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Free Range Egghead

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Robert T.F. Downes (2025) Green Anarchy & Red Praxis: An Anarcho-Indigenous Dialogue Towards a Democracy of Species, Anarchist Studies, 33(2), 6-49.

Downes's essay situates Murray Bookchin's anarcho-communist social ecology in active dialogue with (mainly academic) Indigenous environmental knowledge and political thought to formulate what he posits as a critical, anti-colonial, anticapitalist theory of ecological justice. His aim is to reveal how "settler-colonial capitalist" legal and political structures undermine both human and non-human life, and how combining "green anarchy" (i.e. Bookchin's social ecology – not anti-civ or primitivist anarchism) with "red praxis" (Indigenous struggles and knowledges) provides principles for a "democracy of species." The project is normative and speculative, envisioning how future ecological justice might

be structured outside state and capitalist frameworks, rather than merely reforming existing institutions.

Downes is a PhD student at the University of Connecticut, and works on politics and public law. He has an unusual focus on law as a result.

For Downes, liberal legal systems are tools that uphold colonial domination, property rights, and capitalist extraction, which fail to deliver justice or ecological protection. These systems mask structural violence behind procedural neutrality. The Standing Rock case (2016-2021) serves as a paradigmatic example of how settler-state legal structures systematically ignore Indigenous sovereignty and ecological harm, despite formal claims of fairness. This illustrates the deep alignment of law with capitalist and state power.

So far, nothing new – a mixture of standard idpol and anarchist claims. But Downes mobilizes these ideas to resurrect the ghost of Bookchin, the sworn enemy of anti-civ anarchism, and meld him to a postmodernist-inflected identity-political variant of Indigenous philosophy.

According to Downes, Bookchin's social ecology rejects hierarchical domination and capitalism's ecological destructiveness. It instead advocates for decentralization, mutual aid, degrowth, communal stewardship, and direct democracy in human social relations extended to ecological relationships.

Downes wishes to combine this "Green Theory" with "Red Praxis", by which he means Indigenous environmental knowledge and political thought. His article argues that addressing ecological crises and colonial injustice demands more than environmental reforms within state frameworks.

This is said to be centered on place-based reciprocal relations, spiritual and ethical connections to land and non-human beings, and community-rooted governance. Given his focus on law, he conceives this in terms of a different legalism. Indigenous "counterlegalities" emphasize restorative justice, consensus and relational practices over state coercion.

Downes highlights that neither tradition is reducible to the other, but both share foundational critiques of state supremacy, capitalist property regimes, and ecological exploitation. He synthesizes claims from social ecology and Indigenous thought into the concept of a “democracy of species” — an ecological and political framework that expands democratic participation to include non-human agency and recognizes interdependence between all life forms.

The essay proposes five core principles for this democracy:

Reciprocity & Mutual Responsibility:

Society should be grounded in ecological interdependence, mutual aid, and non-exploitation among humans and non-humans.

Non-Human Agency & Advocacy:

Recognize non-human entities (e.g., rivers, forests, animals) as meaningful participants in ecological-political life, with representation in collective decision-making.

Human-Scaled Decentralized Governance:

Shift governance to local, consensus-based, community structures rather than centralized state authority.

Stateless Justice & Conflict Resolution:

Replace coercive legal institutions (police, prisons, courts) with participatory, restorative forms of justice emerging from mutual agreement and community responsibility.

Legal Pluralism in Democratic Confederations:

Accept multiple, coexistent legal systems rooted in community autonomy and shared values rather than a universal state law.

These principles aim to redistribute power and land back to Indigenous communities and local bodies, dismantle exclusive property regimes, and cultivate ecological guardianship across species lines.

Downes also admits that Bookchin critiqued Indigenous forms of social organization, putting this down to settler-colonial blind spots. In standard idpol mode, he argues that

effective dialogue requires acknowledging differences and historical injustices.

What it means for radicals: It seems bizarre to me to frame Bookchin as primarily an eco-anarchist, whose “Green” theory can be combined with “Red” praxis as if from outside. Bookchin’s social ecology is clearly rooted in anarcho-communism. It is much easier to combine Indigenous practice with post-left or type 3 anarchism, which Bookchin belittled as lifestyle anarchism. Thus for example, the definitive work on Indigenous justice has already been provided by Bookchin’s polemical rival, Bob Black. Unlike Downes, Black recognises that not all restorative justice approaches are liberatory, and that the point is to move away from norms and legality, not simply to pluralize them. I suspect ulterior motives in the attempt to rebrand anarcho-communism as “Green Anarchy”, a term previously used by radical anti-civ anarchists and anarcho-primitivists. The rebrand seems a way to erase and overwrite the more radical position it rejects.

It is also not always clear what Downes means by Indigenous. The obsession with historical legacies and positional group inequalities indicates a strong influence of poststructuralist-influenced identity politics on Downes’s position, an influence which presumably comes through his selection of Indigenous sources. Indigenous groups are very diverse and there are often political divisions within Indigenous communities. Some political tendencies compromise with modern power to a much greater extent than anarchists, and this should not be concealed behind an “Indigenous people know best, check your privilege” veneer. A combination of idpol-influenced Indigenous ideas with a naively pro-social anarcho-communism seems more of a recipe for a left-liberal rebranding of anarchism than for a politics of liberation.