

# **Listen Anarchist!**

**Murray Bookchin's Defence of Orthodoxy**

Jeff Shantz

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**Book Review:** Murray Bookchin. *Social Anarchism or Lifestyle Anarchism: An Unbridgeable Chasm*. Edinburgh: AK Press, 1995, 86pp.

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Unless I am gravely mistaken—as I hope I am—the revolutionary and social goals of anarchism are suffering a far-reaching erosion to a point where the word anarchism will become part of the chic bourgeois vocabulary of the coming century—naughty, rebellious, insouciant, but deliciously safe (Bookchin, 1995: 3).

A spectre is haunting social theory—the spectre of anarchism. Anarchist politics have enjoyed, since the early 1990s, something of a renaissance. While it certainly cannot be said that all the Old Powers have entered into a holy alliance to exorcize this spectre, it would appear that anarchism is back on the agenda. Making matters even more interesting, that which currently passes for anarchism often materializes in strange, unrecognizable forms bearing little obvious resemblance to what is traditionally known as anarchism, those historic movements against coercive authority, hierarchy and injustice in their many guises. It is precisely the novelty of contemporary anarchism which has prompted the writing of Bookchin's text.

Penned by perhaps the most significant and widely read anarchist thinker of the post-WW II era, *Social Anarchism or Lifestyle Anarchism* has exploded like a bomb amongst the anarchist communities of North America, becoming one of the most controversial works in a tradition of controversial literature. More ink has been spilled responding to this slim volume than any other anarchist book in recent memory (including Hakim Bey's contentious *Temporary Autonomous Zone* (1991)). That most of the responses have consisted of angry denunciations of Bookchin, going so far as to question his character and motive, suggests that the work has struck a very raw nerve.

In his introductory chapter, "A Note to the Reader," Bookchin situates his book as a response to "the fact that anarchism stands at a turning point in its long and turbulent history" (1). For Bookchin, however, this turning point is not one which promises renewal as some have celebrated. Rather, anarchism now finds itself at a day of reckoning because contemporary anarchists have forsaken the revolutionary tradition of anarchism, preferring to become just another bohemian subculture with no interest in confronting the powers of State and Capital. Bookchin suggests that contemporary anarchism represents a fatal retreat from the social concerns (and communal politics) of classical anarchism into episodic adventurism and a decadent egoism. This unfortunate transformation threatens to make anarchism irrelevant at precisely the moment when it is most needed as counterforce to globalization and the social dislocations engendered by neoliberal policies. Through the book's two chapters, "Social Anarchism or Lifestyle Anarchism" and "The Left That Was: A Personal Reflection," Bookchin offers his meditations on what has gone wrong with anarchism as he sees it and how anarchists might return to the social roots of their past glories.

The book's first and principal essay "Social Anarchism or Lifestyle Anarchism" consists of an extended polemic against the main theoretical proponents of lifestyle anarchism. The essay provides a valuable survey of trends within contemporary anarchist thought. Bookchin identifies

four main streams of lifestyle anarchism: “individualist anarchism,” “mystical or irrationalist anarchism,” “anti-technologism” and “neo-primitivism.” Coming under particular scrutiny are the diverse works of L. Susan Brown (1993) (individualism), Hakim Bey and his notion of Temporary Autonomous Zones (1991) (mysticism), and John Zerzan ((1994), neo-primitivist theorist and author of *Future Primitive*. Bookchin also manages to single out for condemnation the editors and writers of the *Fifth Estate* and *Anarchy* magazines, the most influential anarchist periodicals (and ironically organized as collectives). This section is worthwhile reading for sociologists and social theorists seeking a basic (though by no means friendly) introduction to major debates and initiatives currently engaged within anarchist thought. Those pondering the prospects for social movements in a postmodern age will find Bookchin’s harsh characterization of anarchy a provocative contribution to current discussions.

Bookchin recognizes that the history of anarchism has always expressed a tension between a personalistic commitment (emphasizing individual autonomy,) and a collectivist commitment (emphasizing social freedoms). The author illustrates that with the advent of anarcho-syndicalism and anarcho-communism at the turn of the twentieth century, individualist anarchism was largely marginalized amidst the emergence of mass workers’ movements and the organized power of general strikes. Individualist anarchism came to be seen as little more than bohemian exotica, a distinctly petty-bourgeois indulgence characteristic of liberalism rather than anarchism (7). Rather than reaching a reconciliation, however, these tendencies have coexisted in constant struggle with either becoming predominant according to context or era. Indeed, this tension has been celebrated by some anarchists as evidence of anarchism’s pluralism, ideological tolerance and creativity (4). For Bookchin, however, it is the very failure of anarchism to resolve this conflict over the relationship of the individual to the collective which has given rise to the worrisome condition in which he finds contemporary anarchism. Now the individualists are back and with a vengeance which threatens to end the anarchist project.

What all of the new (but definitely not improved) lifestyle anarchists have in common is that they have given up social analysis in favour of a “trendy” nihilism. In place of any analysis of alienated labour or the workings of the market, anarchists have mystified capitalism into vague abstractions such as “industrial society” or the “megamachine” in which oppression becomes an effect of a decontextualized Technology. Instead of traditional anarchist concerns with hierarchy, statism and the commodification of everyday life, lifestylists are preoccupied with “autonomy,” “primitivism” and “personal insurrection.” For lifestylists, “[h]istory and civilization consist of nothing but a descent into the inauthenticity of ‘industrial society’” (50). The return to “authenticity,” now anarchism’s motive force, is driven by intuition and instinct rather than by analysis and reason. The turn towards the “irrational” means that anarchists have given away the tools needed to dismantle neoliberalism. This leads to Bookchin’s angry conclusion that lifestyle anarchism is not anarchist at all and has no legitimate claims to the courageous heritage of the social anarchists who too often paid for their convictions and commitment to social transformation with their lives.

Bookchin derides the “polymorphous concepts of resistance” and “theoretical pluralism” of individualist anarchism. Instead he proposes a “democratic communalism” in which anarchism is conceived as “a majoritarian administration of the public sphere”(57). His vision of anarchy allows for the “rule” of the majority and nonconsensual decisions. This seems a step backwards for anarchist conceptions of democracy. It does not require much imagination to envision the possibly authoritarian implications of Bookchin’s communalism.

The second essay, “The Left That Was: A Personal Reflection,” consists of Bookchin’s nostalgic trip down memory lane to the supposed “good old days” of the political Left. The reason for its inclusion along with the main essay appears to be an appeal to anarchists to give up their wayward individualist ways by following the proper path of the socialist which the essay reveals. This essay provides summary statements of Leftist conceptions of internationalism, democracy and revolution which guided nineteenth and early-twentieth century resistance to capitalism and which are supposedly lacking from today’s “Left” (68). Bookchin does not limit this discussion to anarchists, but gives significant attention to the works of Marx and Engels and Rosa Luxemburg. Unfortunately, this account is quite cursory, and will be of little interest to readers with any knowledge of radical politics or history.

Overall, Bookchin fails to understand (or to admit) the complexly nuanced relationship between individualist and socialist tendencies in anarchism, seeing an “unbridgeable chasm” rather than an unavoidable byproduct of the innovation and experimentation of actors seeking to question profoundly all established conventions. It is precisely this creative rethinking of accepted authority from which anarchism has drawn its strength and sustenance, and which has served as the source of its renown. A glance at most anarchist publications actually shows a lively and engaged mix of “individualist” and “socialist” perspectives. Likewise, Bookchin chooses to overlook the intermingling of lifestyle and social anarchists in action. For example, the members of the ultra-lifestylist Trumbull Theater Complex in Detroit recently affiliated to the syndicalist Industrial Workers of the World. Further, one finds lifestyle concerns in the programmatic anarchism of the Love and Rage Federation.

Bookchin identifies lifestylists as anti-theoretical, yet his book is entirely devoted to dissecting lifestyle theories and theorists. For someone so concerned with impacts upon activists they are noticeably absent from his discussion. Bookchin is unable to provide any insights into whether or not anarchists even read Hakim Bey or L. Susan Brown. Given the “Letters” columns of such unrepentant lifestyle “rags” as the *Fifth Estate* and *Anarchy* it appears that those who have read them do not much agree with them. Certainly Bookchin has overstated the threat. This suggests, if anything, that he is out of touch with what anarchists are actually doing.

His characterization of lifestylists’ commitment to imagination, desire, ecstasy and everyday life as apolitical suggests that Bookchin is also out of touch with the insights of recent social movements which recognize that the personal is indeed political. Additionally, Bookchin’s claim that, during the heyday of social anarchism, individualists exercised hardly any influence, is undermined if one considers only the case of Emma Goldman who Bookchin himself identifies as an extreme individualist, “a Nietzschean” (8). For Bookchin the only approved forms of social action seem to be creating organizations and developing programs. Cultural activism is missing from his conception of politics. However, some of the most striking acts of lifestyle anarchism—culture jamming, video activism, micro-radiobroadcasts—are profoundly social, directed at disrupting the pacifying effects of consumer society and the practices of social production and reproduction.

Furthermore, it is not even accurate to charge lifestylists with “allowing no room for social institutions, political organizations, and radical programs” (51). Rather, lifestylists are concerned with developing new forms which are appropriate to the needs and wishes of contemporary actors. Most anarchists are social anarchists who still believe in possibilities for social transformation. Bookchin’s deep nostalgia for past practices (even failed and discredited ones) again interferes with his understanding of what today’s anarchists are trying to accomplish.

That Bookchin is out of touch with anarchist practice is perhaps most clearly reflected in his assessment that “precisely at a time when mass disillusionment with the state has reached unprecedented proportions, anarchism is in retreat” (59). He even blames this “failure of anarchism” upon “the insularity of lifestyle anarchism” (59). Nothing could be further from the truth. Anarchism has enjoyed a tremendous comeback recently and the creativity and vibrancy of lifestylists has contributed much to this.

Finally, a brief note about the style and tone of this book. It is often a chore to find the analysis amidst the invective and snarling personal attacks. In order to benefit from the book, one must read past the vitriol. Similarly, Bookchin throws around hazy and vague accusations referring to individualists at one moment as petty bourgeois, at others as lumpen. Such a loose play of terminology renders the words meaningless beyond being arbitrarily applied epithets. Indeed, the contempt with which Bookchin treats the authors under consideration must make the reader wary of much of the characterizations.

Bookchin’s book is most interesting and helpful as an introduction to some of the major currents engaged with the re-emergence of anarchist theory. It is important in bringing attention to a traditionally overlooked sector of social movement activism. In this regard, it will prove useful for students of social movements and radical politics. It will furthermore be of interest to sociologists concerned with critically rethinking individual/society relationships and questions of structure and agency.

Ironically, the lifestylist variants criticized by Bookchin sometimes sound more compelling, and more liberatory, than the “orthodox anarchism” to which they are counterpoised. In the final analysis, readers interested in contemporary anarchism should pick up the *Fifth Estate, Love and Rage* or the *Libertarian Labor Review* [now *Anarcho-Syndicalist Review*].

## References

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