

OK Bookchin

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There is perhaps no modern thinker who has done more to damage the term “anarchism” than Murray Bookchin. Beyond all the physical repression over the centuries, by both capitalists and communists, the right and the left, Bookchin’s piece “Social Anarchism or Lifestyle Anarchism: An Unbridgeable Chasm” stands as the most notable instance of ideological sabotage against anarchism.

Even the title of the piece is a lie. The only reason this “chasm” exists, is because Bookchin and his followers have been harping about it for the last 20 years. Additionally, individualist and social anarchism share a long history of tolerating each other, if not working together. Bookchin conveniently ignores that fact that many individualist anarchists were members of the First International, right alongside social anarchists, and even Marxists. There may have been tension between these groups, but there was no chasm, as there was no chasm until Bookchin created one.

Bookchin starts by going through the history of individualist anarchism, making sure to label them as terrorists pretty quickly out of the gates.

“individualistic anarchists committed acts of terrorism that gave anarchism its reputation as a violently sinister conspiracy.”

This is patently false, as shown in the work “The Anarchist Beast” by Nhat Hong. If Bookchin knew what he was talking about, he would have known that the drive to label anarchists as terrorists was going strong since likely before the 1880s. Yes, some individualist anarchists were terrorists, but anarchism had largely been stuck with that label already. The deeds of terrorists are not what established the label, it was the fear of those in power, and their need to discredit anarchism.

“Despite their avowals of an anarchocommunist ideology, Nietzscheans like Emma Goldman remained cheek to jowl in spirit with individualists. “

Here, we see Bookchin using Nietzsche like his name is some type of slur, in addition to using him to discredit Emma Goldman. Goldman did far more to advance anarchy in this world than Bookchin ever did, and often did it side by side with more social leaning anarchists. Where is the chasm then? Of course Bookchin wants to dismiss Goldman away, as her very life disproves his thesis here.

“The period hardly allowed individualists, in the name of their ‘uniqueness,’ to ignore the need for energetic revolutionary forms of organization with coherent and compelling programs.”

Moving past the 1800s and early 1900s, Bookchin moves on in time, suggesting that social anarchists in the period past that had “compelling programs.” What were these programs exactly? Allying with the Stalinist red fascism in Spain and getting murdered? While individualist anarchists may have been focused on smaller scale actions, the larger scale actions of the social anarchists of the 1930s ended quite literally, in fascism. I would hardly call that compelling or coherent.

“These trendy posturings, nearly all of which follow current yuppie fashions...”

It is at around this point in the piece that Bookchin abandons his delusional version of history, and moves on to mere ad hominem attacks and mere complaining. Bookchin is the last person who should be complaining about anything fashion related! Look at his hat! Bookchin constantly looks like how he thinks a worker should look like, and could absolutely deal with some sense of fashion other than his self-styled “assembly line chic”.

“the 1990s are awash in self-styled anarchists who — their flamboyant radical rhetoric aside — are cultivating a latter-day anarcho-individualism that I will call lifestyle anarchism. Its preoccupations with the ego and its uniqueness and its polymorphous concepts of resistance are steadily eroding the socialistic character of the libertarian tradition.”

Here, Bookchin attempts to coin individualist anarchism as something he created, a “lifestyle anarchism”, if you will. He claims lifestyle anarchism erodes the socialistic character of anarchism? So be it! The socialistic tradition in anarchism is what has led historically to anarchists buddying up to, and later being murdered by, socialists and communists. If erosion of this socialistic character is what it takes for anarchists to stop thinking that leftist traditions have their best interests at heart...Erode away!

“The ego — more precisely, its incarnation in various lifestyles — has become an *idée fixe* for many post-1960s anarchists, who are losing contact with the need for an organized, collectivistic, programmatic opposition to the existing social order.”

What Bookchin does not realize, is that this type of collectivist, programmatic “opposition” has become ingrained in the social order itself. Mass politics, with its programs for social change, has become part of the status quo. The system itself would much rather have people mimicking its structures and playing within its rules, as opposed to the infinitely diverse forms of resistance available to all individuals at any moment. The state understands how to deal with the same dogmatic resistance it has faced for centuries. It is not prepared for outbursts of individuality, fluid and innumerable in their scope.

“Lifestyle, like individualist, anarchism bears a disdain for theory,”

Yes! We do! We disdain those who fetishize thought, while cowering from action. Unlike Bookchin, who spent his life writing dozens of books, and many more pieces outside of them, the individualists see the world as their parchment upon which to write. Action is worth more than a million words, and also the most effective way to breed more action. People have been theorizing about the same things for centuries now, to little effect. It has been those who commit themselves to enacting theory, rather than steeping themselves in it, who have made the strongest stands against rulership.

“The price that anarchism will pay if it permits this swill to displace the libertarian ideals of an earlier period could be enormous.”

And here is where we see that Bookchin is not interested so much in opposing rulership, as he is using anarchism as a method of control. As evidenced above, Bookchin cares more about anarchism as a static ideology, than as a fluid attempt by people to not be ruled. He is concerned with anarchism as a monolithic entity, because as a singular and dogmatic ideology, anarchism becomes another box in which to contain people’s ideas, and thereby control people’s actions.

“Thus, instead of disclosing the sources of present-day social and personal pathologies, antitechnologism allows us to speciously replace capitalism with technology, which basically facilitates capital accumulation and the exploitation of labor, as the underlying cause of growth and of ecological destruction. Civilization, embodied in the city as a cultural center, is divested of its rational dimensions, as if the city were an unabated cancer rather than the potential sphere for universalizing human intercourse...”

Bookchin also attempts to attack currents of thought like primitivism and anti-civilization, but really just proves that he does not understand the critique these strains are making. Anti-civilization ideas are generally not “anti” technology, so much as they are insisting on an honesty about technology. The technology that exists, exists because of a globalized system of coercion. As anarchists, we need to be critical of this system, and understand that without coercion modern technology would simply not exist. Those who critique technology often do not oppose technology itself, but the manner in which technology is produced. Bookchin’s claim of “antitechnologism” is either a misunderstanding, or a purposeful falsification.

It is also worth noting that Bookchin again vulgarizes primitivism and anti-civ ideas by equating civilization with cities. He dares not address something like Fredy Perlman’s idea of civilization as the roots of all hierarchy...as simply rulership. Instead, Bookchin shows his cowardice by addressing anti-civ ideas with a meme level understanding of it, avoiding those who have thought deeper on the subject.

“Lifestyle anarchism must be seen in the present social context not only of demoralized black ghettos and reactionary white suburbs but even of Indian reservations, those ostensible centers of ‘primalty,’ in which gangs of Indian youths now shoot at one another, drug dealing is rampant, and ‘gang graffiti greets visitors even at the sacred Window Rock monument,’ “

And, of course, no old white man rant would be complete without some statements that just end up sounding like a confused racism. Bookchin actually attempts to claim that lifestyle/individual anarchism is responsible or related to the severe marginalization of people of color?! I believe that responsibility lies with capitalism and the racist structures it has created, not some individualist spectre.

“Social anarchism, in my view, is made of fundamentally different stuff, heir to the Enlightenment tradition...”

Finally, Bookchin comes clean, after the thinly veiled racism, and comes forth with an admission of his true forebearers...the archetypical “old white dudes” of the Enlightenment. Bookchin’s anarchism is not rooted in a simple desire for “no rulers”, but tied up in the liberal white supremacism of Enlightenment ideas.

“it describes the democratic dimension of anarchism as a majoritarian administration of the public sphere.”

Bookchin cannot rid himself of statist ideas, as he goes on to talk about his notion of Communalism. Bookchin does not stop to think “What if the majority does not want to administrate anything?” To him, anarchism is just another system of rulership, albeit a “majoritarian” one. Anarchism to him, becomes less about “no rulers”, and more about “everyone rules”.

“The sovereign, self-sufficient ‘individual’ has always been a precarious basis upon which to anchor a left libertarian outlook.”

Clearly, Bookchin does not believe in any sort of “bottom up” egalitarianism, or else he would not be so quick to dismiss the individual. Free and empowered individuals make up free and empowered societies, and should absolutely be the basis of liberty. One cannot force a system onto people, and then call those people free, no matter how inclusive the system.

“Democracy is not antithetical to anarchism; nor are majority rule and nonconsensual decisions incommensurable with a libertarian society. “

Any sort of rule...Any sort of nonconsensual decision is antithetical to anarchism. Here, again, Bookchin shows his desire to control others in the name of freedom. He literally attempts to reconcile the very tools of the state with anarchism!

“That no society can exist without institutional structures is transparently clear to anyone who has not been stupefied by Stirner and his kind.”

Again, his blatant statism is laid bare. Is “institutional structures” not simply another name for “rulership”? Of course, given the many societal blueprints that Bookchin created in his lifetime, it is clear that Bookchin saw himself at the helm of, or at least a theoretician of these “institutional structures”. Bookchin is incapable of rejecting these structures, because he views them as instruments to be used in ruling over others.

“Certainly, it is already no longer possible, in my view, to call oneself an anarchist without adding a qualifying adjective to distinguish oneself from lifestyle anarchists.”

And again, Bookchin shows that he is the one attempting to dilute anarchism, by attempting to add qualifiers and appendages to it. If anarchism can be obscured by adjectives, then its true meaning of “no rulers” can be watered down and even changed into something else.

“Mere opposition to the state may well unite fascistic lumpens with Stirnerite lumpens, a phenomenon that is not without its historical precedents. “

Bookchin finishes with a bit of classist flair, using the same terms that Marx used with disdain when talking about the underclasses of people. Bookchin, the “good worker”, must berate and chastise others. In a fit of workerism, Bookchin then plays the card common to leftists, and sinks to claims of fascism, putting to rest the notion that he ever had any real argument to begin with.

This final cry of “fascism!” truly shows Bookchin’s true designs here. He is willing to use the threat of fascism to scare those who might not be convinced by the piece’s end into complying. This final statement perfectly illustrates the authoritarianism masking itself as anarchism that Bookchin exemplifies.

“Follow my ‘organized’ and ‘coherent’ plans, or you are a fascist!” he cries.
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