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Intelligentsia and the New Intellectuals

Murray Bookchin

July 27,1990

Editorial Introduction:

The following lecture was delivered as the opening address at the fourth continental Youth Greens conference that took place on the campus of Goddard College in Vermont on July 27,1990. The social theorist Murray Bookchin, whose work on ecology began with an article on the chemical additives in food in 1952, is a long-standing activist in the ecology movement and the author of several books, including *The Ecology of Freedom*, *Remaking Society* and *The Philosophy of Social Ecology*. In many ways, this confrontational and thought-provoking address expresses some of the most difficult problems that Youth Greens, young anarchists, and Leftists face today, such as the poverty of intellectual work and student life in contemporary society and the lack of an oppositional movement. Moreover, it is a concise introduction to the political project of Social Ecology as a revolutionary attempt to reintegrate the intellectual and political world under the weight of the social and ecological breakdown that is now taking place. It is for these rea-

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sons, in addition to its wit, that the editors have decided to publish this work, with the permission of the author.

We ask the reader to approach this address, delivered from the author's memory in a manner reminiscent of the classic soap-box style of the 1930s, both critically and without prejudice. It is the intention of the editors to present what is undoubtedly a controversial and unfinished piece of work by one of the most stimulating thinkers today, with its drawbacks and strengths, in order to demystify the persona of the author (In traditional anarchist style) and, at the same time, to place value on the ideas themselves. We hope that you find it as enjoyable as we have.

This lecture is the first in a series of letters and monographs, published by Alternative Forum, whose purpose is to create a region, outside the university, for the informal discussion of intellectual and creative work-in-progress. — Eric Jacobson and M. Therese Walsh

I would like to deal with a number of concerns that I have. You can judge for yourselves if they concern you. I was recently asked by a close friend and publisher to finish a book I started many years ago, called *The Spanish Anarchists* [Harper, 1977]. It begins in 1868 and ends in 1936 at the beginning of the so-called Spanish Civil War, just as the Spanish Revolution was about to break out — in fact, just as the workers of Barcelona and others take up arms and try to stop Franco's troops. I was asked to write additional chapters so that there would be one book to bring it into the Civil War and, perhaps, even as close to recent times as possible — although there is virtually no organized Anarchist movement in Spain today. Over the past week, while trying to recover from my labors at the Institute [for Social Ecology) — which I found rather exhausting because I'm pushing seventy now — I was obliged to read a lot of material and get the next chapter started, called "The Social Revolution." There will be another four or five chapters, and the book

Those are a few of the thoughts that have gone through my mind. Even today when I was reading about the Spanish anarchists and their tremendous sense of inner self-discipline, commitment, and idealism — and at the same time, an idealism that had to be informed by theory because that was their biggest failure. Their biggest failure was that they didn't know when to revolt, they didn't know what they would have to do if they revolted, or what the consequences would be, and so they entered the government and became a part of the very repressive apparatus that they had been fighting for fifty to sixty years. So, now I have shared with you the various mixed feelings I've had as I've thought about writing this book. I intend, if I can, to convey all this, through the lived experience of the hundreds of thousands of those who, now dead, fought in great battles, which now seem so remote, and yet should have some rich meaning for us. Thank you.

That is what a Left would be and a theory that goes along with it. Reduced to mere nihilism, you've got a vacuum. Anything can enter, including fascism, and that is happening today. Reduced to mere spirituality without reason, we are left with incoherence. Lacking coherence, we cannot interpret the nature of the society in which we live, and we cannot offer up an ideal, a precious ideal that is worth fighting for, which the Spanish anarchists from 1936 to 1937 thought was worth dying for — and in very great numbers. Without an intelligentsia that metabolizes with the people, we become mere scholars, mere intellectuals, utterly institutionalized. Then the system can accept anything — it has turned Marxism into a discipline. We now have Marxism 101 and Marxism 102 and Marxism 201, and then we've got post-graduate Marxism, and so on. And, by the way, the same can be done with anarchism, as long as you want to dwell in the cemetery, as long as you want to write about the Russian anarchists or what happened in Kronstadt or god knows what — you know, find a little piece of paper somewhere in the museum as a well meaning, but still rather stilted anarchist historian has done, or at least a historian on anarchism, has celebrated the fact that he found a White Guard letter to the Kronstadt sailors in 1921, and makes a whole chapter out of what should be nothing more than a footnote because *he* discovered it. And you can be a Situationist, and you can be an Autonome, just don't break too many glass windows or at least make sure that when you break the glass windows that they are insured. And by the way that was a whole thing that developed in Zurich that many of you are not familiar with — a tremendous youth revolt appeared in Zurich in the 1970s when I went there. It was unbelievable. Every "A" was circled, even on the word 'bank,' on the word 'avenue.' "A" was circled and slashed all over the place. You know where that movement is now? It's on crack. Those who haven't gone back into the system have become drug addicts or criminals. And now the system has them where it wants them. They're not a real danger; they're busy cannibalizing themselves.

should be a definitive and fairly popular, readable history of the Spanish Anarchists.

And it's amazing, not only because of the recollection it provokes, but because of the intensity of the material I have had to deal with which, in fact, kept me from completing the book. I have been struck by the intensity of this period in which a people, perhaps the most revolutionary working class and peasantry in history, almost daringly, selflessly just went into the face of machine gun fire — and, I mean, if they had to throw their bodies across a machine gun just to stop it, they would do it in order to silence the nationalists or fascists who were rebelling at that time on July 17, 18, and 19. I recall the period very vividly because these details were coming out in the newspapers. People were absolutely astonished at the revolutionary elan and dedication of the Spanish people, working class and peasantry. What a magnificent movement it was, what a heroic movement it was — what a loss it is not to have it around today! And what's more important, what a loss it is not to have anything like it around today. This is the feeling that I have. You know, I feel very much like a stranger in a strange world, and that's why it is so painful to go over this material where this seemed to us, almost fifty one years ago, to be something that we would expect of ourselves and that we would expect other people to do. My sense of expectancy today is almost zero — that people would be raised and moved by high ideals and unthinkingly throw themselves into a fray to change the world, that they would be moved by passions that are almost absent today. It was a living human poem of epic proportions.

I have been steeped in that for the past few days and, as I thought of what I might say tonight, the one thing that struck me is, where has it all gone? I'm not suggesting that one has to fearlessly throw oneself in front of machine guns. Remember, that movement had been building for over seventy years when the Spanish revolution broke out. But, the thing that I found most chilling is that for the first time — well, now it's becoming repetitive because I know quite

a few of you privately — I could say: Where is the Left? Where is the Left? needless to say, a libertarian Left; needless to say, a Left with ideals. Where is the idealism of those passionate years? Where are those fervent feelings that existed in the Spanish revolution which was the culmination of a period of a hundred years from the French revolution right up to the 1930s and, even, to the 1960s to some extent? And, my sole meaning in life, outside of any personal life, is to recreate, to restore, and to embody the ideal of a Left, no matter what form it may take.

The Left will never go back to being what Spain was in the 1930s; I know that and saw it when I went to Spain in 1967 to gather material for the book. Franco was still alive. I saw the changes that were going on. There were television antennas on top of all the little Spanish pueblos in Andalusia, in the southern part of Spain which had once been an Anarchist heartland of the Spanish peninsula. I remember staying in a hotel near the Ramblas in Barcelona, which had been filled with hundreds of thousands of people demanding arms on June or July 18 and 19, packing the Ramblas from the statue of Columbus at the very port up to the Plaza Catalonia. I knew that Spain was gone already because things had changed. The Embrazo was beginning to disappear — the embrace. I saw young, middle-class, up-and-coming Yuppies, as we were later to call them — 1967 is a long time back, even for a word like ‘Yuppie’- walking around with American attaché cases and women prettying themselves up to be perfect 9-to-5 secretaries. I knew that Spain was gone because the social basis, the historical traditions of the 1930s, had finally been wiped out by Franco. It was done by shooting a quarter of a million people. It was done through the shootings that continued after Franco took power, to the tune of two hundred thousand people. It was done through the so-called modernization of Spain. And that was a terrible thing: Spain had suddenly become really capitalist, and everything capitalist began to penetrate all aspects of Spanish life, reaching even into the pueblos.

I do not think that revolutionaries can afford to be so confident. There is a great danger in that. That’s why we see such vast assimilation: very comfortable, radical careers exist today that are perfectly acceptable to the society. This society has shown an ability to assimilate practically everything but that which challenges it with a coherent analysis. Nihilism is absolutely acceptable today. Anyone who says, “If I write a manifesto or subscribe to a manifesto that says I reject everything” and doesn’t propose anything to counteract the system is going along with the system from my point of view. I have seen that nihilism, and, frankly, it is very common among the Autonomes in Germany, who more and more are moving toward skinhead positions, quasi-Nazi position, or, in the best cases, but still a limited number of cases, are turning into anarchists. To reject everything is to create a vacuum and who knows what will enter into the vacuum. Almost anything can enter into a vacuum of universal nihilism, of universal rejection, of universal incoherence, of universal opposition to theory, of universal opposition to even a coherent practice. I had a friend of mine, years ago, tell me, “I am no longer interested in engaging in fights around civil rights (it was the Civil Rights era). Call me when you raise the barricades.” Well, he got further and further away, whether there were barricades or not, and now you can’t call on him to do anything. There is an extremism that goes absurdly too far, a nihilism that involves a rejection so universal that it creates, literally, a vacuum in which anything can enter. And I have no great feeling for the German Autonomes because of the nihilism that has grown up amongst them. What is needed today are alternatives that really challenge the society. What is needed are ideals and principles that stand in opposition to the society. They have to be ideals, not only theories, and they finally have to metabolize with people — not immediately with people who are involved with the problems of everyday living, but with people who are just beginning to study and to think. That is what the function of an intelligentsia would be. That is what, in my view, a truly revolutionary movement would be.

our ideas? I would submit again that this focus is ecological — not entirely, but overwhelmingly. The breakdown that is taking place ecologically is stupendous, and the rate at which it is taking place is really alarming and is stirring many minds today. At this point, before we move into a situation of serious crisis such as Spain faced in the 1930s or such as Europe and America faced in the Great Depression and the 1930s generally, the real question is whether or not we are going to prepare and organize our vision of what a Left is, of what kind of body of theory a Left can nurture and make relevant to the social scene as changes. And most significantly, will we continue to produce intellectuals who are institutionalized trainers, be they of the mind or of the hand — important as it is to study, important as it is to go to school, important as many academics may be. Speaking in a broad sense, not in an individual sense, we need an intelligentsia that is outside the institutions, that will be the fermenting agent in an organized way for new ideas that can invigorate a radical movement — a Left movement — and can give it coherence.

This is a momentous problem that particularly faces young people today — all the more so because when I was teaching formally in a more academic setting, the usual perspective I encountered was: “I first have to find my career — and after I find what I am going to do with my life, whether I become a civil rights lawyer or a stock broker who’s trying to promote ecological products or an engineer who’s going to do this or that — then I will build my political life and my political thinking around it.” Politics would then be the marginalia of their career. Understandable as it is for most people, with the anomie that exists today, with the alienation that exists today, and the sense that people have no future or, if they have one, they cannot define it, such a statement stands very much at odds with a tremendous tradition which says: “My career is to change the world, and anything else that I do, whatever work that I do, whatever I engage in, will be subordinated to that and will be used primarily to support that.”

But still, I knew, and I still believe — and, I think, most of us believe — that this world is irrational. This is not the truth of humanity. This is not the society that is the fulfillment of human potentialities. What we have today is a kind of bizarre irrationality that, to a greater and greater extent, people take for granted and assume is natural, whereas, in point of fact, everything about it — especially to those of us who are ecologically-minded — is unnatural. In every sense of the word, it is not only pitted against external, non-human nature, it is pitted against human nature. Whatever it is that is expressive about the human spirit, whatever it is that is creative about the human spirit, that is loving, that is moral, that is ethical, and that ultimately should yield a richly articulated, beautifully composed society is, today, a monstrous savings and loan problem. I mean, what we’re dealing with today is not even revolution in the East; we’re dealing with restoration. I wonder where Rumania will go back to, where Germany will go back to. And then there is Czechoslovakia in which the government is led by a playwright who is supposed to have been in prison and is now giving people little homilies of the most middle-class kind. And we’re watching George Bush and Son, carrying on their operations, the family is in business. It may not be the Godfather, but it’s A. A. — “All American” and very well branded and neatly made: cleft chin and straight face and hard-looking but clear eyes — but, nonetheless, devastatingly boring.

So one asks oneself, while the ghettos are rotting and while millions of people are undergoing a kind of suffering that they can’t even articulate to their analysts, what is going to be the basis of the Left? Is there going to be a Left? Or are we finished? Have we left the Left behind? While everyone is being counseled to death, and the media is bombarding us with ads, getting us to consume — and then high-minded ecologists blame us, saying that we shouldn’t consume, that we’re making too many babies, it’s all our fault — the question arises, has the Left become a meaningless word? That has been one of my greatest concerns in these wintery years: how

are we going to reconstitute a Left that is relevant? It can't be like the Spanish anarchists anymore; they can't be reconstituted. It can't be the workers' movement anymore; the workers themselves don't want to be called 'workers' anymore, they want to be called 'us middle-class employees'. That's the rhetoric we're beginning to hear. And now if you go out on strike, it is to the advantage of the company. This is a new development — who could have historically anticipated that a strike would be to the advantage of a corporation? It is the perfect excuse to smash the union or else move to another country, where they can get 72 cents, as they do in Mexico, for auto workers, instead of paying out 13 or 14 dollars per hour. This has been a major theme in a series of discussions that I have tried to give at the Institute. What new interest will replace the special interest of the working class that Marx and others, including the anarchists, thought would become the general interest of humanity? I think we are assembled here because we have an intuition, if not a total consciousness, that that general interest has to be the conflict with the natural world, that the real historical limits of capitalism — whatever Marx thought they were, and he thought that they were internal — that they would break down from within the whole logic of capitalist development, are patently external: this is what capitalism is coming up against, what hierarchical society is coming up against. All the things we blame, like technology and population, all the things, that is, that many people in the environmental movement blame must be understood within the framework of an irrational system today that is anti-ecological, the most anti-ecological that has ever appeared since the species evolved.

Ecology, if it is not tied to social issues, has no meaning. If it does not express the idea that all our ecological issues are social problems and that without resolving these social problems the most we can hope to deal with so far as ecological issues are concerned are feeble reform techniques and accommodations until, finally, we may live in bio-shelters, literally, to avoid the effect of the ozone layer's

are beleaguered by intellectuals. They fill up the pages of the "New York Review of Books," they're all over the "Atlantic Monthly," not to speak of their more exotic journals, two or three thousand, in which each one scratches the other one's back, and tries to get in as many quotations as possible so that when one applies for tenure or for an advance from associate to full professor, one can point out that he or she has been cited 500 times last year in various books and textbooks, which are meant primarily to hold a poor classroom in captivity to a body of absolutely frozen and deadening ideas. So the problem we are faced with is creating an intelligentsia. However, I don't believe that an intelligentsia is a substitute for the historical conditions that create the crisis that finally makes people receptive to new ideas and finally suggests new directions and new possibilities for practice. But the important thing is, above all, to try to formulate and make reality coherent, and to be engaged in a living metabolism with society all the time, instead of remaining insulated from society. To make reality coherent in the sense that one can criticize it in a rational and meaningful way that provides a sense of direction — that should be our goal. Again, of course, the historic conditions have to be with us, and at this particular time, frankly, they are not. I would be absurd if I tried to make anyone believe that what we are faced with at the moment is anything but a period of deep-seated reaction. But there is the beginning of some kind of ferment. There are the first signs that there is a stiffening and an attempt to find meaning. And the crisis that is being produced has its roots above all in ecology.

Now, are we going to produce a movement that is, first of all, Left? Will this be a period in history that will be utterly without a Left or where the Left will mean nothing more than liberal? Are we going to divest ourselves of anything that could be called an intelligentsia and produce nothing but intellectuals in what is the shallowest sense of the term — namely, institutionalized thinkers and institutionalized people who train others, rather than impart wisdom? Finally, have we found the right focus on which to center

ing when he was putting together the Encyclopedia. These were the raw and women who created the intellectual ferment that gave rise to the pamphlets and the literature that finally did so much to nourish the great French Revolution of 1789 to 1795. There, the so-called “intellectuals” and theorists not only engaged in thinking but also engaged on writing, engaged in confrontations with the system instead of shying away from them. They had to be engaged or else, in fact, they couldn’t have functioned intellectually. They would have dried up — they would have literally socially dehydrated if there was not that ferment of ideas that involved the people at large, gradually percolating down to them (or, at least, the middle-brow people) and finally reaching all sectors of the French population. These ideas even intellectually subverted the court itself; the nobility began to lose its sense of identity because of the challenges this intelligentsia made, putting everything up against the bar of reason.

I am reminded of the authentic Russian source of the word ‘intelligentsia.’ It’s truly a Russian, not an English, word. The men that formed the intelligentsia went with others to Siberia and those who created enormous social ferment, including even men like Tolstoy — not to mention the many women who were involved in the revolutionary movement and did so much of the writing and did so much thinking and also did so much acting. The interaction of the mind with life — in which there is no split between the two, in which one is not opposed to the other — and the attempt to work outside the institutions and, in fact, to create new institutions was the paramount role of an intelligentsia that increasingly articulated for a broad mass of people those inchoate concerns, those frustrations, and those feelings of an utter inability to make sense of reality. And, ultimately, it shattered, in the mind and the spirit, the commitment of the great majority of people to the old feudal system and, even, to a certain degree, the republic that followed.

So, today we are faced with the task of developing an intelligentsia, not a new body of intellectuals. We’ve got intellectuals, we

depletion, breathing oxygen that is relatively free of pollutants and creating a totally synthetic environment. Short of that horrifying technocratic solution — which, in fact, has already been suggested by Buckminster Fuller years ago with his dome over New York City — short of those solutions, this society stands in flat contradiction to the natural world because it is *society* that is anti-ecological and not because, as we are so often lead to believe, it just has the wrong sensibility. This society is trapped within a system of growth, of conflict with nature, of turning the organic into the inorganic. So any ecology movement that is going to develop is going to have to be a social ecology, and it is going to have to find the roots of the ecological problem in the societal problems of hierarchy, the domination of one gender by another, the domination of the young by the old, and the domination of one ethnic group by another — and not look at the problem in terms of classes, important as class exploitation is today.

But what is needed to bring a Left together? We must produce not only a Left, but Leftists, and not only revolution in the end, but revolutionaries. We are losing contact with the meaning of these terms. We don’t know where to find definitions; for them, unless we go back to Spain where we see authentic revolutionaries and Leftists, unless we go back to earlier revolutionary periods and the like, for all their defects. We have to develop not only the theoretical body of ideas that is necessary to orient us, a social ecology that roots our ecological views in society, not only a new sensibility toward the natural world, (which is very easy to articulate — all you have to do is read *Deep Ecology* by Devall and Sessions, and you will get more than you know what to do with), but we also have to develop something that goes beyond different ecological sensibilities and spiritualities: we have to develop a stratum of society that is, at the very least, capable of theorizing, of giving coherence to things, yet which is at the same time part of a public sphere or tries to create a public sphere. What we are creating today in the United States and in much of the world, certainly in Western Europe, is a bunch

of intellectuals at best — assuming we are even developing intellectuals. Just as the term ‘Left’ has become so denatured that you can join DSA [Democratic Socialists of America] or another such quasi or remnant Marxist group, go into the Democratic Party, and still call yourself a Leftist, where even Ted Kennedy can be called a Leftist only by comparison with George Bush, where they talk of the left wing of the democratic party which is corrupt to the core — so we are not only losing our sense of definition of what a Leftist is, we are losing our sense of definition of what a revolutionary is and of what an intellectual is.

What is important in theorizing is to make reality coherent. The idea behind a coherent theory is to try to make reality, or our understanding of reality, rational — that is the point behind coherence. Coherence literally is a process of thinking out and giving reason to whatever our ideals may be or to whatever reality we are trying to create. It means giving a rational understanding to the reality in which we live — which doesn’t mean that this reality is rational but that we understand how it came about and where it is going. We are now living in a period of incoherence. There is an ideology in the universities which stresses incoherence in the name of pluralism. It’s called postmodernism. It denies the existence of rationality, it denies the existence of history, it denies the existence of ideals, and has essentially put a text under our noses and asked us to analyze it. If that is what intellectuality is all about, then it is a tremendous failure. If intellectuality is to mean drawing on great traditions, restating and reinterpreting them in order to make them relevant in a new context so that we can go beyond, say, the 1930s and even beyond the 1960s and 70s — if it is meant to do that, then we are not producing intellectuals in the sense that Russell Jacoby is discussing in *The Last Intellectuals*, if any of you are familiar with his book. Jacoby laments the fact that most intellectuals have become professors. We are producing intellectuals who are being absorbed by the academy, who are finding their public arena in the classroom and who are operating according to

a syllabus. These intellectuals are on the academic market, no less commodities in this respect than junk food or the rubbish that you see in department stores or shopping malls. Russell Jacoby made a mistake using the phrase the “last intellectuals” because intellectuals exist today in the sense that they are professors, which is not to say that all professors are bad — I was one myself. I was captured by the university system and left it as rapidly as I could, but that isn’t the point. What I am talking about is basically a new “social contract,” if I may use that word, in which people who are supposed to think are tamed into nothing but people who teach skills. The word ‘skill’ gives to us the instrumental term for what engages intellectuals in the universities today. Because of this absorption into the universities and, for that matter, into corporations and the state machinery, of whatever creative talent exists among intellectuals, they end up getting trapped in the institutions so that they can’t get out of them anymore. This is exactly what’s happened in Germany with the “long march through the institutions” that the German radical student leader, Rudi Dutschke, formulated. They become trapped in the German Green party, trapped in the German state machinery, trapped in the German university, trapped in the whole professional world which is largely bureaucratic rather than creative in any real sense of the term.

There we have lost contact with — and this is why I think Russell Jacoby could have used another word — a word that has come out of the Russian experience and that I recall from childhood: the “intelligentsia.” The intelligentsia were people who thought and still lived in a public arena, and who tried to create a public sphere. There were figures like Denis Diderot, who did not end up in any of the universities but who wrote — virtually in poverty for much of his life — who read and was creative, who walked the streets of Paris intoxicated by the life of the people, who played chess and was involved in the discussions in the cafes, acting as a ferment, challenging authority everywhere along his way and going to prison for a period of time because the clergy didn’t like what he was do-