Bookchin's Revolutionary Program

Wednesday 15 January 2020, by BIEHL Janet (Date first published: 9 December 2015).

The lifelong project of Murray Bookchin (1921-2006) was to try to perpetuate the centuries-old revolutionary socialist tradition by renovating it for the current era. Confronted with the failure of Marxism after World War II, many, perhaps most radical socialists of his generation abandoned the left. But Bookchin refused to give up on the aim of replacing capitalism and the nation state with a rational, ecological libertarian communist society, based on humane and cooperative social relations.

Rather than abandon those ideas, he sought to *rethink* revolution. During the 1950s he concluded that the new revolutionary arena would be not the factory but the city; that the new revolutionary agent would be not the industrial worker but the citizen; that the basic institution of the new society must be, not the dictatorship of the proletariat, but the citizens' assembly in a face-to-face democracy; and that the limits of capitalism were ecological.

Moreover, Bookchin concluded that modern technology was eliminating the need for toil (a condition he called "post-scarcity"), freeing people to reconstruct society and participate in democratic self-government. He developed a program for the creation of assemblies and confederations in urban neighborhoods, towns, and villages that, at various points in this life, he called eco-anarchism, libertarian municipalism, or communalism.

In the 1970s, new social movements—feminism, antiracism, communitarianism, environmentalism—emerged that raised hopes for the fulfillment of this program, but they ultimately failed to generate a new revolutionary dynamic. Today, in 2015, the concept of radical citizens' assemblies is gaining renewed interest among the international left. For this new generation, I propose to lay out the basic program as Bookchin developed it in the 1980s and 1990s.

LIBERTARIAN MUNICIPALISM

The ideal of the "Commune of communes," Bookchin argued to many audiences and readers, has been part of revolutionary history for two centuries: the ideal of decentralized, stateless, and collectively self-managed communes, or free municipalities, joined together in confederations. The *sans-culottes* of the early 1790s had governed revolutionary Paris through assemblies. The Paris Commune of 1871 called for "the absolute autonomy of the Commune extended to all localities in France." The major nineteenth-century anarchist thinkers—Proudhon, Bakunin, and Kropotkin—all called for a federation of communes.

Libertarian municipalism was intended as an expression of this tradition. Rather than seeking to form a party machine to attain state power and institute top-down reforms, it addresses the question that Aristotle asked two thousand years ago, the central problem of all political theory: What kind of polity best provides for the rich flourishing of communal human life? Bookchin's answer: the polity in which empowered citizens manage their communal life through assembly democracy.

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democracy.

For Bookchin, the city was the new revolutionary arena, as it had been in the past; the twentieth-century left, blinded by its engagement with the proletariat and the factory, had overlooked this fact. Historically, revolutionary activity in Paris, St. Petersburg, and Barcelona had been based at least as much in the urban neighborhood as in the workplace. During the Spanish Revolution of 1936-37, the anarchist Friends of Durruti had insisted that "the municipality is the authentic revolutionary government."

Today, Bookchin argued, urban neighborhoods hold memories of ancient civic freedoms and of struggles waged by the oppressed; by reviving those memories and building on those freedoms, he argued, we could resuscitate the local political realm, the civic sphere, as the arena for self-conscious political self-management.

Much of social life today is trivial and vacuous, he pointed out, in a modernity that leaves us directionless and uprooted, living under nation states that render us passive consumers. By contrast, libertarian municipalism, standing in the tradition of civic humanism, offers a moral alternative, placing the highest value on active, responsible citizen participation. Politics, it insists, is too important to be left to professionals—it must become the province of ordinary people, and every adult citizen is potentially competent to participate directly in democratic politics.

Assembly democracy is a civilizing process that can transform a group of self-interested individuals into a deliberative, rational, ethical body politic. By sharing responsibility for self-management, citizens come to realize they can rely on one another—and can earn one another's trust. The individual and the community mutually create each other in a reciprocal process. Embedding social life in ethical ways of life and democratic institutions results in both a moral and a material transformation.

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Where assemblies already exist, libertarian municipalism aims to expand their radical potential; where they formerly existed, it aims to rekindle them; and where they never existed, it aims to create them anew. Bookchin offered practical recommendations as to how to create such assemblies, which in 1996, in collaboration with him, I summarized in a primer, starting with self-education through study groups.

The process may involve running candidates for elective municipal office on programs calling for the devolution of power to neighborhoods; where that is impossible, assemblies can be formed extralegally and strive to achieve vested power through moral force.

In large cities, activists may initially establish assemblies in only a few neighborhoods, which can then serve as models for other neighborhoods. As the assemblies gain real *de facto* power, citizen participation will increase, further enhancing their power. Ultimately city charters or other constitutions would be altered to legitimate the power of the assemblies in local self-government.

DEMOCRATIC POLITICAL LIFE

In a typical assembly meeting, citizens are called upon to address a particular issue by developing a course of action or establishing a policy. They develop options and deliberate the strengths and weaknesses of each, then decide by majority vote. The very process of deliberating rationally, making decisions peacefully, and implementing their choices responsibly develops a character structure in citizens—personal strengths and civic virtues—that is commensurate with democratic

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Citizens come to take seriously the notion that the survival of their new political community depends on solidarity, on their own shared participation in it. They come to understand that they enjoy rights in their polity but also owe duties to their community, and they fulfill their responsibilities in the knowledge that both rights and duties are shared by all.

Reasoned civility is essential to a tolerant, functional, and creative democratic participation. It is a prerequisite for constructive discussion and deliberation. It is indispensable for overcoming personal prejudices and vindictiveness, and for resisting appeals to cupidity and greed, in the interest of preserving the cooperative nature of the community.

One thing direct democracy does not depend on is ethnic homogeneity: neither its practices nor its virtues are the exclusive property of any one ethnic group. A rational democratic polity provides the public spaces where mutual understanding among people of different ethnicities can grow and flourish: its neutral procedures allow members of ethnic groups to articulate their specific issues in the give-and-take of discussion. In this shared context, people of all cultures may develop modesty about their own cultural assumptions and achieve a common recognition of a general interest, especially based on environmental and communal concerns.

The assemblies' decisions, it is to be hoped, will be guided by rational and ecological standards. The ethos of public responsibility could avert the wasteful, exclusive, and irresponsible acquisition of goods, ecological destruction, and human rights violations. Citizens in assemblies could consciously ensure that economic life adheres to ethical precepts of cooperation and sharing, creating what Bookchin called a moral economy as opposed to a market economy.

Classical notions of limit and balance would replace the capitalist imperative to expand and compete in the pursuit of profit. The community would value people, not for their levels of production and consumption, but for their positive contributions to communal solidarity.

DECENTRALIZATION AND CONFEDERATION

To support democratic self-government, municipal political life would have to be rescaled to smaller dimensions; large cities will have to be politically and administratively decentralized into municipalities of a manageable size, into neighborhoods. The city's physical form could be decentralized as well. By decentralizing cities and rescaling technological resources along ecological lines, libertarian municipalism proposes to bring town and country into a creative balance.

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Decentralization, however, does not presuppose autarky. Any given individual community, for the means of life, needs more resources and raw materials than are contained within its own borders. Municipalities are necessarily interdependent, especially in economic life. Economic interdependence is a function not of the competitive market economy or capitalism, but of social life as such—it is simply a fact.

Organized cooperation is therefore necessary, and Bookchin argued that making this possible requires the institutional form of a confederation, a lateral union in which several political entities

combine to form a larger whole, such as the city or the region. The democratized neighborhoods do not dissolve themselves into the confederation but retain their distinct identity while interlinking to address their shared municipal or regional life.

The assemblies send delegates to a confederal council to coordinate and administer the policies that the assemblies have established, to reconcile (with base approval) differences among them, and to carry them out. The delegates are not policymakers but are accountable to the assemblies that chose them, and they are imperatively mandated, immediately recallable at the assemblies' discretion.

The confederal councils exist solely for administrative and adjudicative purposes. Consciously formed to express and accommodate interdependence, and ensuring that power flows from the bottom up, they embody the revolutionary dream of a "Commune of communes."

COMMUNITY OWNERSHIP

The economic life that libertarian municipalism advances is neither nationalized (as in state socialism), nor placed in the hands of workers by factory (as in syndicalism), nor privately owned (as in capitalism), nor reduced to small proprietary cooperatives (as in communitarianism). Rather, it is municipalized—that is, placed under community "ownership" in the form of citizens' assemblies.

All major economic assets would be expropriated and turned over to the citizens in their confederated municipalities. Citizens, the collective "owners" of their community's economic resources, formulate economic policies in the interest of the community as a whole. That is, the decisions they make would be guided not by the interests of their specific enterprise or vocation, which might become parochial or trade-oriented, but by the needs of the community. Members of a particular workplace would thus help formulate policy not only for that workplace but for all other workplaces in the community; they participate not as workers, farmers, technicians, engineers, or professionals but as citizens.

The assembly would make decisions about the distribution of the material means of life among all the neighborhoods in a municipality, and among all the municipalities in a region, where it can be used for the benefit of all, according to the maxim of nineteenth-century communist movements: "From each according to their ability and to each according to their need." Everyone in the community would have access to the means of life, regardless of the work he or she was capable of performing. The assembly would rationally determine levels of need.

Economic life as such would be subsumed into the political realm, absorbed as part of the public business of the confederated assemblies. If one municipality tried to engross itself at the expense of others, its confederates would have the right to prevent it from doing so. Neither the factory nor the land could ever again become a separate competitive unit with its own particularistic interests.

Today, Bookchin long argued, productive technologies have been developed sufficiently to make possible an immense expansion of free time, through the automation of tasks once performed by human labor. The basic means for eliminating toil and drudgery, for living in comfort and security, rationally and ecologically, for social rather than merely private ends, are potentially available to all peoples of the world.

In the present society, automation has created social hardships, like the poverty that results from unemployment, because corporations prefer machines to human labor in order to reduce production costs. But in a rational society, productive technologies could be used to create free time rather than misery. It would use today's technological infrastructure to meet the basic needs of life and remove onerous toil rather than serve the imperatives of capitalism. Men and women would then have the

free time to participate in political life and enjoy rich and meaningful personal lives as well.

CITIZENS' MILITIAS

As more and more municipalities democratized themselves and formed confederations, Bookchin observed, their shared power would constitute a threat to the state and to the capitalist system. Resolving this unstable situation could well involve a confrontation, as the existing power structure would almost certainly move against the self-governing polity. The assemblies, he believed, would have to create an armed guard or citizens' militia to protect their newfound freedoms.

In this respect, he followed the longstanding recognition by the international socialist movement that the armed people, citizens' militias as an alternative to standing armies, was a *sine qua non* for a free society. Bakunin, for one, wrote in the 1860s: "All able-bodied citizens should, if necessary, take up arms to defend their homes and their freedom. Each country's military defense and equipment should be organized locally by the commune, or provincially, somewhat like the militias in Switzerland or the United States."

A citizens' militia is not merely a military force but also manifests the power of a free citizenry, reflecting their resolve to assert their rights and their commitment to their new political dispensation. The civic militia or guard would be democratically organized, with officers elected both by the militia and by the citizens' assembly, and it would exist under the close supervision of the citizens' assemblies.

It is possible that armed confrontation would be unnecessary, Bookchin observed, as the very existence of direct democracy could "hollow out" state power itself, delegitimating its authority and winning a majority of the people over to the new civic and confederal institutions. The larger and more numerous the municipal confederations become, the greater would be their potential to constitute a dual power (to use Trotsky's phrase) or *counterpower* to the nation-state. Expressing the people's will, the confederation would constitute a lever for the transfer of power.

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With or without armed confrontation, power would be shifted away from the state and into the hands of the people and their confederated assemblies. In Paris in 1789 and in Petrograd in February 1917, state authority simply collapsed in the face of a revolutionary confrontation. So hollowed out was the might of the seemingly all-powerful French and Russian monarchies that when a revolutionary people challenged them, they crumbled.

Crucially, in both cases, the ordinary rank-and-file soldiers of the armed forces crossed over to the revolutionary movement. Today too, Bookchin thought, it would be crucial for the existing armed forces to cross over from the side of the state to the side of the people.

SEIZING THE REVOLUTIONARY MOMENT

Bookchin emphasized repeatedly in his later years that for a revolution to succeed, history must be on its side. Success is not possible at every moment; in addition to the will of individuals, large social forces must also be at work.

But too often, when a revolution is on the horizon, people are not ready for it. At "revolutionary moments," as Bookchin called them, when a social or political crisis explodes, people pour into the streets and demonstrate to express their anger—but without the existence of revolutionary institutions to embody an alternative, they are left wondering what to do. By the time a revolutionary

moment occurs, it is too late to create them.

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It is impossible to predict, Bookchin insisted, when social crises will take place, so emancipatory institutions must be consciously created well in advance of the revolutionary moment, through painstaking, molecular work. He urged his students to begin to create the institutions of the new society within the shell of the old, so that they will be in place at the time of crisis.

The architects of the Rojava Revolution understood this point clearly. In the early 2000s, even as the brutal Assad regime proscribed political activity, the women's union Yekitîya Star and the PYD began organizing clandestinely, in accordance with the new PKK ideology of Democratic Confederalism. In March 2011 the Syrian uprising began, allowing for more overt organizing, and they plunged ahead full force: the People's Council of West Kurdistan (MGRK) created councils in neighborhoods, villages, districts, and regions.

Citizens poured into these alternative institutions, so much so that a new level was created, the residential street, which became home to the commune, the true citizens' assembly. By the time Rojava's revolutionary moment occurred in July 2012, when the Assad regime evacuated the region, the process had been underway for over a year, and the groundwork had been laid: the democratic council system was in place and had the support of the people.

The next challenge will not only be to survive in the war against the jihadists, but to ensure that power continues to flow from the bottom up. For the rest of the world, the Rojava Revolution offers an important lesson about the need for advance preparation. While Western activists often face repression, they face nothing like the brutality of the Assad dictatorship, and they have the relative freedom to begin to create new institutions now.

THE QUESTION OF POWER

In movements today, Bookchin found to his frustration, many activists regard power itself as a malignant evil, something to be abolished or avoided as morally impure. He vehemently opposed this notion, late in life, insisting that power is neither good nor evil—it simply is. The pertinent issue is not whether it will exist (it will, always) but whether it is in the hands of elites or in the hands of the people, and the purposes and interests for which it is exercised.

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He illustrated this point by telling a story from the Spanish Revolution of 1936-37. In the preceding decades, Spanish anarchists had built a strong revolutionary institution, the CNT (National Confederation of Labor)—the world's largest anarchosyndicalist trade union. On July 21, 1936, as Franco's generals were overrunning much of Spain with the intention of destroying the Spanish Republic in favor of a military dictatorship, the workers of Barcelona, organized by the CNT, formed armed militias, and in some places—especially Catalonia—succeeded in pushing back the reactionary Francoists.

When the dust settled, the workers and peasants held de facto power in Catalonia. They had collectivized workplaces in factories and in urban neighborhoods; in the countryside, they collectivized the land; and they established a network of self-governing committees to handle defense and supplies and transportation. These bottom-up institutions constituted a true

revolutionary government. Through them, workers and peasants did not destroy power—by virtue of their self-organization and their military success, they *held* it. It was, Bookchin thought, one of the greatest revolutionary moments of the twentieth century, indeed in all revolutionary history.

For guidance on how to manage that power, the workers and peasants turned to the CNT, which on July 23 convened an assembly or plenum near Barcelona to discuss the matter. Some delegates argued passionately that the CNT should approve the collectives and committees as a revolutionary government and proclaim *comunismo libertario*. But others argued that such a move would constitute a "Bolshevik seizure of power." Instead, they urged the CNT to join with all the other antifascist parties—bourgeois liberals, socialists, and even Stalinists—and form a regional coalition government in Catalonia.

The CNT plenum lost its revolutionary nerve and chose the second course. Tragically, it in essence transferred power from the de facto self-government to the coalition government—which really was a new regional state. Thereafter this Catalan state consolidated its power, restoring the old police forces and even giving the Stalinists a free hand. Within a few months, the Stalinists suppressed the workers' and peasants' committees, demolished the revolution, and arrested its supporters.

Bookchin, of course, thought the Catalan anarchists of 1936 should have proclaimed *comunismo libertario* when they had a chance. But anarchist theory had taught them to reject all power as malignant rather than embrace popular power that was grounded in the people. The Friends of Durruti, whom Bookchin admired, attributed the failure of the July 1936 revolution to its lack of "a concrete program. We had no idea where we were going. We had lyricism aplenty; but when all is said and done, we did not know what to do with our masses of workers or how to give substance to the popular effusion which erupted inside our organizations. By not knowing what to do, we handed the revolution on a platter to the bourgeoisie and the Marxists."

With libertarian municipalism, Bookchin sought to provide just such a libertarian theory of power as was needed in 1936-37; so does Öcalan's Democratic Confederalism. Armed with libertarian theories of power, we may hope that in the future such revolutionary moments will not once again be tragically lost.

RADICALIZE THE DEMOCRACY!

The nation state and the capitalist system cannot survive indefinitely. Around the world, the divisions between rich and poor have widened into a yawning chasm, and the whole system is on a collision course with the biosphere.

Capitalism's grow-or-die imperative, which seeks profit for capital expansion at the expense of all other considerations, stands radically at odds with the practical realities of interdependence and limit, both in social terms and in terms of the capacity of the planet to sustain life. Global warming is already wreaking havoc, causing rising sea levels, catastrophic weather extremes, epidemics of infectious diseases, and diminished arable land.

To Bookchin, the choice was clear: either people would establish a democratic, cooperative, ecological society, or the ecological underpinnings of society would simply collapse. The recovery of politics and citizenship was thus for him not only a precondition for a free society; it was a precondition for our survival as a species. In effect, the ecological question demands a fundamental reconstruction of society, along lines that are cooperative rather than competitive, democratic rather than authoritarian, communal rather than individualistic—above all by eliminating the capitalist system that is wreaking havoc on the biosphere.

Bookchin thought that the desire to preserve the biosphere would be universal among rational people; and that the need for community abided in the human spirit, welling up over the centuries in times of social crisis. As for the capitalist economy, it is little more than two centuries old. In the mixed economy that preceded it, culture restrained acquisitive desires, and it could do so once again, reinforced by a post-scarcity technology.

The demand for a rational society summons us to be rational beings—to live up to our uniquely human potentials and construct the Commune of communes. In many places, he argued, old democratic institutions linger within the sinews of today's republican states. The commune lies hidden and distorted in the city council; the sectional assembly lies hidden and distorted in the neighborhood; the town meeting lies hidden and distorted in the township; and municipal confederations lie hidden and distorted in regional associations of towns and cities.

By unearthing, renovating, and building upon these hidden institutions where they exist, and building them where they do not, we can create the conditions for a new society that is democratic, ecological, rational, and nonhierarchical. Hence the slogan with which he closed so many of his inspirational orations: "Democratize the republic! Radicalize the democracy!"

Janet Biehl is the author of *Ecology or Catastrophe: The Life of Murray Bookchin* (2015), published by Oxford University Press.

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P.S.

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