

Some Good Bookchin?

Review

John Brinker

2006

a review of

The Ecology of Freedom: The Emergence and Dissolution of Hierarchy by Murray Bookchin. AK Press. 2005.
491 pp. \$23.

An influential theorist with a background in anarcho-syndicalism and Marxian theory, Murray Bookchin has spent the past thirty-five years developing and promoting social ecology, one of the few anarchist schools of thought to have its own school, the Institute for Social Ecology in Vermont. The latter part of his career has been devoted to curmudgeonly crusades to “save” anarchism and ecology from what he sees as its pitfalls: mysticism, biocentrism, and something called “lifestylism.”

Originally published in 1982, *The Ecology of Freedom*, a central work of Bookchin’s career, has just been republished by AK Press with a new third introduction by the author.

Just as Marx thought that capitalism was a step on the road to communism, Bookchin seems to view history as a tragic “but necessary path that could return us to an improved Eden. The central theory put forward here is that the relationships of domination that evolved in prehistoric human society set the stage for humanity’s domination of nature. If we can rid ourselves of that domination, but retain what many claim are its products—reason and technology—a kind of ecotopia could unfold.

Although they’re plausible, Bookchin’s arguments are undermined by being presented as facts. The author is emphatic about the intrinsic value of reason, and he states, “It would be better to use our rational faculties and reflect on them later than to lose them altogether to a dark heritage that may obliterate mind itself.” One wonders if it’s just a coincidence that Bookchin sees this “dark heritage” returning through interest in non-western societies.

Bookchin proposes a “new” politics based on autonomous municipalities that would make decisions in New England-style town hall meetings. Looking back in time, the author reserves his highest regard for Athenian democracy, and sees the later emergence of representative democracy as a step backwards. It’s a shame that Bookchin didn’t seriously consider the many “primitive” societies whose practice of direct democracy both predates the Greeks and has even survived the emergence of capitalism and the modern state.

In his two additional introductions, one from 1991 and one from this year, Bookchin takes such pains to distance himself from his detractors that he highlights the most conservative aspects of his work. It’s a shame, because his work should be more widely read and understood, despite its flaws.

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