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Bookchin: A Critical Appraisal (review)

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two future individuals in shapes hardly recognizable to us, for whom love is arranged and artificial in form, isolated and distant in application, and never physically consummated between them, but who are nonetheless permanent and distinctly “human.”

Damian F. White. *Bookchin: A Critical Appraisal*. London: Pluto Press, 2008. xvii + 236 pp. Paperback, \$24.95.

Reviewed by Michael E. Gardiner, University of Western Ontario

In a career spanning nearly a half-century, the U.S. writer and activist Murray Bookchin (1921–2006) fashioned a distinctive and highly ambitious social theory. Dubbing it “social ecology” (not to be confused with the “social ecology” pioneered by the Chicago school of urban sociology in the 1920s and 1930s), Bookchin aimed to synthesize elements of classical philosophy (especially Aristotle), humanistic Marxism, anarchism, natural science, and radical ecology. His goal was a holistic theory that would allow for a systematic analysis of our deeply problematic relationship with the nonhuman world and provide the necessary political and ethical guidelines so as to reconcile humanity and nature in the context of an imagined “good society.” But there can be no such reconciliation until humanity itself is liberated in the form of free, self-governing, and cooperative communities, because, in Bookchin’s reasoning, the domination of humankind through coercive and hierarchically structured societies both precedes historically and functions to legitimate the domination of nature. The roots of the contemporary environmental crisis can therefore be traced to what Bookchin calls an “underlying mentality of domination,” one that projects the natural world as an unyielding and vindictive “realm of necessity,” which must be conquered by a combination of brute force and ceaseless technological innovation. In this cosmic drama, humanity pulls itself out of the primordial slime by its own bootstraps so that it can enter the promised land of material abundance and “civilized” values, but at the supposedly unavoidable cost of social repression and ideologies of command and control. Such master narratives have encouraged our profound alienation from, and fear of, the natural world.

But while it is imperative to overcome this alienation, the goal should not be to “dissolve” humanity into an abstract, monistic Nature, as “deep” or

“ecocentric” ecologies often seem to advocate. As Bookchin forcefully asserts, such a view can only serve to negate the rich differentiations and complex forms that biotic evolution has produced over aeons, as well as obscure the important differences between “first” and “second” nature. Bookchin’s social ecological perspective on this question is that human development must be placed within a natural context and that specifically human forms of consciousness and reflexive praxis are the outcome of processes and qualities that are immanent in nature itself. The trend of natural evolution is, for Bookchin, skewed in the direction of ever-greater variety, complexity, and ecosystemic integration and interaction, which implies that organic forms become increasingly flexible, active, and self-directed over time. Both the human and nonhuman realms partake of this organic unfolding of the “wealth of particularities” that inheres in the unfulfilled potentiality of the world; they are, as Bookchin suggests in his touchstone 1987 essay “What Is Social Ecology?” joined together by a “processual reality, a shared metabolism of development, a unified catalysis of growth as distinguished from mere ‘change.’” Granted, human beings are able to realize these potentialities in a much more thoroughgoing fashion than nonhuman species, and they are capable of conscious self-organization in a startling range of sociocultural forms that have no direct precedent in nature. Nonetheless, social ecologists make a strong case for an essential, developmental continuity between nature and humanity, in the sense that they are both characterized by the same constitutive dialectic. If this is the case, Bookchin argues, then the task that faces humankind is the “radicalization” of nature and the concomitant creation of forms of social organization aiming to maximize the ideals of freedom, diversity, and subjectivity. Furthermore, we must foster an attitude of what Bookchin calls “stewardship” with respect to the nonhuman world, ensuring that nature’s tendency toward ever-increasing diversity, fecundity, and interrelatedness is fully supported and encouraged. Ecological and sociopolitical issues are therefore joined at the hip: any qualitative transformation in human–nature relations can only be premised on a social revolution of a decidedly utopian and libertarian sort, governed ultimately by principles of rational dialogue and civic engagement.

In a nutshell, this was Bookchin’s position. He developed this line of thinking not only in such major theoretical statements as his epic but ultimately flawed masterwork *The Ecology of Freedom*, published in 1982,

but also as a chronicler of popular rebellions and modes of communal self-organization stretching from ancient times to contemporary municipal movements, in books such as *The Spanish Anarchists* from 1977 and *The Third Revolution: Popular Movements in the Revolutionary Era*, published in four volumes between 1996 and 2005. Additionally, he founded the Institute for Social Ecology in Vermont, which by all accounts is still thriving today, and was an indefatigable (if somewhat obsessive) polemicist who took on virtually all comers; those who raised his particular hackles included deep ecologists, neo-Malthusians, orthodox Marxists, and postmodernists, the latter written off with the memorable phrase “yuppie nihilists” in his splenetic 1995 work *Re-enchanting Humanity*. Bookchin was, in many respects, ahead of his time. He wrote about chemical additives in food and the effects of industrial pollution long before these became fashionable topics—even before Rachel Carson’s epochal work *Silent Spring* was published in 1962. He drew attention to the potential climate-altering effects of hydrocarbon emissions . . . in 1964! At the high point of his influence, in the 1980s and early 1990s, Bookchin had a demonstrable impact on radical ecological circles in the United States and abroad (most notably in the German Green Party).

Yet, as Damian F. White notes correctly in the study under review here, there has been remarkably little sustained critical work on Bookchin’s overarching corpus and his legacy. This oversight is precisely what *Bookchin: A Critical Appraisal* is intended to address. White is well positioned to offer such an assessment, with an academic background in environmental sociology, urban studies, and social theory; in addition, he spent some time at the Institute of Social Ecology and knew Bookchin personally, although he was never (by his own admission) a card-carrying Bookchinite or part of the “inner sanctum.” The spotty and highly selective secondary literature that does exist on Bookchin has, to a certain extent, been overshadowed by vicious sectarian battles and rhetorical posturing of the sort that is hardly intrinsic to the ecological movement but is distressingly commonplace in radical politics generally. White is not shy about dipping his toe in some of these waters, but, to his credit, his explicit intention is to step back and offer a more dispassionate, synoptic view of Bookchin’s achievements and contributions and, in particular, to take the central theoretical and political claims made by Bookchin to task by engaging them with more recent developments in ethnology, environmental science, evolutionary biology, social movements theory,

and so forth. At the same time, White seeks to offer a clear and accessible introduction to Bookchin's ideas and to expose these to what is undoubtedly intended to be a wider audience.

There are often tensions between a desire for accessibility, on the one hand, and the demands of a sustained, sober analysis of complex and multifaceted thinkers like Bookchin, on the other. But, on the whole, White succeeds admirably in reconciling these twin impulses, and the result is a cogently structured and wide-ranging study. White is clearly well versed in the primary and relevant secondary literature regarding Bookchin, but he also writes with confidence and accuracy about wider fields that bear on any serious assessment of Bookchin. The research is supported by a fairly extensive and often useful apparatus of footnotes and a reasonably comprehensive bibliography. Although White does tend to concentrate on Bookchin's most dauntingly philosophical work concerning social ecology and "dialectical naturalism," attention is also paid to the often astonishing reach of Bookchin's intellectual and political interests, especially his writings on the city and "libertarian municipalism," the latter of which have been grievously underexamined in the literature up until now. White is particularly adept at identifying certain tensions or contradictions in Bookchin's thinking and pursuing their logical and practical ramifications. For example, while Bookchin is resolutely anti-reductive, stressing the importance of culture, language, and our species-specific capacity for abstract cognition, he equally seeks to ground ethics in a natural ontology of biotic networks and mutual interdependencies, which would seem to negate the importance of cultural factors and the role played by voluntaristic human choice (see chapter 5). Similarly, as discussed by White in chapter 2, at times Bookchin identifies the logic of domination with modernity and capitalism specifically, predated by free, "organic" societies (which can be a source of inspiration, although we can never return to them); at other points, he seems to opt for a Frankfurt school-like notion that domination is millennia old and that, in some respects, the emergence of hierarchical societies was inevitable.

The overarching tone of *Bookchin: A Critical Appraisal* is sympathetic but never unduly reverential. White is not afraid to address the darker side of Bookchin's work and the "cult of personality" that seems to be associated with his name. As mentioned above, although in some respects Bookchin's work was prescient, even prophetic, and even though he did change his mind about

certain issues—for example, toward the end of his life he came to eschew the term *anarchist*, a label he wore proudly for most of his career—in other ways he was a somewhat insular and closed-minded thinker. As White notes, he was not open to more recent developments in postcolonialism (which may have leavened his Euro-, even U.S.-centric outlook), semiotics or discourse analysis, or the sociology of science, and his hostility to postmodernism has already been noted. Such brusque dismissals short-circuited what could have been a productive and mutually enriching exchange. In an important sense, once Bookchin identified his core philosophical influences and his worldview coalesced, there were tinkering on the margins and shifts in emphasis but never wholesale paradigmatic changes—not necessarily a bad thing, unless it leads to a certain inflexibility and dogmatism, which does inflect Bookchin's thinking and writing sporadically. At the same time, White wisely concludes that there are many “Bookchins” refracted through different interpretive lenses and that there was a considerable gap between Bookchin's “heroic” and combative public persona and his more intimate dealings.

This is not to say there are no weaknesses in *Bookchin: A Critical Appraisal*. Although for the most part the book is lucidly written and well organized, there are some odd digressions that, although often interesting in their own right, don't add that much to the argument overall or are distinctly underdeveloped. For instance, White suggests that although Bookchin was well aware of the fact that humanity and nature influence each other in all manner of mutually conditioning ways, which explains his rejection of deep ecology's fetish for “pure nature,” fantastically insulated from all human intervention (which is related to deep ecology's closet misanthropy as well), he failed to appreciate the implications of what White, drawing on writers like Neil Smith and Henri Lefebvre, refers to as the “production of nature.” That is, different configurations of labor and technology that inhere in discrete types of social organization quite literally generate plural “natures,” and this process includes modes of appropriation that are not necessarily domineering. This is a potentially significant insight but is not developed in sufficient detail here. Similarly, in the context of discussing Bookchin's admittedly problematic distinction between genuine and commodified needs, White mentions Ted Benton's notion of “positional goods” but declines to inform the reader what this means, even in a footnote, or how it might shed light on the issue at hand. Finally, although this is perhaps a function of the relatively short

and introductory nature of this study, there are some gaps in the narrative. As examples, Bookchin's later, postanarchist work on "communalism" is barely mentioned, and at one point White (177) upbraids Bookchin for his lack of attunement to social movements and the attendant literature—yet fails to acknowledge Bookchin's important essay on "new social movements," included in the 1989 anthology *For Anarchism: History, Theory, Practice*, edited by David Goodway.

In a more conceptual vein, I suspect White is largely correct when he argues that many of the inconsistencies and contradictions in Bookchin stem from his penchant for neo-Hegelian grand theory and the sort of sweeping generalizations that flow from it, which has become increasingly unpopular in academe. Undoubtedly, there is a strong desire on White's part to rein in the more uncompromisingly radical positions espoused by Bookchin and his sometimes gratuitous messianism and apocalyptic rhetoric. Mostly, this is to the good as Bookchin *was* something of a crisis-monger—although at certain junctures I wondered whether the idiosyncratic and distinctive character of Bookchin's work, and the provocative nature of his insights, might be somewhat obscured in the attempt to burnish off all the rough edges and offer up a more pragmatic, empirically grounded, and reformist version of social ecology. In contesting Bookchin's "grow or die" thesis about modern economic systems, White seems to espouse the possibility that some sort of "green capitalism" might ultimately save the day, but, needless to say, the jury's still out on that one.

Part of the problem, it seems to me, stems from a certain slippage or ambiguity when it comes to White's understanding of utopianism. On the one hand, he explains many of Bookchin's excesses by reference to his susceptibility to abstract utopianism, in which it becomes difficult, or even well-nigh impossible, to link day-to-day struggles, interventions, and tactics to some lofty goal of a liberated society. On the other hand, White also seems to recognize that without some sort of utopian vision, political ecology can quickly lapse into a timid reformism that is easily waylaid and co-opted. White states his preference for what he calls "a pragmatic, open-ended utopianism" (197), yet nowhere does he spell out what he means by this or address the broader implications thereof. A better grounding in the current literature on utopia, which has been concerned explicitly with these questions, and a more in-depth reflection on Bookchin's status as an unabashedly utopian

thinker could have been instrumental in clarifying precisely what is at stake and outlining some possible ways forward. In the final analysis, however, these are relatively minor caveats: White has crafted a clear and compelling critical introduction to Murray Bookchin that should appeal to Bookchin neophytes and aficionados alike, and it is to be hoped that it is read widely by committed environmentalists and scholars across a panoply of disciplines.