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Review: Anarchism, Marxism, and the Future of the Left

Jason McQuinn

Spring/Summer 2001

Anarchism, Marxism, and the Future of the Left: Interviews and Essays, 1993–1998 by Murray Bookchin (AK Press, 1999)
352pp., \$19.95 paper.

“Just when there is rising interest among young people,” Mr. Bookchin said, “we are shooting ourselves in the foot.”

New York Times, Aug. 5th, 2000 “Anarchism, the Creed That Won’t Stay Dead” by Joseph Kahn

For many anarchists who had been continuously involved and active in the anti-capitalist libertarian milieu over the last two or three decades, it came as quite a surprise when Murray Bookchin returned some of his prodigal attention back toward anarchists in the waning years of the 20th century. Bookchin, after all, had spent a lot of time and energy in

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both building up a little academic kingdom (with his Institute for Social Ecology) and attempting (and ultimately failing) to put his ideological imprint on the green politics milieu. However, it was even more surprising when the quality of his renewed attention toward anarchists—beginning with publication of *Social Anarchism or Lifestyle Anarchism: An Unbridgeable Chasm* by AK Press in 1995—turned out to resemble anarcho-Stalinist denunciation much more than critical solidarity. (In SALA Bookchin’s list of denunciatory terms includes “fascist,” “lumpen,” “yuppie,” “petty-bourgeois,” “decadent,” etc.) Ultimately, Bookchin’s long disregard for the contemporary anarchist milieu, along with his present abandonment of any pretense of respect for the thoughts and work of most anarchists, has led to his growing irrelevance except as a frequent target for well-deserved criticism.

Bookchin’s latest work, *Anarchism, Marxism, and the Future of the Left*, helps to explain some of his neo-Stalinist proclivities toward trash-talking other anarchists. It begins with a nostalgic memoir of his early Stalinist and Trotskyist careers. But it also extends his incoherent denunciations of anarchist “lifestylism” to new levels of abuse for his preferred targets. The targets? Basically, anyone uninterested in perpetuating a leftism that has little to do with anarchy and much to do with Bookchin’s attempt to establish social ecology and libertarian municipalism as hegemonic anarchist theories and practices with which to supplant those of anarchist-communism and anarcho-syndicalism in years past. Unfortunately, though, for Bookchin, he’s too late on the scene with too way little of value to offer us.

Bookchin’s primary aim in all of his recent efforts to influence political movements seems to have been to couple his moralistic, anticapitalist rhetoric with opportunistic, reformist practices, which he would desperately like to turn into a new anarchist paradigm. Bookchin’s core commitments are to (1) privileging the social and institutional over the individual and

personal (even to the extent of occasionally seeming to deny any importance or value to individual uniqueness or personal experience in his wilder rhetorical moments), (2) deriving the domination of nature from human social domination, (3) developing an ecological philosophy of “dialectical naturalism,” (4) claiming that municipalities in federation can and will be organized by anarchists to challenge the state, all the while proclaiming that he’s the only one really fit to understand and develop the anarcho-socialist project that is the last hope of all humankind. Of these, the first will never fly in a movement whose core insight has always been the importance of integrating the individual and the social without elevating one above the other. The second is unprovable, though a worthwhile hypothesis for exploration. The third is throwback to the philosophical errors of the nineteenth century—laughable in its pretensions. And the fourth is so ludicrous that it is hard to see how anyone outside of the world of academic fantasies could ever entertain such a vision. Even anarcho-syndicalism appears to be a sober and realistic strategy in comparison!

While never ceasing to claim the mantle of “revolutionary” theorist, in any real, existing practice his theory of libertarian municipalism has led only to recuperative and non-revolutionary—when not merely reactionary—gestures (see, for example, “The Ecology Montreal Party: A Libertarian Frankenstein” in *Anarchy* #40 and “The Collapse of the Ecology Montreal Party” in *Anarchy* #46 & #47). Thus in the broad anarchist milieu, Bookchin’s influence is strongest amongst his fellow anarchist and socialist academics (who generally gravitate towards ineffectual theories and a mushy reformism which doesn’t threaten their job security or the civil peace of their campuses) and a few of their students. Bookchin has also won a small following from anarchists on the fringe of the Green Party milieu (a highly compromised milieu at best), where they cling to the few attempts to forge

a semi-coherent anarchist position like liferafts in the vast sea of green incoherence.

Amongst the great bulk of the anarchist milieu, most activists simply don't notice Bookchin. Or they just don't care what he says, since his work has little relevance to most anarchist activities. However, one can find a number of activists who will defend Bookchin to a degree, despite the fact that they most often don't agree with his theories or practice. What these people do agree on is with his identification of certain theorists, theories and/or practices within the milieu as the source of the past and present failures of anarchism. In other words a steadfast minority of anarcho-syndicalists, anarcho-communists, and others with stronger-than-average leftist identities look to Bookchin the "lifestyle anarchist"-basher as an ally. Having fought a losing battle for influence within the anarchist milieu for decades now against some of the same people and currents that Bookchin has newly denounced, these left-identified anarchists have jumped at the opportunity to employ some of the same tactics, even if they have proven less than effective for Bookchin. At least they can function to rally the sagging troops in the face of continuing defeats.

However, for most of us, Bookchin comes off as a pathetic would-be schoolyard bully of the anarchist milieu. After wading back into the movement (following his failed effort to save the greens from themselves), he found himself mostly ignored. So he raised his voice louder and louder, threatening just about everyone in sight with eternal damnation to "lifestyle" hell, only to cry foul when anarchist theorists and activists naturally started fighting back. Surprised that anarchists aren't as easily cowed as the authoritarian Marxists he grew up with, Bookchin can't seem to decide whether it's best to continue threatening to beat everyone up or to cry because his targets are too good at defending themselves, making him look the fool he is.

Nevertheless, probably the most lasting memory of Bookchin's bitter, fading influence will be his introduction of the nonsense category of "lifestyle anarchism" into anarchist discourse—a category of abuse meant to include the entire conglomeration of theories and personalities of all those Bookchin for one some reason (and he's got plenty of reasons) despises. Bookchin is uninterested in discussion or debate in the anarchist or any other milieu. His customary attitude involves the denunciation of deviations from the Bookchin line, along with the personal trashing of anyone potentially standing in his way (or at least anyone whom he doesn't particularly like). To be clear here Bookchin isn't particularly interested in talking up unpleasant truths about those he perceives as rivals or opponents, although he uses this tack when it's available. More often he is driven to make personal smears—ugly lies that he tends to repeat loudly and often. For these reasons the Bookchin school of anarcho-Stalinist denunciation shouldn't be humored or tolerated within the anarchist milieu. Bookchin's rantings instead deserve to be exposed, rationally criticized and publicly ridiculed.

So, unless you're eager to explore Bookchin's formative childhood experiences and his self-aggrandizing oral history, or sink into the muck of his anti-lifestylist abuse, you're better off looking elsewhere for worthwhile reading. The best overview and critique of Bookchin's tortuous theories and demagogic practice remains Bob Black's incisive and entertaining *Anarchy after Leftism*, published by C.A.L. Press in 1997. *Anarchy after Leftism* is available for \$7.95 + 2.05 postage & handling (\$10.00 total) from C.A.L. Press, POB 1446, Columbia, MO 65205-1446. The book is also available through AK Distribution (Oakland, CA) and Autonomedia (Brooklyn, NY).