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# Ecology or Catastrophe: The Life of Murray Bookchin by Janet Biehl

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## **In Remembrance: A Requiem for Murray Bookchin**

### ***Ecology or Catastrophe: The Life of Murray Bookchin* by JANET BIEHL**

Oxford University Press, 2015 \$34.95

Reviewed by **BENJAMIN O'HERAN**

My first encounter with the ideas of Murray Bookchin was not from Bookchin himself. Instead, I received a brief introduction about his ideas on Social Ecology through his long-time editor and political companion Janet Biehl. Biehl's *The Politics of Social Ecology: Libertarian Municipalism* helped shaped my early ideas on the ties between ecology and Anarchism. So it is a pleasure that once again I find myself learning more about the life and ideas of Murray Bookchin from Biehl's biography of him, entitled: *Ecology or Catastrophe: The Life of Murray Bookchin*.

*Ecology or Catastrophe* is the completion of a promise Biehl made to Bookchin before he passed on in 2006. It is crafted through a combination of stories told by Bookchin to the author, Biehl's nineteen odd years of living alongside Murray, and interviews with Bookchin's compañeros. In *Ecology or Catastrophe*, Biehl sets out on the ambitious task of chronicling one of the twentieth century's most influential and polemic ecological thinkers.

Born January 14, 1921 in New York City, Murray Bookchin is considered the founder of the Social Ecology movement. For those unfamiliar with the philosophy, Social Ecology centres on the belief that human society and nature can flourish together when they are able to relate to each other in non-hierarchical and

complimentary ways. This stands as a middle of the road alternative to a return to nature form of deep ecology and business-as-usual centered green Capitalism.

However, to have humans and nature "reconcile" after millennia of environmental degradation, exploitation, and violence required that humans first create new relationships with each other. For Bookchin, the root of all environmental destruction was predicated on the hierarchical and violent relationships created by and enacted by humans against other humans. He was primarily concerned about Capitalism's inherently exploitative relationship between both humans and nonhumans. In order to move beyond these violent human relations meant that humans needed to embrace Anarchism and its foundational beliefs of egalitarianism, cooperation, and direct democracy. Only then could humans start to create new relationships with nature that allowed both humankind and nonhumans to flourish.

To build an ecological future required Bookchin to explore humanity's past. Looking at examples in which cooperation, decentralization, direct democracy, and non-hierarchical traits manifested themselves in human society, Bookchin plotted the history of Anarchism as the future of Social Ecology. Starting from pre-agricultural societies, to the Greek polis, and to the Anarchists of the Spanish Civil War, Bookchin argued that the history of human liberation was the history of Anarchism. Only by recreating human society as an Anarchist society based on cooperation, decentralization, direct-democracy, and non-hierarchy could humans mend their split with the natural environment. Essentially, once humans were able to start treating each other

better, then they could start treating the natural environment better.

Not content with just being a historian or theorist of this future, Bookchin would spend his life trying to create such an ecological Anarchist society. Calling his praxis Communalism, Bookchin believed that restructuring cities along neighborhood lines would allow citizens to participate in a form of direct democracy. By decentralizing large cities, people could make their neighborhoods more livable by producing organic foods and creating a post-scarcity economy, while being powered through a variety of renewable energy resources. Pragmatically creating these communities through city elections, the Montreal Citizen's Movement and the Burlington Greens would be just two of the many projects that he was directly involved with. While never fully able to create his ecological Anarchist society, Murray Bookchin would serve as an inspiration for environmental and political thinkers not content with a mythic return to nature or letting the faux solutions of green Capitalism solve our problems.

*Ecology or Catastrophe: The Life of Murray Bookchin* serves as a reminder of the importance of developing both a theoretical vision as well as a political praxis for today's environmental movement. Largely assailed and continuously derided by former allies and those all along the spectrum of the Left, Bookchin spent his final years in political exile. After taking on EarthFirst! Founder Dave Foreman for the racist and homophobic nature of his organization, Bookchin took on primitivists in the Anarchist and ecology movements and found no remorse amongst them. With few political allies and friends, Bookchin would pass on in 2006 with Biehl beside him. After reading Biehl's biography of

Bookchin and reflecting on the statement opening this paragraph, I was left wondering what he would think of today's environmental movement.

I believe that he would be disappointed. In regards to current trends in Anarchist thinking, I believe that he would still be struggling against the prevailing anti-civilization and primitivism trends within Green Anarchism. I believe that he would also be frustrated with mainstream environmentalism's embrace of the State and Capitalism as the solution to climate change. Once again, he would be left out of the mainstream in regards to what is to be done about our looming environmental catastrophe by the groups he cared about the most.

Conversely, Bookchin's philosophies are having a renaissance. Indeed, for those on the Left looking for a return to the idea of the Commune as the centre of their political praxis, Bookchin's ideas serve as an inspiration. As exemplified by Abdullah Öcalan's Kurdish Workers Party, Venezuela's *comunero* and the global Occupy Movement, Bookchin's ideas and philosophies live on with those who wish to establish an anti-hierarchical society based on direct-democracy and an anti-Capitalist economy that focuses on the flourishing of the commons through ecological stewardship. *Ecology or Catastrophe: The Life of Murray Bookchin* provides the best synthesis of Bookchin's ideas for those wanting to create such a future.

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