

Freedom, Anarchism, or Social Ecology

Review Essay

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2005

Murray Bookchin's significance as a leading thinker, writer and spokesman for the contemporary radical movement is still generally acknowledged. However, the past fifteen years has seen a rancor and division that threatens to challenge Bookchin's contribution and place in history. The man acknowledged by Roszak as a philosopher to rank with Thoreau has been critiqued and criticized. Repudiated, even.

Crucial to his "deconstruction" has been Bookchin's espousal the opposition of advocates of deep ecology like anarchist essayist David Watson, whose *Beyond Bookchin: A Primer for a Future Social Ecology* tears at the very fabric of Bookchin's ideas. There is vituperative attack at times from both sides in this debate (e.g., Bookchin's *Social Anarchism or Lifestyle Anarchism – The Unbridgeable Chasm*). Watson is a theorist, if one who eschews dogma. His activities would seem guided by liberatory reflection, perhaps a spontaneous dialectic. The poet, the artist, in contrast with the prosaic thinker. The man of metaphor challenging the advocate of coherence. Watson's emphasis on metaphor, intuition, art and poetry as ends in themselves, and as a neglected dimension of Bookchin's critique, is refreshing. Undoubtedly, in pursuing a coherence attuned to rationality, Bookchin ignores a sensibility crucial to a broad and diverse liberatory consciousness. The Renaissance man is too close to his own "ism," as Watson observes.

However, Watson's sympathy toward these neglected areas in Bookchin's perception creates its own problems. His desire to view human uniqueness as a reflection of the acknowledgment of non-human identity as much as its own, leads to its own uneasiness. Citing the Dakota Black Elk approvingly that "unless human beings humble themselves before the entire creation, before the smallest ant, realizing their own nothingness... (human) knowledge of their oneness with the universe... can not be realized" (pp. 55–56), Watson invokes an obeisance to "unity" (here spirituality/mysticism) similar in intent, if not form, to the man he condemns.

Watson's evocation of a diversity and fulfillment in aboriginal communities serves as an antidote to Bookchin's sometimes dismissive musings. Yet again, one wonders if a catholic embrace of "primal, archaic and modern" (*Beyond Bookchin*, p. 72) invites confusion as much as continuity. Does necessary humility become deference: "I must add that sometimes creeping on all fours might be precisely what is called for." (p. 60)

"Revolution will be a kind of return." (p. 154) As wise and incisive as many of Watson's reflections are, to conclude his chapter "The Social Ecologist as Technocrat" in this manner conveys

a disturbing sense of regression. Do we explore the past humbly, with an “authentically dialectical understanding that reorients life around perennial, classic and aboriginal manifestations of wisdom ... we have yet to address fully” (p. 154), or do we thus mire ourselves in new litanies of contradiction?

Watson fears Bookchin’s marriage of capitalist-sponsored computer technology and a municipalist utopia, indicating his incapacity to comprehend the full matrix of hierarchical and segmented social and psychological organization inherent in modern society; the Marxist economist within the anarchist philosopher and social ecologist. Nonetheless, Bookchin’s espousal of a nature rendered self-conscious through humanity’s realized potential retrieves and generates a spark of authentic personhood from mankind’s often dark journey. For Watson, progress is regress – unmitigated.

Bookchin’s role in demystifying Marxism (“Listen Marxist,” *Post-Scarcity Anarchism*, 1971) may be less certain 20–30 years on, but his analytical passion in *Post-Scarcity Anarchism* and *The Ecology of Freedom* (1982) were stepping stones, sign posts for a generation. Watson sees a paralysis or decline in Bookchin’s progress (!) over time. There are such signs. Yet *Re-making Society* (1990) still inspires and *Re-enchanting Humanity* (1995) – uncited by Watson – depicts in bold strokes the ambiguous heritage of post-modernism and deconstruction. Here awareness of “the sentinel of reason” is not an instrumentalist naïveté but a crucial intellectual reference to guide critique. *Social Anarchism or Lifestyle Anarchism* may be guilty of the selective trivialization Watson, personally offended, alleges. It may perceive treason where idealism is equally apparent. It is unquestionably accurate in discerning and decrying the tendency toward privatized retreat so manifestly observable within the left-liberal political spectrum (and attendant culture). For all their erstwhile (at times contemporary) nobility and integrity, the Greens elaborate this secure, middle-class compromise – Rousseau and Mill in perfect harmony.

It is no surprise to see Watson at odds with Bookchin’s illustrative libertarian heritage and his depiction of a utopian future. “Bookchin’s Civitas; from here to where?” (Chapter 6) exemplifies the divide. Watson queries the significance attributed to the Athenian polis and Bookchin’s evocation of Vermont as a current shining light, and challenges the authenticity of his envisaged participatory municipality as a beacon of the future.

David Watson’s criticisms again offer breadth and the value of an alternative perspective. His error again is to misunderstand, hence disregard, the essential conviction of humanity’s striving for freedom and the need for a passionate, if at times indulgent, vision. His glaring omission as an anarchist writer, in an otherwise comprehensive discussion, is to almost totally ignore the contribution of the anarchist tradition itself. As a reflection, Bookchin’s *The Spanish Anarchists* is conspicuous by its absence.

Is it possible that Watson’s dismissive response to Bookchin’s mention of his past experience as a foundry worker intuits more than a contextual dismissal? Without knowledge of the man’s antecedents, one can but surmise. His coming of age during the Vietnam War (both literal and political) suggests the middle-class student radicalism of the time. A deep gulf with earlier radicals like Bookchin influenced, if not shaped, by Depression and war. Personal experiences of enforced drudgery or marginalization inspires a different zeal from that created within a chosen realm of romanticized reminiscences.

It seems possible to locate some of the tension existing between the two writers in relation to the appropriate anarchist interpretation of autonomy and freedom, within these personal and

social origins. Autonomy, precious to a child of the '60s, under suspicion from a man cherishing the best of "The Left That Was" (Part Two, *Social Anarchism or Lifestyle Anarchism*).

As someone of Watson's era (and perhaps background) – certainly someone changed by Vietnam and radicalized by anarchism – I see in *Beyond Bookchin* more systematic echoes of thoughts, reservations I expressed in a response to a brief left-wing resurgence (and Brisbane seminar) in 1989. My "Four Paths" drew attention to Bookchin's virtues, but also his occasional lack of subtlety and complexity, his unawareness of nuance and ambiguity. My reference, with some asperity, to Bookchin's favorite word, "coherence," clearly mirrors a similar unease emerging overseas.

Bookchin's virtues, nonetheless, are considerable. My own intellectual and ethical debt spans 25 years of awareness and enjoyment of his work. Janet Biehl's brief but gracious acknowledgment of correspondence two years back (conveying her unwell companion's best wishes), a pleasant telephone call with his comrade Dan Chodorkoff, these may be slight indications of affinity. They did earn my respect as responses to a communication both complimentary and critical – and erase an understandable annoyance at the silence greeting a letter four years earlier.

Courtesy and conviction need not be at odds. Passionate adherence to principle and belief are qualities to admire, but vitriol to the degree exhibited in the Graham Purchase – Bookchin exchange (*Deep Ecology and Anarchism – A Polemic*, 1993) is sad, even demeaning.

Within the compass of Watson's critique we witness a decline from "(Bookchin is) a unique figure in twentieth century radicalism" (Chapter 1, p. 7) to "my original sympathies for Bookchin's work waned during the writing of this essay (Chapter 7, p. 189). He speaks of its early flaws, its "unsound and inadequate ... 'maturity,'" "the saddest moment and the nadir of his career" represented by "his recent writings." Watson salvages something – "the radical intent and virtues (of) his early contributions" – but the deconstruction is near total.

We may wonder if "after examining his work repeatedly and intensely," Watson has inherited some of his subject's messianic zeal; if the analysis has become something of an obsession, as much as a probing appraisal. Watson is gracious, even detached, at the end: "Only time will tell whether I have sledgehammered a flea or shot peas at an elephant" (Chapter 8, p. 245). Yet the contrast portrays extremes inappropriate to a more balanced perception of the roles of both. Watson's insight and caveats are necessary to elevate social (or deep) ecology to a more complex, catholic conception. To diminish or caricature Bookchin's seminal role, however, is to do less than justice to a man Watson himself acknowledges "revived valuable chapters of neglected social history for many radicals (through his) utopian concerns and exploration of the ideas of a social ecology" (p. 67).

The broader canvas – and conversation – is suggested: "I agree with Bookchin that an authentically radical social ecology beyond the 'bare bones' of the scientific discipline, an ecological sensibility and ethical perspective that discerns the connections between natural and social history, between social crisis and ecological crisis, is essential in halting humanity's present inertia towards social and ecological apocalypse. I share his hunger for a social movement that can become the seed of the new society within the shell of the old, for a redemption of desire and imagination, his insistence on the possibility of a different kind of organic reasoning." (p. 243)

Does the ultimate decision, the final truth, lie not between individual philosophers, their assertion and denial, but between the centuries-old quest for human freedom, inspired by dreams, visions and philosophical questions and the inevitable attempts to locate, confine and codify, be it in the name of anarchism, humanism, animism or ecology?

As we strive and yearn for transformation, we need to explore the writings of all contributors to the panorama of that transformation; to understand their differences, contradictions and insights. Their role – be it fundamental, reflective, provocative. Their intent – didactic, intuitive; their approach – analytical or discursive; their style – literal, metaphorical.

Ultimately, however, we find a freedom – hence love – that is individual and social, ordinary and extraordinary, existential and thoughtful, passionate and intelligent, theirs and ours. I may be you, but I am indisputably me. So, too, anarchism and social ecology, visions of utopia, maintain their heritage, their unique essence, their identity, their strength, flexibility and frailty. They illustrate and articulate freedom, sometimes explain or encapsulate it. But comprehend and define it – never.

Freedom is its own domain, while our quest – neither faith nor justice nor peace nor hope, though at times it may seem one or all of these. Their participation in this quest, their acknowledgement of this domain, measures the ultimate value of the Bookchins and Watsons of the world.

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Retrieved on 28th January 2021 from syndicalist.us
From Anarcho-Syndicalist Review #41, Summer 2005, pp 34–35

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