

We need a plethora of tactics

Considering “metacrisis” and the ever greater need to re-embrace Bookchin’s social ecology.

Matt Azuley

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‘Metacrisis’ is my chosen umbrella term for the escalation of multiple global crises of climate, ecology, and political economy, which have reached such a point now that all radical organising is a form of crisis response. And I know for folk on the sacrificial frontlines of capitalism, the terms ‘radical organising’ and ‘crisis response’ belie that they have to fight just to survive. The metacrisis is hidden from many of us a lot of the time. Until it isn’t.

Meanwhile, three records have been smashed on climate, as well as the continuing series of natural disasters in 2023 made worse and more likely by the climate crisis. These are average global surface air temperature, global sea temperature and Antarctic ice loss. Ecological and social tipping points are upon us.

Social ecology is an appropriate response to the metacrisis that will lead to widespread societal collapse within our lifetimes, even as some are already living through it or have been sunk by it. Murray Bookchin first developed his theory of social ecology in the 1960s. Its foundation is dialectical naturalism (Dianat), which Bookchin developed from Hegel’s dialectics and Marxian dialectical materialism. Dianat is a deceptively simple ecological philosophy that explores how the human domination of other humans leads to us also oppressing non-human nature and how to stop one we need to stop the other.

These times of crisis are fuelling the rise of the far right, who sometimes adopt “ecological” arguments for locking borders against “polluting” refugees and blame the climate crisis on China and Africa, preferring to set up World War III rather than take responsibility for fossil fuel emissions. This is nothing new. We saw it in the blood and soil doctrine of the Nazis in 1930s Germany. So, all organising in the metacrisis must be deeply ecological and explicitly anti-fascist.

Post-Covid, we also need to be explicitly anti-fantastical-conspiracist. As the planet heats even further, so will distracting narratives. As well as being anti-liberatory – we can’t organise against enemies who will be forever hidden from us – this conspiracism is often implicitly anti-Jewish.

A part of social ecology which some anarcho folk take issue with, which is not a dogma so much as Bookchin’s preferred program for introducing a stateless social ecological society, is known as libertarian municipalism. This means using existing local power structures to gradually wrest power back from the centre as a gateway to confederated, communitarian self-government.

It's unlikely that such a society would materialise just as Bookchin prescribed on any significant scale. However, in times of crisis, all efforts to draw power from the state back towards the local (whether direct democracy or consensus decision-making) are to be welcomed.

It could be using ZAD-type tactics, seizing the local means of production, sabotaging local outposts of deathly corporations out of existence, strengthening and extending mutual aid networks and localised food-growing initiatives, or indeed implementing libertarian municipalism. I love Peter Gelderloos' perspective that "the solutions are already here" and the "build and fight" formula suggested by the Black-led Cooperation Jackson project in the US.

Whoever we are with on a given day, how can we instigate conversations about crisis organising, especially with people "not like us" who may seem to be sold on capitalism? Not easy, I know. My main job is teaching English online to students worldwide (for a terrible corporate platform which pays below UK minimum wage), and 95% of the time, any attempt at radical connection with my students is hopeless. However, 5% of the time, something special happens. You may be surprised at what revolutionary ferment is happening in some of the young minds of China, especially among women.

I like to imagine social ecology and other forms of ecological, social anarchism as a hidden potential in every quarter of human society, a kind of quantum magnet underlying everything that could draw everything else to it. Everyone can give in to that magnet, even if just a little. Aric McBay's Full Spectrum Resistance is useful here. I have an idea of "even fuller spectrum resistance", which means leaving no stone or member of society unturned. In a Colin Ward-esque way, what can we observe around us through "anarchism in action and escalation" in times of crisis, and how can we plug into that? Locally, this includes extending a hand to conservative-minded folk whilst being uncompromisingly anti-oppression. Online, this includes utilising resources like A Radical Guide. Even AI could be useful for organising without giving in to accelerationism. Algorithmic Justice League, Not My AI and Queer in AI signal how AI could be democratised and liberated from patriarchy, notwithstanding its ecological impact.

In times of crisis, as anarcho types, we could also build bridges with existing activist groups, even if we sometimes find them infuriating. From my own experience, I have to look at what I half-affectionately and half-frustratedly term the XR milieu, which includes Extinction Rebellion, Just Stop Oil and the Deep Adaptation / Transformative Adaptation crowds — the latter is a kind of extra urgent reiteration of the Transition Movement. I got arrested with XR in the early days, but I have taken a critical attitude towards them since then. I don't believe in the disempowering strategic stance of pleading with an illegitimate government to create Citizens' Assemblies, with the assumption that these assemblies would be well-advised and empowered enough to transfer the power of capital back to ecology and the people — what the metacrisis demands. Beyond the XR milieu, from the collapsitarian perspective, Just Collapse are great in that they centre marginalised groups. (I'll be interviewing Just Collapse on my YouTube channel Epic Tomorrows in the coming months).

We need more affinity groups or study and action. Bookchin's idea of an affinity group is not just one that does actions but one that engages in deep regular study of texts for collective liberation, including a revolutionary understanding of history that is not deterministic or statistical, that gives us plenty of options. Organising in times of crisis could even mean organising our own lives and memories into something more pointed and in a better direction.

On a more personal note, my stepdad runs Ely's folk sing-around at a pub in Somerset. I sing there occasionally and imagine a pub-based social-ecological revolution. Many of the traditional tunes sung are very grounded in ecology and the seasons, with a deep understanding of farming (the old way) —or else they tell of tragic events that have befallen common folk through the ages, where an oppressive class system often features in the background. I reflect that all sorts congregate in pubs. What ground could we find for anti-authoritarian crisis organising, for drawing power back from the centre? The beauty of pub-based organising could be when we get it wrong; we can put it down to the drink and try again next week. AGs can meet in pubs if everyone is alright with it. Just be careful who's watching or listening.

I don't want to detract from what anyone is doing to fight against all forms of authoritarianism and capitalism and to fight for life and a reasonable standard of living for everyone. Nevertheless, maybe the good fight is best framed as a social-ecological one, where every oppressed human is understood in the context of a damaged local ecology, and every thoughtlessly ripped up plant or killed animal is understood as the result of human hierarchies. This is a conversation that we could continue down the pub. Urgently. Mine's a real ale or cider. Cheers.

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