence of some necessary connection, some degree of causative determination, between a process and an end or goal (telos). The acorn, for example, contains DNA for an oak and for nothing else. Its DNA is its genotype, and its expression in the mature oak is its phenotype, the "telos" into which it grows. Absent genetic mutations, there's no room for variation. Long ago, Aristotle thought so too: "for it is not any chance thing that comes from a given seed but an olive from one kind and a man from another."[4]

Bookchin clearly understood that social and historical processes do not act this way, the way genotypes manifest in fixed phenotypes. Natural evolution, social and historical development, and human cultural growth are analogous to plant growth in that all are developmental, but they are not analogous insofar as they lack a determinate end such as DNA determines. So Bookchin wrote about the process in terms of "tendency," or "potentiality," or "the implicit," or "directiveness." Human beings may contain the potentiality to create a free, rational, ecological society, for example, but that doesn't mean they will inevitably do so.

Clark, in his efforts to mock and ridicule Bookchin, would have us believe that the botanical illustration is the centerpiece of Bookchin's philosophy. He extracts a Hegel quote that Bookchin used[5] but conveniently omits Bookchin's caveat that the "distinct directionality of 'conscious

[2] G.W.F. Hegel, *Hegel's Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, trans. E.S. Haldane and F.H. Simson (London: Routledge and Kegal Paul, 1955).

[3] John Clark, "Domesticating the Dialectic: A Critique of Bookchin's Neo-Aristotelian Metaphysics," *Capitalism Nature Socialism*, Vol. 19, No. 1, March 2008, p. 95.

[4] Aristotle, *Ethics*, II 4.

[5] Clark, *op. cit.*, p. 84.

beings'" (in contrast to the growth of plants) is "purpose as will."[6] And he ignores Bookchin's numerous statements that progress toward the good society depends upon people themselves, of which the following is typical:

> We are in a position to choose between an ignominious finale, possibly including the catastrophic nuclear oblivion of history itself, and history's rational fulfillment in a free, materially abundant society in an aesthetically crafted environment… Yet our decision to create a better society, and our choice of the way to do it, must come from within ourselves … What is clear is that human beings are much too intelligent not to have a rational society; the most serious question we face is whether they are rational enough to achieve one.[7]

Having set up his straw man, Clark proceeds to heroically knock it down. "It seems not to have occurred to Bookchin," he spits, "that there is a crucial difference between determining the potentialities of a bird's egg and determining those inherent in a social phenomenon."[8] That's true only in John Clark's presentation, which contains only the pieces of straw he chooses to include. Curiously, on the very next page[9] our Zen dialectician actually goes on to chastise Bookchin for failing to live up to Clark's straw man — that is, for failing to provide evidence that any process in human society "is analogous to the healthy growth of a plant or animal across its life cycle." Yes, Bookchin did not do so — because he didn't believe they were analogous in that way, and only Clark has said, falsely, that he did! Continuing in this remarkable vein, Clark proceeds to complain about "Bookchin's vague musings on development and directionality in history."[10] Vague — that is, they don't fit the straw image Clark has fancifully created! The only remarkable thing about these passages is the spectacle of Clark actually scolding Bookchin for failing to conform to his own caricature of him!

As I mentioned, Bookchin wrote about developmental processes in terms of tendency, directionality, potentiality; meanwhile our Zen dialectician carries on about Bookchin's supposed teleology in thinking people make revolutions like plants grow. Then he does a strange thing. With consummate professionalism, he turns to a source no less estimable than *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy* to find a definition of teleology. The word really means something much milder than all that hard-and-fast stuff — it means "tendency"! But *tendency* is one of the words Bookchin used frequently. Let me get this straight: Clark condemns Bookchin for failing to consult a dictionary that supports — Bookchin's own outlook? Evidently Clark's left hand doesn't know what his right hand is doing. Is that some kind of Zen paradox, perhaps?

Bookchin may or may not have consulted that dictionary, but he did consult the writings of Aristotle himself. And Aristotle was quite clear, and indeed rather stringent, about his definition of "final cause." He said it was "the end, that for the sake of which a thing is done."[11] Regardless of how the *Cambridge Dictionary* defines *teleology*, Bookchin was right to feel the need to dissociate

[6] Murray Bookchin, *The Philosophy of Social Ecology: Essays on Dialectical Naturalism*, rev. ed. (Montreal: Black Rose, 1996), p. 19. Clark cites page 28 of the earlier edition of this book.

[7] Murray Bookchin, "The Communalist Project," *Communalism* 2, November 2002, online at `http://www.communalism.net`.

[8] Clark, *op. cit.*, p. 90.

[9] *Ibid.*, p. 91.

[10] *Ibid.*, p. 92.

[11] Aristotle, *Physics*, II 3.

himself from determinate causation after all. Actually if anything in Clark's article resembles Aristotelian teleology, it's the lines from Gary Snyder that he quotes: "plankton … call for salmon," Snyder tells us, with Clark's approval, "and salmon call for seals and thus orcas. The Sperm Whale is sucked into existence [sic] by … squid" and so on.[12] How neo-Aristotelian can you get!

Let's quickly review some other issues. Did Bookchin really present no "normative basis on which to judge that any particular development of humanity constitutes what 'should be'"? Of course not. He often wrote about the ethic of complementarity, usufruct, the equality of unequals, and reason as the basis for ethics — see most notably *The Ecology of Freedom*. Did Bookchin really "make no attempt to relate 'the history of freedom' to the 'specific social conditions that might make freedom and justice into historically grounded realities?"[13] Even a passing familiarity with Bookchin's works shows that he made more than an attempt, and readers of everything from "The Forms of Freedom" in *Post-Scarcity* (1971), to *The Limits of the City* (1974), *The Spanish Anarchists* (1977), *The Rise of Urbanization* (1982), and *The Third Revolution* (1996–2003) will be surprised to hear anything to the contrary. Did Bookchin really ignore the fact that "the dynamics of a political movement can exist only in relation to specific state formations … the global nationstate system … capital … cultural practices … developing institutions," as Clark alleges?[14] Fulfilling Clark's demand to provide "specifics" and more "specifics" would make all theorizing impossible, yet Bookchin was entirely concrete about his aims: I refer the reader to *Urbanization*, and his untiring efforts to form a libertarian municipalist movement against the nation-state, and his grounding of its tradition in very specific historical phases.

Bookchin, one of the great utopian thinkers, devoted his life to developing and advancing a program, history, philosophy, and politics for the creation of a free, rational, ecological, and above all *socialist* society. Are people going to create such a society inevitably? Of course not. Is its achievement a fixed and determinate end of social evolution? No. But do human beings have the potentiality to create such a society? Indeed. Is such a society, in Bookchin's view, the "what should be"? Yes, and what engaged political radical does not cherish at least some notion of "what should be"?

Clark belittles Bookchin for his failure, during his lifetime, to create a broad revolutionary movement, but in these unpropitious times, he cannot be faulted for such, any more than other radical philosophers can. (Rare is the philosopher, however, who advances a program as comprehensive as Bookchin's.) Lacking favorable political and social conditions, Bookchin himself was content to hold up an ideal. In the meantime, those of us who embrace his vision will keep his ideas alive, and build on them, so that they will be available to new generations.

As for Clark, the deeper and thicker the mud he throws, the thinner are his substantive arguments. He'll doubtless tell you now, as he has in the past, that for defending Bookchin I'm some kind of brain-dead hack. Buckets at the ready!

[12] Clark, *op. cit.*, p. 95.
[13] *Ibid.*, p. 92.
[14] *Ibid.*, p. 91.

On Biehls Defense of Bookchins Immanent Dialectic by John Clark

Biehl on Asian Philosophy

In her "Reply," to "Domesticating the Dialectic," Janet Biehl attacks what she characterizes as my "curious effort" to "marry the Western dialectical tradition with Taoism and Buddhism" and my citation of the Buddhist dialectician Nagarjuna.[1] Biehl announces that "For his part, let it be known, Hegel didn't think much of Asian philosophy, writing that there 'what is highest and the origin of things is nothing, emptiness, the altogether undetermined, the abstract universal ...'"

Biehl is certainly correct in her belief that Hegel wrote this. However, it is wellknown that Hegel, for all his dialectical brilliance, was not a very reliable authority concerning Asian philosophy. He depicted it according to his schematization of four stages of World History, beginning with that of "unreflected consciousness" during "the childhood of History" in "the East," and culminating in the fourth stage of History with the fully "adult" Germanic World. Hegel had no familiarity with major Buddhist philosophers such as Nagarjuna, Chandrakirti, or Tsong Khapa, and he defended his Orientalist philosophical speculations with hasty generalizations based on scant textual evidence and extrapolations from European perceptions of the Mysterious East.

Biehl's Hegel quote is a particularly unfortunate one, for it gets things precisely backwards. Buddhist thought, far from advocating "abstract universality," holds a radically anti-essentialist position, and vehemently rejects any idea of "abstract universals." Hegel might be to some degree excused for holding such seriously defective views concerning Asian philosophy 200 years ago, when little of the relevant philosophical literature was translated. Today, however, there is an enormous body of scholarly work on these matters, in addition to helpful and accurate elementary texts for those like Biehl who are not familiar with the meaning of basic concepts in Buddhist philosophy (such as *sunyata* or emptiness).

Biehl faithfully follows Bookchin's project of discrediting Asian philosophy by sweepingly depicting half of humanity's philosophical inquiry as no more than a form of escapism and quietistic withdrawal from the world. It is instructive to see how she applies this to Zen. "To her mind," she informs us, "paradoxes like those of Zen speak to the *vita contemplativa*." Biehl is unaware of the fact that Zen is in reality scathing in its attack on what has been called the "vita contemplativa." Hannah Arendt, in the classic discussion of that concept, associated such a life with the "experience of the eternal" and said that it "occurs outside the realm of human affairs."[2] Madhyamaka, the tradition of Nagarjuna, is defined classically as "the Middle Way" between "eternalism" and "nihilism," and Zen, as the practice of this same perspective, has no patience with imaginary transcendent realms and nonexistent eternal realities.

[1] For a detailed discussion of Nagarjuna's philosophy, see John Clark, "On Being None With Nature: Nagarjuna and the Ecology of Emptiness," *Capitalism Nature Socialism*, Vol. 19, No. 4, December 2008, pp. 629.

[2] Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), p. 20.

Buddhism holds that everything is impermanent and that the reality that is most relevant to us, indeed the only one we really encounter, is the one found here and now. It directs us to the *tathata*, the "thusness" of things, and teaches mindfulness, full *presence* of mind. As a well-known Zen saying goes, "before enlightenment, chopping wood, carrying water; after enlightenment chopping wood, carrying water." As Zen puts it, nirvana is samsara, and samsara is nirvana; there is no distinction between the "ultimate goal" and that which we confront most immediately in everyday life.

Zen is dialectical precisely because it challenges and explodes such dualities as Biehl's conventional distinction between the *vita activa* and the *vita contemplativa*.

Biehl on Bookchin and Dialectic

Biehl cites a well-known passage from Hegel that stresses the radical negativity inherent in dialectic: "As Hegel wrote in *Logic*, dialectic is 'this immanent going beyond, in which the one-sidedness and limitedness reveals itself for what it is, namely, as its negation. It is the nature of everything finite to sublimate [*aufheben*] itself.'"[3] It is a useful passage, for it exhibits strikingly how little of the spirit of such radical dialectic can be found in Bookchin's work, which overwhelmingly treats dialectical development on the model of immanent teleology. In "Domesticating the Dialectic" I give numerous examples of how consistently Bookchin follows this paradigm. It is noteworthy that while Biehl quite reasonably credits Hegel with having a larger view of dialectic, she does not present counterexamples of Bookchin's own use of dialectic in ways that stress radical negativity and striking dialectical reversals, as opposed to the unfolding of potentialities immanent in a being.

Instead, she concentrates on defending Bookchin's use of the acorns into oak trees analogy. Biehl claims that Bookchin uses this image merely as an example of "development," as if his readers needed to know that what an acorn does when it becomes an oak tree is "develop" into it. But in fact this image serves a quite specific purpose within what Bookchin conceived of as his dialectical project. Quite clearly, its function was to help establish his paradigm of dialectical development as the unfolding of the potentiality that is inherent within a being.

Biehl attempts to defend Bookchin by demonstrating that there are differences between the development of an oak tree and the development of human society. She believes that she is pointing out one such difference when she notes that "Human beings may contain the potentiality to create a free, rational, ecological society, for example, but that doesn't mean they will inevitably do so." In fact, there is no "inevitability" in the development of an acorn into an oak tree; only a miniscule percentage of acorns grow into fully developed oak trees. They only do so when the necessary and sufficient preconditions for that development exist. However, the crucial issue is in any case not about inevitability and non-inevitability. It's also not about DNA. No one has ever accused Bookchin of believing that societies have DNA, and if anyone ever does I will certainly defend Bookchin vigorously on this point.

The crucial question about Bookchin's analogy does not concern the quite obvious ways in which the two terms in the analogy *differ*, but rather the ways in which Bookchin thought that they were *similar*. It is the question of whether Bookchin thought that that he had uncovered an

[3] Janet Biehl, quoting Hegel from Logic, trans. W. Wallace (London: Clarendon Press, 1892), p. 81 in "Reply to John Clark's 'Domesticating the Dialectic,'" *Capitalism Nature Socialism*, Vol. 20, No. 1, March 2009, p. 120.

immanent teleology within human society that is analogous to the realization of potentialities for development in organic life forms, not only in plants, but in animals also. This question was answered quite clearly in the affirmative by Bookchin, when he states, for example, that "humanity actualizes a deep-seated nisus in evolution toward self-consciousness and freedom" and that this provides "the grounding for a truly objective ethics."[4]

The political implications of this position became increasingly clear in Bookchin's later work. In "The Communalist Project," for example, he attacks the contemporary anarchist movement for its "chilling eclecticism, in which tentative opinions are chaotically mismarried to ideals that should rest on objective premises."[5] He explains for the uninitiated that by "objective" he means "potentialities that can be rationally conceived, nurtured, and in time actualized into what we would narrowly call realities."[6] In other words, his own post-anarchist "Communalist" politics can, he thinks, be "rationally" educed to be the path toward the unfolding of the immanent teleology of human society, and those who reject his politics can be dismissed as relativistic enemies of Reason.

One of the most serious confusions in Biehl's response pervades her discussion of the meaning of this key term, "teleology." I presented a number of examples of the way in which Bookchin consistently misused the term, defining it as connoting a kind of preordained, necessary development and stating that he was not a teleological thinker because he rejected necessary development. Biehl ridicules my citation of one of the many standard philosophical works that define the word clearly as having no implication of necessity and connoting, among other things, "tendency." She notes that this is "one of the words Bookchin used frequently" and she incomprehensibly concludes that this fact shows a contradiction on my part.

In reality, her observation only verifies the claim that Bookchin was confused. If, in fact, as Biehl concedes, what "the word [teleology] really means" is not "necessity" but rather "tendency," and if, as she observes, "*tendency* is one of the words Bookchin used frequently," then she has proven the obvious, that Bookchin was confused when he said "I'm not a teleologist, I don't believe that any development is inevitable."[7] On Biehl's own assumptions, Bookchin is a teleologist *malgré lui*, and contrary to his protestations, his belief that development is not inevitable is irrelevant to the issue of his being one.

There are further confusions in Biehl's discussion of teleology. She quotes Aristotle's statement that the final cause is "the end, that for the sake of which a thing is done" and then speculates that Gary Snyder's statement that in a natural ecosystem "plankton … call for salmon," constitutes an instance of Aristotelian teleology. The much more obvious interpretation of Snyder's statement is that it is an example of mutual determination in nature. A species that might be naively looked upon as a merely passive food source is in fact an active determinant of the nature of a species that preys upon it. This is a dialectical view; it reverses Spinoza's famous formulation by pointing out the manner in which "negation is determination," the way in which a thing *is* that which it *is not*. It is dialectical in that it challenges our unreflective, static ways of thinking about processes in nature and points out the internal relations between things.

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[4] Murray Bookchin, *Remaking Society* (Montreal: Black Rose Books, 1989), p. 203.

[5] Murray Bookchin, "The Communalist Project" in *Communalism* #2 (Nov. 2002), online at: `https://www.communalism.net/Archive/02/tcp.html`.

[6] *Ibid*.

[7] Murray Bookchin, "Interview with Murray Bookchin in the Summer of 2000," *Harbinger: A Journal of Social Ecology*, Vol. 2, No. 1, online at: `http://www.social-ecology.org`.

In invoking Aristotelian teleology to interpret Snyder, Biehl would presumably have us believe that he is claiming that the raison *d'étre of salmon* is to serve the needs of those plankton that "call" for them. This is an extremely dubious interpretation, since it is the plankton that serve as food for the salmon. Accordingly, the "purpose" of salmon would be, rather bizarrely, to satisfy the need of plankton to be eaten. Moreover, even were we to accept the entirely implausible idea that Snyder posited such a teleology, it would be just the opposite of the teleology found in the Aristotelian *scala naturae*, in which beings that are lower in the natural hierarchy serve the needs of those that are higher. There's a certain air of desperation in Biehl's attempt to defend Bookchin from accusations of Aristotelianism through such a contrived attempt to find Aristotelianism in Snyder's statement.

Biehl on Dialectic

Biehl's own view of dialectic duplicates precisely the problems that I pointed out in Bookchin's position. In her book *Rethinking Ecofeminist Politics*, she explains that dialectical naturalism is an approach that "above all focuses on the transitions of a developing phenomenon, which emerge from its potentiality to become fully-developed and self-actualized. These transitions, in turn, arise from a process of 'contradiction' between a thing as it is, on the one hand, and a thing as it potentially should become, on the other."[8] This faithfully follows Bookchin's reduction of dialectic to immanent teleology.

She explains the meaning of this "dialectical contradiction" in relation to *an organism* by positing a "tension between what that organism could potentially be when it is fully actualized" and "what it is at any moment before that development is fulfilled."[9] Next, she addresses "dialectical contradiction" in the development of the *human being*, in that "there is a tension that exists between infancy, childhood, adolescence, and youth, until the child's abilities are fully actualized as a mature being."[10] Finally she applies the same view of dialectical development to *society*. Explaining that overcoming internal contradictions and achieving full actualization is equivalent to rationality, she notes that "the same can be said to apply to society."[11] Thus, Biehl, like Bookchin, applies the "unfolding of potentiality" model of dialectical development to organisms in the natural world, to human beings, and to human society.

Biehl has consistently adhered to the same view of dialectic as immanent teleology that I criticized in Bookchin, and her response to my critique of that view does nothing to vindicate it. "Dialectical reasoning," she has said, proceeds by "eduction," which "aims to understand the *inherent logic* [Biehl's emphasis] of a thing's development — that is, the point from which it started, where it is now, and where by *its immanent developmental logic* [my emphasis] it should go."[12] This is a good depiction of precisely what is wrong with Bookchinite "eduction." It is in fact the *reduction* of radically subversive, anarchic, wild dialectic to tame, safely domesticated processes of immanent teleological unfolding. Dialectic in its most radical and critical moments tells us that there is *no point* at which anything starts, that it *never is* "where it is now," and that

[8] Janet Biehl, *Rethinking Ecofeminist Politics* (Boston: South End Press, 1991), p. 117.
[9] *Ibid*., p. 118.
[10] *Ibid*., p. 119.
[11] *Ibid*., p. 118.
[12] *Ibid*., p. 123.

sweeping pronouncements about where everything from an acorn to the course of World History "should go" reduce either to pointless banality or to sterile dogmatism.

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27 Sep 2008 & 5 March 2009

Capitalism Nature Socialism, vol. 19, issue 1, 82–97,
<www.doi.org/10.1080/10455750701859471> & vol. 20, issue 1.
<www.doi.org/10.1080/10455750902727428> & <www.doi.org/10.1080/10455750902727451>