

The only possible alternative was for an eco-anarchist movement arise that would "corrode, weaken, and hollow [it] out" by warning humanity of the social and ecological peril it faced and inducing the majority of people to take action and create an ecological, decentralized, and rational society.<sup>86</sup>

In January 1981 the second NEAC conference convened, in Somerville, but the 125 participants got lost in identity politics.<sup>87</sup> It was a bitter pill: NEAC clearly would not be able to organize the necessary movement. And to add insult to injury, on April 15 Reagan issued a pardon for the two convicted FBI directors, Mark Felt and Edward Miller.

Bookchin consoled himself that his failure to organize a movement did not invalidate social ecology. "To be in the minority is not necessarily testimony to the futility of an ideal," he observed. On the contrary, a humanly scaled, communal, ecological society remained ever necessary to avert ecological catastrophe, regardless of circumstances. Least of all did the sellouts of the 1970s discredit his ideas.

But the bitterest pill, the end of the revolutionary era itself, deprived social ecology of the activist tradition upon which he thought social ecology had depended. Given that reality, he knew he must dwell "on the margins of experience and practice" and try to make the best of it, "even as the center seems triumphant." He told people, "I'm one of those characters that lives on the dark side of the moon."<sup>88</sup>

From the margins, he could still demand the impossible, demand utopia. And un tethered from current developments, he need make no apologies for it. He comforted himself, too, with a quote from Marx's *Eighteenth Brumaire*: "Men make history, but not under conditions of their own choosing."

But quietly, he made a subtle shift in his writing. In the past he had often distinguished between the *what is* and the *what could be*. The phrase *what could be* implies a possibility of attainment, but now it dropped from his writings, replaced by *what should be*—a moral standpoint, making no reference to practical attainment. Living on the margins would mean writing in the subjunctive.

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## Municipalist

WHEN BOOKCHIN'S FRIEND and translator Karl-Ludwig Schibel organized a speaking tour of West Germany for him in January 1980, his hopes for the political scene may not have been high. But as he moved through Frankfurt, Kassel, Hanover, and West Berlin, he was elated to find it roaring. As American youth had done ten years earlier, European youth (whose postwar boom crested somewhat later) were rejecting consumerism and power politics, militarism and the patriarchal family, racism, and environmental destruction. They, too, were seeking to form a communal, cooperative, nonhierarchical culture that would be an alternative to the mainstream.<sup>1</sup>

Throughout the 1970s, citizens' action groups in West Germany had been organizing around issues of the environment, gender equity, minority rights, housing, social services, and public transportation. After the successful site occupation at Wyhl in 1975, opposition to nuclear power had grown. "We weren't just trying to do symbolic actions," recalled the socialist journalist and activist Jutta Ditzfurth. "We were trying to actually block the construction of the plant."<sup>2</sup>

In Frankfurt the international airport was planning to build a new runway extension through old-growth forest—and activists were protesting it. The chemical conglomerates Hoechst and Merck buried toxic waste near city water supplies and dumped pollutants straight into the Main and Rhine rivers, so demonstrators took to the streets. Faced with a housing shortage, students and youth squatted abandoned houses communally and fought off police attempts to evict them. Frankfurt bookstores, like the Karl Marx Bookshop, spilled over with volumes of radical theory and analysis, including Bookchin's, which had been published in German translation since 1974–75. In Germany, it seemed, he need not live on the dark side of the moon.

In December 1979, NATO had announced that it intended to station more than two hundred Pershing II and Cruise missiles on West German soil, nuclear-capable missiles able to reach Moscow in minutes. If a nuclear war broke out between the United States and the Soviet Union, West Germany would be the battlefield—yet these terrifying weapons would be outside any effective democratic control. Instantly, a concentrated peace movement sprang to life.

Young Germans, Murray realized, were creating the kind of broad, multi-issue, antihierarchical movement that he had hoped to generate with Clamshell and NEAC, linking issues of ecology, feminism, energy, and peace. It was decentralized, and it emphasized grassroots democracy and direct action. And to top it off, ideologically it discerned that ecological problems stemmed from social problems. The German movement was tantalizingly social-ecological. Moreover, German youth seemed to have a greater appreciation for social theory than did pragmatic Americans, which made their movement all the more impressive.<sup>3</sup> Perhaps he could mediate a cross-cultural interchange, he thought, combining German theoretical rigor with the American libertarian impulse.

Due to his teaching commitments at Ramapo, he could not linger in Europe. But in the spring of 1981, when he had a sabbatical, he returned and spent six weeks traveling through West Germany, Belgium, the Netherlands, Switzerland, and Italy, once again soaking up the radical scene.

Squats were nodes around which the European youth movement formed, and the squatters' movement, a loose network of communes, had evolved into a struggle for free, alternative spaces generally. In Freiburg and Zurich, squatters had formed autonomous youth centers that were "basically anarchistic in character." At weekly meetings at the Zurich center, the microphone was open and people could "just walk up . . . and say whatever they want to say," without a moderator, yet the meetings were functional. The circled A, a symbol of anarchism, was ubiquitous. He told the communal squatters that America had a libertarian tradition that was grounded communally, in town meetings, dating back to the Revolution.<sup>4</sup>

Strikingly, this admirable youth movement was based not in large urban centers but in small cities like Freiburg and Nuremberg. Such cities, he realized, still had "some sense of community"; one could be politically creative there, in a way that one could not in big cities like New York. Indeed, it turned out that living in small-scale Vermont didn't have to mean withdrawing from political life or being sidelined to marginality: the margins could have an unexpected importance as the birthplace of "the rich variety of forms, sensibilities, and institutions that are likely to supplant and transcend the given 'centers' of today."<sup>5</sup> Living far from an urban core, forty miles from the Canadian border, could thus actually be an advantage. His grandmother Zeitel, after all, had chosen for good reason to live in the borderlands of the Russian empire.

Although he was still teaching at Ramapo, he moved his primary residence to Burlington, where his two children also lived, along with their mother.<sup>6</sup> Every week

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during the school year he would commute the 266 miles to Ramapo, check into a motel, teach his classes, and then drive back to Vermont.<sup>7</sup>

The commute was grueling, but Vermont, with its political culture that emphasized civic participation and community, was more than worth it. Each of its 242 towns had a town meeting, and each meeting assembled on the first Tuesday in March every year. The Vermont town meeting, he thought, bore a striking resemblance to the *ekklesia*, the citizens' assembly of the ancient Athens. The Vermont towns themselves, like the Athenian *polis*, were modest enough in size "to be taken in at a single view," as Aristotle prescribed. The citizens who populated the town meetings were, like ancient Athenians, amateurs at politics who met face to face and made decisions about the shared, communal elements of their lives. They too were a *demos* (people) who enjoyed *philia* (solidarity) and *koinonia* (community life). They shared, in Bookchin's eyes, a reverence for *arête* (virtue) and *dike* (justice). Their political experience taught them *politike techné* (political judgment). And on certain matters, like local infrastructure and schools and budget, they enjoyed *autonomia* (self-rule) or independence from the state, possessing "direct, unmediated control of society."<sup>8</sup>

Ancient Greek political thought, imbued with such ethical concepts, was closely tied, he realized, to a nature philosophy that emphasized that the *kosmos* (natural world) had an orderly structure that was comprehensible by *nous* (mind) or *logos* (reason). A nature philosophy based on these ideas could "guide us toward a deeper sense of ecological insight into our warped relationship with the natural world," he thought—and would be far more relevant to the ecology movement than Asian philosophy.<sup>9</sup>

Particularly in the work of the Pre-Socratics, he found a sense of reality not only orderly and comprehensible but "pregnant, fecund, and immanently self-elaborating." The Marxists had trained Murray to think dialectically, in terms of unfolding and emergence. As he studied Aristotle's concepts of *dunamis* (potentiality) and of *entelechia* (actuality, the fulfillment of potentiality), he recognized in them the roots of his familiar philosophy. His very cast of mind was dialectical: his optimism lay in his ability to recognize potentialities for freedom and progress in both present and past. Human beings had that *dunamis*; an eco-decentralist society, governed by assembly democracy, would be its *entelechia*. Hayes recalled that, while carpooling with him to Ramapo, Bookchin "took you out of today's newspaper, and you entered a world of human potential that could be actualized and recovered. His attitude was, *Hey, this is real, it happened, it can happen again.*"<sup>10</sup>

To fulfill Burlington's potentialities, Bookchin's first step was to bring together a small group of anarchists to work with, individuals who were educated in social ecology and committed to putting it into practice. He found them in the Clamshell veteran Brian Tokar, the antinuclear activist Alan Kurtz, the social ecology student David Block, and others who followed him to Burlington. Their study group read Bookchin's by-now-standard texts—Buber's *Paths in Utopia* and Horkheimer and Adorno's *Eclipse of Reason* and *Dialectic of Enlightenment*—as well as current work in

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evolutionary theory and nature philosophy. At the same time they would get involved in local politics.

Burlington's mayor, Gordon Paquette, was intent on developing Burlington's waterfront. Through some quirks of history, the waterfront—which might easily have been regarded as the city's precious asset—was an industrial dumping ground, home to oil storage tanks, an old grain mill, and warehouses, as well as debris and weeds and broken bottles.<sup>11</sup> (What CHARAS might have done with it!) In its nineteenth-century heyday, it had been a busy port, transshipping trees felled in Canada onto railcars. But that industry had vanished almost a century ago, whereupon the waterfront—owned by the Central Vermont Railway—had fallen into disuse.

In 1971 Burlington's city council (then called the board of aldermen) formed a committee, which led to studies, development proposals, financing schemes, and zoning changes. Most recently, local developer Antonio Pomerleau had proposed to construct a high-rise luxury enclave at the water's edge, with three condo towers, as well as a marina, a 150-room hotel, restaurants and offices, a parking lot, and some shops.<sup>12</sup> Mayor Paquette, catering to the local business establishment, was solidly behind the \$35 million project.

But many city residents demurred: Pomerleau's luxurious plan would create an enclave for the wealthy, at a time when the city lacked adequate housing for working people. A neighborhood movement sprang to life to oppose it.<sup>13</sup> Mayor Paquette faced reelection in March 1981. A thirty-nine-year-old writer, filmmaker, and socialist activist, Bernard Sanders, stepped forward to challenge him. Running as the voice of the neighborhoods, Sanders opposed the plan and pledged, if elected, to "establish an alternative waterfront development policy—one which will bring jobs and prosperity for all of Burlington rather than a few wealthy individuals."<sup>14</sup>

Campaigning on the slogan "Burlington is not for sale," Sanders slogged door to door through five-foot-high snowdrifts. On March 4, 1981, Burlington elected him mayor—by a margin of ten votes out of more than 9,600 cast.<sup>15</sup> ("Ten anarchist votes!" Murray would say. "And I know who they were!")

While Burlington's political establishment reeled at the installation of a socialist in the Georgian-style city hall, the neighborhood groups rejoiced. Bookchin commended the socialist awakening in the city's political culture: "The Vermont citizenry seems to have risen up with a political vitality that we have not seen for years."<sup>16</sup>

Meanwhile, the city's neighborhood movement was planning a citywide conference, to transform itself into a cohesive political force. Neighborhood groups submitted resolutions on a whole spectrum of social and environmental issues. Bookchin's anarchist friends, under his tutelage, submitted three resolutions. "Waterfront and Downtown Development" argued that the waterfront should be held in a public trust and developed in accordance with Burlingtonians' desires. "Energy and the Environment" urged the use of renewable energy.

The third resolution, "On Neighborhood Democracy," was the most remarkable. It proposed replacing the existing city council with "a system of open democratic neighborhood assemblies." Each of the city's six wards would form an assembly, to hold

their respective city councilors accountable through mandate, rotation, and recall. If a councilor refused to submit to such accountability, the assembly would run its own candidate in the next election. "When a sufficient number of the Alderpeople [city councilors] represent the neighborhood assemblies, the city charter should be revised so that the board [council] is officially composed of mandated, recallable representatives of the neighborhood assemblies." The council's function would then be merely to coordinate the assemblies, which would constitute a neighborhood government.<sup>17</sup>

On May 16, 1981, the Conference of Neighborhoods endorsed these and thirty-odd more resolutions.<sup>18</sup> Burlington had gained not only a socialist mayor but a dynamic popular movement.

Since Bookchin became a teacher in 1973, his book on hierarchy had languished in a state of incompleteness. In the spring of 1981, after he came home from Europe, he used the rest of his sabbatical time to finish it. He gave the manuscript to his friend Michael Riordan to publish, with the small press he had founded called Cheshire Books.<sup>19</sup>

*The Ecology of Freedom* was Bookchin's fullest exposition of radical social ecology, using material drawn from history, anthropology, dialectical philosophy, and science.<sup>20</sup> The first chapters, as we have seen, described an original "organic society," with a mutualistic, egalitarian social organization, then traced the rise of hierarchies: gerontocracy, warriors, patriarchy. Domination was the next phase, with states, tyrannies, inquisitions, empires. The eighteenth-century Enlightenment made the domination of nature part of the civilizatory enterprise: humanity, if it were to progress, must subdue and conquer nature.

Fortunately, the West also has a long-standing antihierarchical tradition, dating from uprisings in the ancient world to medieval heretics and peasant revolts to the democratic revolutions of England, the United States, and France, to the Paris Commune to the Spanish Revolution. The common, if unspoken, dream of all these movements was to revive the principles of organic society—usufruct, the irreducible minimum, and the principle of complementarity—but within the framework of modernity.

The liberation of humans from exploitation and domination is a precondition for creating a society in harmony with nature. Only a free, emancipated society can create an ecologically sound planet. Today's social ecology movement must advance a moral economy as an alternative to capitalism, replacing competition with values of reciprocity and interdependence, of responsibility and integrity. It must reconstruct a cooperative economic life, producing not for profit but for excellence and for the sake of the community.

In *Ecology of Freedom*, supplemented by a series of articles in the early 1980s on nature philosophy and ethics, Bookchin rejected the dualistic idea, derived from Descartes, of a radical dichotomy between humans and the rest of nature and embraced instead the idea of a graded continuum, stretching from the simplest life-forms to human society, as described by evolutionary theory.<sup>21</sup> Human beings, like all other organisms, are an integral part of that continuum.

That said, natural evolution (what Bookchin called "first nature") has also given rise to human society ("second nature"), and people necessarily inhabit that social environment as well as that biological one. With our symbolic faculties and our capacity for cooperation, *Homo sapiens* is uniquely social as well as natural; our behavior is conditioned not only by biology but also by society, language, psychology, and culture. Part of our dual nature is creative agency. Through our labor and our imagination, we are structured to interact with nonhuman nature, even to modify and transform it.

This distinctiveness, however, does not give us the right to subordinate the rest of nature or to wield dominion over the earth. Least of all does it give us the right to treat it as an assemblage of resources available for our use at our convenience. Capitalism, with its market economy geared to producing goods for profit rather than need, views it this way, but that system is social not biological, a part of our second nature (culture), not first nature (our physiological makeup), and hence alterable. We are capable of changing that system and replacing it with a different system that relates to the rest of nature with respect and intelligence. And we can orient our use of science and technology toward humane and life-affirming purposes, rather than toward the enhancement of profit and environmental destruction.

Removing ourselves from the ideologies of domination and submission, we can cultivate an "ecological sensibility": respect for natural phenomena, sensitivity to the interdependence of life-forms, a feeling of responsibility for the natural world. In so doing, we can potentially even improve on it, promoting the flourishing of people as well as the biosphere.

That sensibility must be underpinned by an ethics. In order to have substance, Bookchin believed, ethics cannot exist merely in thin air—it must be grounded in tangible reality. What was to be the basis for an anticapitalist ethics? Moral relativism, with its fleeting, changeable values, offered none. Nor could religion, with its tablets of commandments, provide an ethical basis: such authoritarian systems, demanding of their adherents unquestioning obedience to "thou shalt not" injunctions, had no place in a modern, rational movement.

Not even the Frankfurt School had a good answer, in Bookchin's view. Its members thought instrumental rationality had reduced ethics to the utilitarian calculation of risks versus benefits, of greater evils versus lesser ones. But the rejection of rationality opened the door to the demonic. Horkheimer and Adorno were, Bookchin found, unable to anchor an emancipatory ethics in nature philosophy and ended with a "dark pessimism about the human condition."<sup>22</sup> As always, while he admired their analysis, he couldn't accept their pessimism.

Providing an objective basis for ethics was possible, he concluded, by grounding it in nature. Pre-Socratic philosophy had suggested how nature had been the ground for ethics, and Bookchin thought it could become so once again.

Grounding ethics in nature was fraught with peril, Bookchin knew, because it could be mistaken for simplistic parallels between natural and social phenomena. Such parallels, for example, have tried to explain human behavior by reducing it to

biology—especially genes—rather than by considering the social factors at work. Historically, the privileged and powerful had tried to justify hierarchy—oligarchy, slavery, sexism, imperialism, and the state—by alleging that they were "natural" because women, people of color, and colonized ethnic groups and nationalities were "naturally" inferior because of their biology. Social Darwinism tried to justify capitalism by maintaining that since competition exists in nature ("survival of the fittest"), competition must exist in society.

No, if nature were to be a ground for ethics, it would have to be understood not in terms of parallels but for what it is: fecund and creative, ever-changing, evolving toward greater complexity—dialectical. Life-forms are not only competitive but cooperative—and their mutual cooperation and symbiosis have helped advance natural evolution at least as much as competition, if not more. According to the evolutionary biologist William Trager, "Mutual cooperation between different kinds of organisms—symbiosis—is just as important [as competition], and... the 'fittest' may be the one that most helps another to survive."<sup>23</sup> Cellular life itself may have begun with a symbiotic cooperation between viruses and bacteria, as the biologist Lynn Margulis showed.

But to say that we must have a cooperative society because cooperation exists in nature would be a kind of reductionism: we must avoid "projections of our own social relationships into the natural world," he observed, even cooperative ones. Nature is neither cruel nor kind; it has no morality: "Nature is a ground for ethics, [but is] not ethical as such."<sup>24</sup>

Rather, Bookchin argued instead that mutuality, cooperation, and complementarity are potentialities in the natural world, ones that have historically been expressed and, one hopes, will continue to be. As a result of their expression, natural evolution has, a cumulative history of increasing complexity and diversity, toward ever more elaborate and conscious life-forms. Over aeons, along that graded evolutionary continuum, creatures' neural and sensory systems became more differentiated, resulting in consciousness and culminating in the layered human brain.

Tantalizingly, the paleontologist Elisabeth Vrba's "effect hypothesis" suggested that evolution "includes an immanent striving" or directionality. That implied, Bookchin thought, that evolution could be self-directive, even "participatory."<sup>25</sup> He denied that this notion amounted to teleology, asserting that the directional process is neither inexorable nor preordained. Potentialities do not inexorably achieve actualization. "Potentiality is not necessity; . . . No specific stage of a process necessarily yields a later one."<sup>26</sup>

But as natural history shows, more neurologically complex organisms did evolve, and so did their capacity to make choices—and so did the possibility of freedom. As the twentieth-century German philosopher Hans Jonas pointed out, even the most rudimentary organism, the cell, makes an effort to preserve itself—to maintain its identity—through metabolism, and cellular metabolism is evidence of "germinal freedom."<sup>27</sup> Human beings have the potentiality for both freedom and

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