Tony Sheather
Remaking Society
Summer 2025

Anarcho-Syndicalist Review # 92 Summer 2025, page 30

usa.anarchistlibraries.net

Remaking Society

Tony Sheather

Summer 2025

Murray Bookchin, *Remaking Society: Pathways to a Green Future,* Black Rose Books*, 1989,* 222pp. (Reissued by AK Press with a new foreword as *Remaking Society: A New Ecological Politics,* 2023).

A soothing reflection in contrast to the explosion of *Post-Scarcity Anarchism* and the power of *The Ecology of Freedom*, Murray Bookchin's short but incisive work, *Remaking Society*, was an essay to welcome more general readers to the ideas of libertarian history and thought combined with then contemporary urgings. It came before the polemic of *Social Anarchism or Lifestyle Anarchism,* the revealing and increasingly sectarian *Marxism, Anarchism and the Future of the Left,* witness to the emerging rifts.

It is a book that may be enjoyed even thirty-five years after its publication, the revelation of a man still content with his decades' long embrace of social anarchism, a writer secure in the general acceptance of the utopian community in America and beyond. The very title is redolent of a balanced, constructive commitment to an achievable goal. It is also an affirmation of the coherence and rationality necessary to guide revolutionary aspiration.

The book is a refreshing insight into thoughts and ideas that places the current enormous crisis in Western culture within the historical panorama of ruling elites, be they absolutist monarchs or nations state and capitalist elites, contending with revolutionary forces. While contemporary turmoil is a cautionary reminder of his assertion three decades ago that America was "… culturally, the most illiterate country in the Western world" (162), this compact thesis offers depictions of vision and hope through millennia that assert coherent transformation is still a viable path for civilisation.

Certainly, the first stirrings of the author's unease with the direction and nature of radical politics are apparent in his initial chapter where he articulates his discomfort with the anti-humanistic and irrational threads perceived during the National Gathering of the American Greens in a conference held at Amherst, Massachusetts in June 1987. Bookchin described the catalyst at this event that made tangible his and others' desire that he pen a compact summary of his writings on social theory, anthropology indeed social "reality" transformed: a young Green participant relaxing outside a conference presentation passionately embraced the supposed virtues of ecology where nature ruled humanity, a humanity deemed responsible for all environmental ills and destruction.

Bookchin acknowledges the crudity of this perception but also saw it as a haunting omen of an increasingly biocentric world view where the domination of social hierarchies and tyrannies, most pervasive of all capitalism, be it corporate or state, is opposed by a simplistic yet strident, diminution of humanity's achievements as well as the complexity of the natural and social realms. Such a perspective, he stated, as indeed articulated by the young Green man, is vulnerable to a sweeping condemnation of all people, ignoring the specific cruelties and violations visited upon the vast majority of humankind by overlords.

When the rape of the natural world "justifies" such a "revenge" against humanity, discernment, justice and freedom lose all social and philosophical meaning.

These themes become familiar ones throughout the book, domination versus liberation, mysticism against rational humanism, the fracture where nature and society are opposed. Certainly, the destruction of habitats, species and communities are characteristics of historical domination but these are very largely reflections of the distorted ambitions of elites throughout history.

Bookchin explores the social relationship between nature and society in his second chapter, a brief and accessible insight into historical perversions of the role of each. His discussion on the anthropological projection of distorted societal concepts like domination and hierarchy onto the animal world are liberating, as are the thoughts on community in the aboriginal realms. His reflections on the emergence of human second (societal) nature from the primeval complexity of first (original) nature seek to restore a vision and welcome the reality of integration, neither the liberal/Marxist dualism where human society is "self-reliant" and independent from other existence on the planet, nor the absorption of one into the other characteristic of much current environmental belief.

Hence we are introduced to the thesis of social ecology as a reworking of these conflicting and distorted world views. The insects and animals through the evolutionary path create wonderful connections that provide humankind with the potential to become rational, to embody the creativity of the natural realm. Nature rendered self-conscious.

It is a logical step from this discussion to a critique of the development of domination within the history of humanity. Bookchin stresses the significance of mankind's ability to make a place within the natural world, not adapt as had creatures in the earlier evolutionary chain. He reflects upon the rise of hierarchies of control as community groups in preliterate times became divided into those dependent on age, physical strength or mystical illusion.

Qualities of support or wisdom became perverted as warriors vied for economic superiority while seeking another tribe's land or produce. The complementarity and usufruct that had marked the more communal millennia became prey to the ambitions of "big men" as status became hierarchy, class and ultimately the state.

The author discerns the unevenness of this process where some civilisations could show the characteristics of mutuality and compassion while others seized power through war, or indeed societies which revealed features of both solidarity and oppression. He ponders the uniqueness of the 5th century Athenian polis, democratic triumphs in the midst of slavery and the ostracism of women.

Turning Points in History is an apt title for the fourth and middle chapter of this primer. Here Bookchin describes the events and eras of history where freedom contended with power, whatever the guise of each. He applauds the mutuality and collective spirit of the early organic societies while deploring their seduction by shamans and the warrior kings. He exhorts the rise of the city throughout the centuries as a focus and inspiration for independence from or opponent to the warrior castes, hierarchies then classes and state. Here he perceives the acceptance of the stranger, a concept foreign to the insular realm of village or tribe. Urbanity and cosmopolitanism contrasted strangely with private property, quasi -states and class throughout the later eras of ancient times, the Middle Ages with feudalism's rise and the early centuries of modern times.

Bookchin sees the third moment in civilisation (itself a term fraught with contradictions) where freedom may have ousted dominion as the 15th and 16th centuries. Here the bourgeoisie strove for status to mirror economic power as Christian ethics condemned greed and usury and concepts of public good touched the long memory of community and sharing. Nation states grew strong and capitalism found fallow ground for bureaucratic nurture.

The alternative path, "the road not taken", saw valiant efforts from various cities such as Castille in Spain to challenge the growth of nation-states in Europe, the radical possibilities of municipal

of the past. Here the economy, neither privatised nor under state government control, bears and shares fruit for all people. Here organic farming is the life- saving representation of a society free of the chemical control of corporations while solar, wind and tidal power offer the "what if" absent in the massive technology and unnatural existence of the mega states. "Should" and "Could" are inherent in the conscious formation of a reality dedicated to the remaking of a social order.

Sadly, Bookchin's later writing shows a man disillusioned with the promise of anarchism. His third introduction to *Post-Scarcity Anarchism* is a paeon to social ecology. His late life support for syndicalism but not anarchism demonstrates a profound departure from earlier conviction. Here was a man disappointed in his hopes, shattered by the denunciation from contemporary anarchists and deep ecologists. Provocative he may at times have been but there was always a nobility in his intent. In August, 1999, he announced his formal departure from anarchism as his philosophical home.

Nonetheless, this 222 pages' summary of his earlier dreams is an exhilarating expression of the many movements, events and original thinkers who inspired the ideals of freedom throughout history. It is a crucial reminder of the theories and practices desperately needed today in a world in turmoil, one bereft of even a semblance of compassion, sense or intellectual aspiration.

TONY SHEATHER
April 2025

communities such as Confederations erupted in the 16th century, even after the former had become victorious by the late 17th century.

Bookchin reminds the readers that this aspiration towards a form of freedom never died as witnessed by the rebels in the English Revolution, the Parisian sections of the French Revolution and the radical farmers of the American Revolution. The Paris Commune in 1871 again raised the battle cry of the "Commune of communes".

The final pages of this chapter evoke a passionate denunciation of capitalism, the insidious "rivalry at its most molecular base" as a bourgeois law of life. This most ardent of advocates, one whose own life witnessed many social torments, rails against the desecration visited upon the poor and powerless, as portrayed by Dickens and Zola. He denounces the destruction of the bison herds of the American plains, the laying waste of the forests of Africa and Southern America by the European interlopers. The destruction of human life is mirrored in the loss of diversity and balance in the natural world. Homogenisation, indeed.

This oratorical vigour sweeps the reader into the more explicitly liberatory pages of the book. The chapter titles proclaim the visions and the dreams: *Ideals of Freedom*; *Defining the Revolutionary Project*; *From Here to There*. Here we are invited to share the numerous insights of an erudite man on the cusp of seventy, activist and revolutionary, from his early teenage years as Leninist through Trotskyism to social anarchist and social ecologist.

One of the enduring memories I have from first reading this book thirty years ago is the vivid distinction he drew between justice and freedom. Bookchin discerns the essential nobility of the cries for justice from ancient times through the law codes of the Romans and other cultures to the voluminous codification of today. He sees the moral, even religious dimension through the millennia where the call for justice in the face of unspeakable oppression was inspired by the ideal of "equal and exact" as the golden measure.

We are then asked to ponder the nature and implications of justice through the image of the goddess Justitia whose statue adorns the entrance of many a courthouse. Justitia stands blindfold, scales in one hand with sword raised in the other. Here is justice, equally apportioned without fear or favour, objective with the force of the state behind it. Here, in societies riven by class division, is the commitment to the "inequality of equals" where juridical equality ignores the many differences and conflicts, of "health, age, infirmities, talent, intelligence and the material means of life" (*98)* that contradict the concept of formal equality. The limitations of reform are displayed.

Bookchin embraces the "equality of unequals" where the substance of equality is honoured in practice, a characteristic of cultures as ancient as Neandertal Age, where compensation for physical or mental challenges was understood. Pre -literate communities were marked by the compassion or solidarity crucial to an ethics of freedom, albeit one confined by tribal boundaries. Here we discover the genesis of organisations such as the village down the centuries marked by mutuality and reciprocity. Libertarian outbursts in modern times embrace this same aspiration and practice. Revolutionary in form and intention.

Some of Bookchin's most incisive insights and evocative images are those of a modern world drifting back to the ancient realms of myth where personalistic retreats dilute any will, desire and consciousness. A corollary to this is the confusion between justice and freedom as reform adapts and maintains, modifies and manages the supposed reality while radical aspiration and reflection becomes a casualty of cultures of passivity and introspection. History is more truly the source of ideals of freedom and exciting visions of new utopias.

Early ventures into secular thought saw the strivings of Greek and Roman philosophers to find reason in justice. Jewish writing saw social revolt in the early scriptures while Christian scriptures envisaged earthly redemption. Radical Christians exhorted imagi-

ments, sensible, well-intentioned but open to compromise within the existing social order. In search of revolution, the author observes these two intertwined movements, ecology and feminism, where the abolition of hierarchy opened radical potential for small scale alternative technology, decentralised community and the balance of genders within occupations and social organisation as well as the family.

In the final chapter, an optimistic writer explores the possibilities *From Here to There,* pursuing themes evident throughout this tome and many other of his publications. How can the contemporary revolutionary project be portrayed where universal human vision replaces the divisive class, hierarchical and exploitative reality of the present?

This final essay draws polemical contrast between the continuing human horrors of famine, with the attendant tragedies of millions of deaths in poorer countries and the woeful inadequacy of socio-political responses. The dire warnings of ecological disaster are reiterated as deforestation and species extinction continue apace. Bookchin condemns the illusion of environmentalism, its acceptance of compromise the perfect expression of reformism, the ethical danger of the "lesser evil" symbolised by the Green Party in Germany. He castigates the evanescent fantasies of New Age retreat visible in eco-feminism, a simplistic response to "male perfidy", characteristic of the general societal paucity of critique. He urges the need for education, conversation and research not superficial and personally pleasing gratification.

The essence of this thesis is the need for anarchism and social ecology to find concrete expression in forms of freedom where process and communal actualisation demand ethical and intellectual commitment. Bookchin views the municipality, smaller than the giant edifices of today, as the appropriate avenue and focus for general assemblies where people share a general human affinity, not a narrow particular agenda. His affection for libertarian municipalism is seen as a modern expression of the city's role in revolutions

ity, and decentralisation of American historical groups, including the Puritans, would have likely deepened the appeal of the movement.

Reflections upon this brief but tumultuous time, even more passionately and profoundly mirrored in the Paris 1968 uprising by students and workers, the sections of past revolutions briefly invoked, perceive activism ignoring theory in the absence of a more thoughtful exploration of philosophies of the past. The politics dissolved into the retreat to careers and middle-class return or the violence associated with police clashes and terrorist groups such as The Weathermen. Meanwhile, the economic security of the 1960's descended into the pain and fear of the Nixon and Thatcher eras. More fruitfully, the legacy of this fleeting moment in time is observed in the broadening perspectives where anarchist and utopian aspirations of sensuality and freedom from arduous and meaningless toil evoked memories of pre-Marxist times and in Bookchin's view "vastly broadened the definition of freedom and the scope of the revolutionary project…beyond their traditional economic confines into vastly cultural and political domains" (151).

As the 1960's moved beyond the student movements and the American defeat in Vietnam became clear in the early and middle 70's, many moved into conventional pursuits, academic, professional or business, even the New Age offerings of former countercultural enthusiasts. Former student activists like Tom Hayden moved into mainstream political careers. Bookchin pondered two trends that seemed to open vistas where specific concerns intimated universal application: ecology and feminism.

He discerns the practices of good health such as exercise, good food and cleanliness in environmental movements in Europe and the love for wilderness in America, both environmental in some sense. However, the draw of wilderness can become a worship of nature as compelling as the 19th and 20th century philosophers' assertion that nature was there to be pillaged at humanity's behest. In the middle of these extremes lay the modern environmental move-

native critique and ideas to articulate freedom. Joachim of Floros refashioned the Trinity in the 12th century to symbolise the Old Testament, New Testament with a future kingdom of tolerance, material comfort and harmony. The Levellers reviled Cromwell's piety while Wintanley and his Diggers embraced a communistic pantheism. Activism and morality transcended custom and acceptance.

Aristotle intimated a dialectical rationality coexisting with syllogistic logic but the Renaissance thinkers such as Galileo and Da Vinci, Thomas More and Francis Bacon celebrated an Age of Reason that exhorted passion and invention in all realms of human inquiry. Bookchin warns of the individualistic threats posed by the emerging bourgeois to the communal bonds of the past.

In his exhilarating evocation of these thinkers and the acolytes they inspired, Bookchin exhibits the voracious curiosity of the independent thinker, with books strewn around his home as recollected by a friend of yesteryear who attended a gathering in the US some decades ago.

His reflections on *Anarchy and Libertarian Utopias* sees figures such as Fourier with his multifaceted phalansteries where body and mind, work and play, desire and learning within self-sufficient communities sparked rebellion yet did not challenge existing society. Robert Owen's industrial villages saw more realistic versions of workshops and farms. Rabelais's "Abbey of Thelme" exalted the theme "Do as Thou Wilt" and delighted in the pleasures of mind and body. Godwin is lauded for his opposition to church, custom and state while even Rousseau is praised for his assertion of the human will if not the excess of romanticism. William Morris's communal vision exalting art and artisanal skill is seen as a manifestation of co-operation, the human scale, ecological in aspiration and design.

The familiar anarchist figures of Proudhon, Bakunin and Kropotkin are succinctly discerned. Proudhon's offering of municipalism and confederalism explored constant themes of alternative organisations to the nation state, Bakunin's embrace of spontaneity and the revolutionary will is distinguished from

parliamentary cretinism. Kropotkin, one of the most influential thinkers as Bookchin formed his own anarchist vision, is lauded for his ecological and decentralised ideals as well as his scientific insights into humanity's harmonisation with nature in a world increasingly shaped by urbanisation and enormous factories.

Bookchin vigorously defies Marxist assertions that anarchism is a product of liberal and bourgeois philosophies of individualism such as the "invisible hand" as he contrasts the "free entrepreneur" and competing egos that characterised the liberal version of individual autonomy with the ethically and rationally liberated anarchist guided by communal and social good. There is no sign here of the thinker who would in later years consign anarchism to these same liberal origins as he battled with anarchist opponents he perceived as individualistic while asserting the centrality of social ecology and libertarian mutualism.

Bookchin's final two chapters resonate with recurrent themes in his writing. In the penultimate chapter *Defining the Revolutionary Project* he despairs at the "embourgeoisment" (citing Bakunin) of modern societies and the complete disappearance of revolutionary even radical movements. In fact, to discern any semblance of critical theory is an exercise in futility in the unrelenting social rivalry that permeates the contemporary world.

Defying critics who see this quest as sectarian or dogmatic, he proceeds to vanquish key tenets of Marxist theory. Marxism's dismissal of the peasantry as a revolutionary force diminishes the vibrant love of land, craftsmanship and community of the declasse torn from the country through industrialisation that sparked their revolutionary fervour in the French Revolution, Commune, Russian Revolution and 1930's Spain. He further challenges the assumption that the proletariat is the driver of revolution, driven by misery, perceiving the militancy of late 19th and early 20th century as becoming domesticated through managerial control and the rise of nationalism over internationalism. Marxism has long been hostage to its rigid theory of inevitability, one ignoring the

spontaneity of alternative pathways. The suffocation of ordinary workers by the elitist "vanguard of the revolution" is reflected in the hostility directed towards nature, objectified as a resource similar to the workers as a labour resource. Morality, consciousness, an aesthetic sensibility, as opposed to objectification, is exhorted.

The late 1950's and 1960's were the very wellsprings of utopian vision, even ecstasy. Bookchin, while atheist to the core, celebrates the prayer-like demeanour of the Black movement symbolised by Martin Luther King, an emancipation where dreams transcended the "pseudo-science" of Marxism. The New Left emerged as a vastly different aspiration from the Old pre -WW 2 Left. This terrain mirrors Bookchin at his powerful and liberatory best, witnessed by his manifesto Post-Scarcity Anarchism, a copy sits on my desk (temporarily!) as a reminder of its influence on many in the 1970's. Hierarchy was to be replaced by the urgency of face- to- face assemblies, sexual repression by desire, onerous work by the miracles of technology. Abundance for all was the doorway to a new radical dispensation.

The New Left is depicted as striving towards leaderless forms of organisation, reflected in face- to- face assemblies. However, these forms of freedom never materialised in the broader social experience beyond the campus. The communes inspired by the counter-culture were more truly representative of the spirit of anarchism with sexual relationships explored, work roles shared, collective childcare, poetry, art and music reflections of a liberatory perspective. Of course, students and disillusioned youth in general moved quite fluidly between the distinctly political New Left and the more personal/political counter-culture.

However, as the New Left became infected by Leninist sects, the identification of New Left activists with the simplistic slogans of Chinese, Vietnamese and other revolutionaries alienated many who still maintained principled opposition to the war in Vietnam. Bookchin believed that a more patient rendering of the utopian and anarchist aspirations of the era evoking the communality, mutual-