Murray Bookchin: the Front is Narrow

Review by David Orton

Bookchin: A Critical Appraisal, by Damian F. White,
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"It 'is the responsibility of the most conscious of life forms – humanity – to be the *voice* of a mute nature and to act to intelligently foster organic evolution.'" (p. 110)

INTRODUCTION

Bookchin: A Critical Appraisal comes out of a PhD thesis by Damian White, who is now teaching sociology at the Rhode Island School of Design in the United States. This is a scholarly and thus well documented text, with the author having gone through Bookchin's writings, which are extensively referenced. White is himself a social ecology supporter, basically a justifier of Bookchin, and summarizes Bookchin's theoretical positions and their evolution well. Unlike Bookchin, who I would consider a revolutionary – in the sense of having a belief that a capitalist economy cannot save itself – Damian White is "pragmatic," "reformist" and a supporter of "green capitalism." (p. 190) White shows with examples that "There are numerous 'Murray Bookchins' and numerous potential legacies." (p. 189) In a sense, and with no disrespect intended, this book could be considered a "Murray Bookchin for Dummies" Primer. My reading of Bookchin is quite limited, so this book helps fill a gap for me, as it will for others, because it presents his basic views.

Murray Bookchin lived from 1921 to 2006. When he died, I remember feeling that an important Green thinker had exited the world stage. I felt some remorse, both because I had never really engaged with his ideas, except defensively as a deep ecology supporter, and because I never met him in person. I did also find him a hard read. The hubris quotation which introduces this review, illustrates the divide between social ecology and deep ecology. (The quote is taken from Bookchin's **The Philosophy of Social Ecology: Essays on Dialectical Naturalism**, 1995, 2nd edition.) He was a person of considerable theoretical importance and intellect, embracing social, political, and cultural questions, in addition to having views on ecological matters. This is the kind of ecological politics which interests me. I was quite astounded to find out that, as early as 1952, Bookchin was writing articles on ecologically related issues, for example, "The Problem of Chemicals in Food." Yet for both Bookchin and White, as with social ecology generally, one misses the lack of a genuine ecocentric identification by humans with the natural world. Currently

we treat Nature as a "resource" for human and corporate consumption. Bookchin seems to want a more conscious intervention, with the apparent assumption that our species can intervene and shape the natural world in the interests of other species.

Bookchin was also a person of the Left, a self-educated working class intellectual, who knew what it was like to earn a living using his hands on the factory floor early in life. (He did become a tenured professor in the 1970s.) Many university-based academics, like Damian White, were, and still are, responding to his ideas, and a number of influential movement activists have been guided by him.

Bookchin was a difficult person to interact with. I liked the way White described this by saying that "Bookchin cast a very heavy presence over his own body of work." (p. 187). White also notes: "His work has attracted both disciples and remarkably hostile critics. His intellectual life is littered with disputes and rancorous arguments, many conducted with former sympathisers." (p. xv)

The importance of this book is that it gives a good overview and introduction, in a relatively short text, to the work and evolving views of Murray Bookchin. The bibliography lists 21 of "Bookchin's Core Works" (including those using pseudonyms) starting with the 1962 **Our Synthetic Environment** and 23 "Secondary Writings" starting with the 1950 essay "State Capitalism in Russia." It also has a list of about 12 pages of "Additional References." This is a large body of work by a theorist who has made a major contribution to political ecology. But I do not share the view of the book jacket, that Murray Bookchin "is widely regarded as the visionary precursor of modern environmentalism."

DISCUSSION

My own attitude towards Bookchin was perhaps initially shaped by two events. One was reading the 1987 essay "Social Ecology Versus 'Deep Ecology.'" This totally dismayed me. Among other slanders, deep ecology was characterized as "an ideological toxic dump" and this philosophy was linked with "eco-fascism" which is a very serious indictment. Yet, for deep ecology, all life forms (including humans) have "intrinsic value", which is not determined by humankind, a position incompatible with fascism. Arne Naess himself wrote regarding intrinsic value:
"This is squarely an *antifascist* position. It is incompatible with fascist racism and fascist nationalism, and also with the special ethical status accorded the (supreme) Leader." (**Selected Works**, Volume Ten, p. 95.)

The above essay was also anti-communist. For example, Woody Guthrie is called "a Communist Party centralist." "Iron Curtain" terminology is used, which implies a unilateral construction by the former Soviet Union. To be on the Left in the West has meant being socialized within a culture of anti-communist negativity since the 1917 Russian revolution. Damian White traces

Bookchin's own political migration from expelled Communist Party member in 1939, to a supporter of Trotskyism, leaving the Marxist tradition behind in the mid 1960s, to libertarian municipalism and breaking with anarchism in the late 1990s. Bookchin came to see social ecology finally as a form of libertarian socialism. White says that Bookchin was influenced by the German sociologist Max Weber, specially Weber's stress on how ideas and cultural factors affect historical development.

My own view is that the ecocentric Left today must be open-minded, inclusive and non sectarian, and learning from all theoretical tendencies; non communist, but without giving credence to virulent anti-communism. It is essential that we discard divisive baggage from past Left battles without repudiating this valuable heritage. One of the slogans associated with Naess is "that the front is long", meaning that there are many paths to a deep ecological consciousness, many struggles for participants to engage in, and that we should be tolerant and supportive of those marching to a different drummer. The exchanges that I am aware of, between Naess and his critics, both within deep ecology and external to this philosophy, are without rancour. For Bookchin there was one way – his way – and the front was narrow. There was little tolerance for those who disagreed with him. Damian White shows this unfortunate side of Murray Bookchin, while sharing Bookchin's major blind spot in not being able to see anything positive in deep ecology.

The second event that helped shape my initial negative attitude towards Murray Bookchin, which got me off on a wrong foot with his ideas, was that I had met with some supporters of the Left Green Network in Montreal in the late 1980s, who travelled from Vermont (where Bookchin was based), to discuss, or so I thought, possible cooperation. Bookchin co-founded the Network. (p. 203) I and my companion from Nova Scotia were turned off by the 'hegemonistic', 'take no prisoners' attitude towards those who harboured sympathy for deep ecology, but who also saw themselves as part of the Canadian Left. For these emissaries, to be a Left Green was to be a Green who supported social ecology, end of discussion. Other people, for example, Richard Sylvan, Andrew McLaughlin, Judi Bari and myself, who were attempting to bring together deep ecology and a Left anti-capitalistic perspective, were not fit to be invited to the Left Green Network table. (White himself seems oblivious of deep ecology's own internal self-critique from the Left, as shown, for example, in the writings of Richard Sylvan or Judi Bari, or in the Left Biocentrism Primer.) As the Principles of the Left Green Network noted at the time, "Left Greens are social ecologists" and, on top of this, the Principles were imperial, seeming to assume that Canada was just an appendage of the United States. The 'cooperation' put forth by the Network spokespersons was 'our way or the highway,' not an exchange among equals.

SOME KEY IDEAS

"The very concept that humanity must dominate nature has its origins in the domination of human by human." (p. 35)

I do not want to replay past debates, but those influenced by deep ecology have pointed out, in regard to this quotation, that one can have a society in which humans do not dominate each other, which is relatively egalitarian and is non sexist, but which still exploits the natural world and destroys its biodiversity. It is a bit of a stretch, but among capitalist societies, Sweden is often used as a model of a society which is quite progressive from a social justice understanding. It also has a forestry policy considered highly successful from a tree-growing perspective by the forest industry and its supporters, and also from an economic perspective, both for the industry and for the individual forest 'land owners.' Yet Sweden is no ecocentric forest model, because, while it has solved the problem of growing 'timber' through tree plantations, this has been at the expense of the biodiversity of its original forests. From an ecological perspective, the Swedish model shows how to destroy the original forest ecology and how to create economic well being for the industry and for 'woodlot' owners. It is a 'successful' example of the capitalist industrial development model, under social democratic and social justice guidance, at the expense of other forest life forms.

White shows that Bookchin's key concepts of "social hierarchy" and "social domination" supercede social class and the state, and that social hierarchy also includes Marx's view of class but extends this. (p. 34) Bookchin defines his attitude towards eco-Marxism in the following footnote. (p. 205): "'I still think when I say Marx was not an ecologist, even in the sense of genuine stewardship, I'm far more accurate than the eco-Marxists, who, even today, are still going through Marx's works and trying to snip out statements here and there that they can pierce together to stimulate an ecological world view.'" (Taken from **Anarchism, Marxism and the Future of the Left: Interviews and Essays**, 1993-1998.) White does rightly acknowledge that more recent scholarship on Marx "has sought to recover his ecological credentials." (p. 41)

This book also notes Bookchin's "optimistic emphasis on the positive potential that technological and scientific change has for re-directing our impact on the natural world." (p. 82) His "stewardship" view of humanity's relationship to the natural world as the most appropriate, ends up with an endorsement of nuclear energy for future energy requirements – "'controlled thermonuclear reactions'", and support for fossil fuels and genetic engineering. (pp. 147-148 and footnote, p. 213)

Those who, like myself, have struggled with the distinctions between "First Nature", "Second Nature" and "Free Nature" will be glad for Damian White's explanation of these. (pp. 108-109) As is well known, for Bookchin, humans are referred to as "'nature rendered self conscious.'" (p. 109) But do these distinctions, even if understood, advance environmental work?

Any deep ecology supporter could identify with the following quote from Bookchin (p. 36): "'People in pre-literate cultures viewed themselves not as "the lords of creation" ... but as part of the natural world. They were neither above nature nor below it but *within* it.'" (Taken from **The Ecology of Freedom**, 2nd edition)

It was Christianity, accompanied by the colonizers, which broke the spiritual bonds with the

natural world for indigenous cultures, so that humans came to be seen as separate from other life forms. The priest replaced the shaman as spiritual interpreter. With Christianity, humans were given 'souls' and came to have a special or privileged, if subordinate relationship to a deity. (Calvin Martin in the 1992 publication **In the Spirit of the Earth** discusses this.) I do not believe Bookchin could take the position that bringing back a new spiritual and animistic relationship to the Earth, is a vital component of any relevant Green politics today. Today, the Earth has become a collection of "resources" that can be exploited without spiritual consent.

DEEP ECOLOGY

"The persistent charge levelled against the ethics of social ecology is that they are ultimately too anthropocentric and interventionist." (p.118)

I think that Murray Bookchin's view of Nature intervention, as conveyed by Damian White, does not foster human restraint or planetary sharing between humans and other species. For me, the issue is not whether humans have shaped and changed the natural world in the past, and still mainly do this today, but that this is done from short-sighted purely human/corporate self-interest motives. These motives basically disregard long-term human interests, e.g. global warming, plus the interests and habitat needs of nonhuman life forms, and do not place real human needs in a context of putting the earth first. In deep ecology, the core ecocentric message is that we humans must enter into a new relationship with the natural world. We need to see our personal identities as including the natural world. Yet, at the present time, when we make a living economically, we destroy the natural world in the process.

There is only one reference to something written by Arne Naess in the bibliography. There are no references to left biocentric writings, those writings which represent a left focus within the deep ecology movement, either in the bibliography or in the text itself. For example, White speaks of "a valuable socio-ecological critique of eco-fascism" by Biehl and Staudenmaier (footnote, p. 199), who both are social ecology supporters. But he totally ignores a rebuttal from a left biocentric perspective available on the internet since 2000, the article ***" Ecofascism: What is It? A Left Biocentric Analysis***".

In general, the discussion by Damian White on deep ecology and its relationship to social ecology is not helpful. The discussion of Kirkpatrick Sale and Warwick Fox, for example, speaks of these two writers' "underlying misanthropy" and "profound asocial and ahistorical quality." (p. 77) White shares Bookchin's aversion to calls for human population reductions and disparages those who do, like deep ecology supporters. His discussion merely reproduces and endorses the social ecology stereotypes about deep ecology, that it is "anti-humanist", guilty of "naturalistic reductionism", has an "underlying misanthropy", and is fixated on "wilderness" (which is always discussed disparagingly by this writer as though deep ecology writers are ignoramuses) and that it is also fixated on population reduction i.e. "green Malthusianism". The tone of White towards deep ecology is illustrated in the quotation below:

"Not only is 'wilderness' – like many of our ideas of nature – something very different to the romantic landscapes of ecocentric, deep ecological and primitivist thinking; it is also saturated with cultural assumptions, power relations and active human and non-human bodies." (p. 123)

I wondered on reading this, with its lack of comprehension of what deep ecology is all about, if this person had ever put his body on the line in defense of other species or their habitats? Does he understand the power and ontological significance of the slogan Earth First! or that ecocentric activists thinks of themselves first in self-identity as Earthlings? The above quote illustrates the lack of understanding of ecocentric thinking, where wilderness is a necessary refuge, mainly for non human species, in a world which has been largely appropriated for human/corporate exploitation and destruction. Of course different cultures and religions do shape how humans perceive the natural world and animal life, and this is as true today as it was in the past for indigenous peoples. This does not negate that Nature exists in its own right and is worthy of protection.

Historically, European expansion has meant that indigenous peoples globally have had the lands which they were occupying essentially stolen from them by treaty or religious fraud or, if necessary, at the point of a gun. Why is it the critics of deep ecology zero in on lands in parks and protected areas as being stolen from indigenous peoples as the only issue here, when the total land base was appropriated? Today, as we are face planetary ecocide, we need new thinking which recognizes that other species have legitimate habitat needs. Large scale "wilderness" preservation is an attempt to address this. For White, reflecting perhaps post-modernism, Nature is without ethical significance in its own right. I believe the real issue here is that human needs ultimately trump others species' needs for Murray Bookchin and his intellectual biographer Damian White.

CONCLUSION

It is quite clear, after reading Damian White's book, that Bookchin had a lot of interesting ideas. Yet are these ideas guiding radical eco-politics today, as claimed by White? I do not think so. The ideas of ecocentrism are far more influential among activists. Bookchin did have a 'know-it-all' attitude towards others and a basic intolerance towards those who challenged him. It is not only ideas that are important – they need to be embodied in a movement for social change. As Marx told us so long ago, "The philosophers have only *interpreted* the world in various ways; the point however is to change it." Bookchin's sectarianism held back the development of the environmental and Green movements, as we can see with the attitude of the Left Green Network in the late 1980s towards those unwilling to embrace social ecology. The situation is better today. There is an awareness that there is much to learn from each other, and that the various ideological strands making up an ecocentric Left each have something to contribute. No one has all the wisdom. For example, John Clark said of Left Biocentrism, the theoretical tendency which I am involved with, that it combines "a theoretical commitment to deep ecology with a radical decentralist anticapitalist politics having much in common with social ecology." (See Clark,

Environmental Philosophy: From Animal Rights to Radical Ecology, fourth edition, pp. 378-379)

I believe this book, while celebratory, is worth reading, because it presents Bookchin's basic ideas. Yet White does not 'get' deep ecology and its contribution to a contemporary ecopolitics. This dilutes his (not very) critical appraisal of Murray Bookchin's work.

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