

The Anarchist Revolution

Interview with Murray Bookchin

Murray Bookchin
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This interview was conducted for the *Fifth Estate* by Dena Clamage.

Fifth Estate: What is meant by anarchism? Why talk about anarchism today?

Murray Bookchin: Most people associate anarchists with traditional bomb-throwers and nonsense like that. Anarchism is something much larger than a particular set or a particular school.

Some thousands of years ago men lived in some kind of totality with nature. They were dominated by the natural world, but they also lived in harmony with the natural world.

Then there was a tremendous cleavage. Man's attempts to free himself from the domination of the natural world, to gain some type of security, resulted in the domination of man by man. It split man from nature, it split man from man, it brought about class society. It not only split man from man, it split man internally. It split his mind from his body. It split the concept of subject from object. It produced a whole logic of domination.

During this whole period in which man dominated man there was a gradual development of the technological forces. Slowly, bit by bit, in the course of this class society, in the course of this propertied society, man began to develop his technology.

And for the first time over these thousands of years it's possible to see a unity restored again between man and nature, between man and man in which man will not so much dominate nature but will be secure, will be able to shape the natural world consciously.

Anarchism has always been a libidinal movement on the part of mankind to go back to that unity.

During all periods of great transition the masses of people have pressed against the system of domination that existed. They have seen it crumbling. They pressed against it and tried to restore this nonauthoritarian, free world. But they haven't had the material conditions, the technology, to consolidate this. There has always been scarcity, always want. And the technology has opened up an entirely new vista of human liberation.

We're sort of returning to the old communism now but with an entirely new level, an entirely new possibility, an entirely new potential for human freedom. This potential can not only eliminate property, but might eliminate toil itself, might eliminate all those things which have kept man impoverished and divided between himself and the natural world. And this is what anarchism really means.

Anarchism is an attempt to restore the early unity but now on an entirely new level. For this reason we use the word anarchy as a synthesis of these entirely new historical and social possibilities.

Fifth Estate: What are the prospects of anarchy in the United States? How could anarchy come about?

Murray Bookchin: This is the country above all in which you have the highest development of this technology. What is happening right now is this: Throughout the course of history these classes, the systems of class domination, while they dominated mankind still played a certain social function. The city played a certain social function. The split between town and country played a certain social function. It has also been said that the State played a certain social function.

Class domination, according to Marx in particular, was supposed to have made it possible for mankind to develop a culture, to develop the science necessary to free himself from the domination of nature over man. The theory here is that the ruling classes, despite all the crimes that they inflict on humanity, nonetheless, had the leisure time to develop a literature, to develop mathematics, to develop a technology.

The city also has been described as the arena in which human culture developed. Men were brought together, removed from the land and brought into close proximity with each other to communicate ideas.

The State, despite the fact that it's always been an instrument of class domination according to Marx, has played the role of maintaining a certain amount of social peace.

These institutions have played a progressive role. Whether they did or not, the most striking thing that has happened is that now they all play a totally regressive role.

The State mobilizes the means of production in order to enforce the system of domination at a time when this could be eliminated. The economy is being used to impose domination, and to preserve domination; in fact, to preserve scarcity today artificially. The armaments industry is the most striking case in point here.

We have a tremendous productive capacity, but this productive capacity does not return to the people, it is not used to support them or to emancipate them. It is used to preserve scarcity artificially so that people have to go to work even when work is unnecessary.

The city today plays a totally regressive role. It no longer unifies people or brings them together. On the contrary, in the large cities today people are more alienated than ever before. This is an entirely new development historically. The city is no longer conceived as the arena of culture but as the arena of deculturation.

The contradiction between town and country has produced an enormous ecological crisis today. The city crawls over the land in the most destructive fashion. It is the center of air pollution, the arena in which most of the poisons are introduced into the human environment. And here again you have a very striking departure from all of the past.

Technology which should free men from toil actually becomes a means of imprisoning man. We have technological developments which are entirely destructive, which are entirely coercive.

The result is that you have a total exhaustion of all institutions, of time-honored property society. They no longer play even the progressive role that Marx imputed to them.

What is happening in the United States? Here more than any place else in the world we sense this. We sense on the one hand the enormous technological possibilities even if we sense them unconsciously. We sense on the other hand a condition that exists, a prevailing condition which imprisons man. The tension between what-could-be and what-is is now becoming excruciating in the United States.

A whole generation has emerged which senses this tension almost intuitively, and some people sense this consciously. The result is that you have a tremendous polarization of the new generation which has not been able to justify in its own mind the dominating role, sexually, psychologically, politically, institutionally, of all those forces which men in the past accepted.

With this generation you have a genuine generational conflict which cuts across all class lines. A very significant fact is that the youth revolt came from the middle classes, from those classes which were most affluent. What this youth revolt essentially expresses is a hatred of the whole quality and banality of life. All the old institutions can no longer be justified in their minds. They no longer make any sense in the face of the new possibilities that exist, in the face of the patent hypocrisy that exists in terms of the roles that these institutions profess to perform and the reality of the oppression which they create.

Fifth Estate: In what sense is this youth revolt revolutionary?

Murray Bookchin: In the profoundest sense imaginable, class youth. You don't simply have a class war; more significantly you have a struggle of young people in all classes outside of the bourgeoisie (and in some cases even within the bourgeoisie) who feel that the present society can no longer be justified. These young people will not be

satisfied merely with reforms of the society, such as wage improvements, changes in hours, or an increase in the standard of living. They have rejected the American Dream itself.

This is the biggest thing that is happening. Over the past one hundred years you had building up in the United States, in the mentality of the United States, an American Dream, which in the 1920s was expressed by men like Hoover with his “two chickens in every pot, two cars in every garage.” This involved the idea that commodities would raise the standard of living and provide a new sense of American life. A new dream would be realized through the productive capacities of the United States.

What we have found now is that for millions of people who had acquired this dream, life has become totally banal and meaningless. It has become senseless and pedestrian as well as vicious.

And the demand today gradually edges into a revolutionary dream, into a new sense of community to replace the exploitation of nature; into a new sense of sexual freedom to replace the patriarchal and even monogamous family; into a new sense of the beauty of life itself, the idea that everyday life has to be liberated, that every moment has to be as marvelous as it possibly can.

These are entirely new conceptions. These notions which were once the property of a small handful of poets have now become increasingly general notions. And this represents an entirely new point of departure historically.

Nobody has brought forth this youth revolt. It has not been brought forth by a manifesto. It has not even been brought forth as such by the drug culture. It is something which rides on a new sense of technological possibility on the one hand and the absurdity- of the whole past property culture on the other.

Fifth Estate: Do you think this consciousness has an effect on the working class?

Murray Bookchin: I was personally a worker and I was even in the UAW, although not in Detroit. I remember the tradition of the working class at that time. The workers generally felt that they were anchored in the factories. They felt that the factory was their way of life, however much they disliked it. And young workers had a very fatalistic attitude about the job. This was, in a sense, their career and they took it awfully seriously. Bread and butter demands were the key demands of that period although union organization was also a very important demand.

Now what's happening is a young worker is beginning to emerge who does not regard the factory as his fate. This is the mentality of the most advanced sections of the workers today, particularly the young workers.

The feeling here is, in a sense, “What the hell am I doing here? I feel trapped.” And there is a tendency to link up with the youth culture, to turn to dope, to _turn to marijuana, to turn to rock music on an ever-increasing scale, to feel even intuitively, although there's still a very deep suspicion between young workers and hippies, a greater kinship when the chips are down than there is to the older workers who come to counsel moderation, be cool, stick by the rules, bureaucracy, etc.

There is also a stronger tendency to flip out, which manifests itself in the wild-cat strikes and in a gross mistrust of the union bureaucracy; in the feeling that whatever they're going to do as workers, be it in the factory, or outside the factory, they want to control and they don't want things controlled for them.

I remember as a worker it could be said very legitimately by a Marxist that workers respect their leaders. This was in fact true. There was a tremendous personality cult and the tremendous respect for the union leadership.

Today this has disappeared to a very great extent. The most advanced of the workers feel that they don't want any bureaucracy; they mistrust leaders rather than revere them.

I feel that these are all very great points of departure. They reflect the entirely new possibilities that are emerging today. They reflect the idea that men can begin to think of a society in which there will be no leaders, in which they, themselves, will completely control the conditions of their lives.

Fifth Estate: You have written in *Anarchos* several articles on the question of ecology, the relationship between man and his environment. Could you run this down a little?

Murray Bookchin: We have now a tremendous crisis in man's relationship with nature. There's a very strong chance that if we manage to survive all the other crises, this crisis will become almost insurmountable at the present rate that it's going.

It's not my opinion, but the opinion of many ecologists that we may not be able to get out of the Twentieth Century intact at the rate that we're despoiling the natural world. Not only is this a social crisis, it's one that the so-called left should be giving a great deal of attention to. Because this crisis can only be solved by what would be called a kind of anarcho-communism.

This crisis arises not only from the exploitation of the natural world for profit. It also emerges from the split between town and country. We haven't developed merely an urban civilization; we've developed a particularly destructive form of urban civilization. The fact that nearly 60 to 70% of the American population begins to move into immense cities and urban belts has a devastating effect upon the atmosphere.

We do not live in balance with the regions that we occupy. New York City or Detroit, for example, are no longer regional societies. They are really elements in a tremendous national division of labor in which vast areas such as the Mesabi range, such as certain farming districts, have to be despoiled, have to be exploited, in order to feed these immense populations.

The centralized nature of the societies today and the centralized natures of the cities today have turned the whole continent into a kind of factory.

And this has had a destructive effect upon the natural ecology of every region in the United States, in fact, of every region in North America. The economy now organized on this centralized basis, organized on this national division of labor, has to override all the ecological distinctions, hydrological distinctions, atmospheric distinctions, climactic distinctions, differences in soil, differences in the ecology of animal and plant life to feed these immense giant centralized cities.

The results are likely to be catastrophic, if not in my generation, quite conceivably in yours or maybe in the generation shortly afterwards. At least we'll begin to feel the effects of it.

We have transportation systems today that are utterly destructive. The growth in the pollution of not simply the atmosphere but the soil, even up to the Greenland Ice Cap with lead deposits from our gasoline, is reaching appalling proportions. I think it's something we will have to contend with as a major health hazard in the not-too-distant future.

The spread of radioactivity, the spread of pesticides, not simply DDT, but a large spectrum of pesticides which are not receiving anywhere the attention that they should, are leading to massive pollution of the earth.

We are changing the whole carbon dioxide ratio in the atmosphere today, which may be leading to a warming up of the planet with all kinds of apocalyptic results in some distant future. We are polluting all the oceans on a massive scale, all the waterways.

This is now becoming a problem, because what we are doing is under-mining the complex biosphere, the complex world of life, on which an organism like man depends, not only for his health literally, but for his sanity. We are homogenizing the entire planet, we are turning it into a factory. And while man may be compelled to accept this kind of condition, nature will rebel against it.

We have to decentralize our cities now. This is an old and traditional anarchist demand and it was always seen as a dream. For the first time historically it has become not simply a dream but a necessity for human survival.

We have to eliminate the State which plays such a destructive role today not only in coercing people but in mobilizing the economy in the exploitation of resources. This is no longer merely a dream today, it has now become a necessity.

We have to eliminate property; we have to start using the earth as though it were a garden to satisfy human needs, material needs, instead of satisfying class interests. This today is no longer merely a dream. It, too, has become a necessity.

We have to start living in order to survive. That's the essence of the new situation which has arisen. In the past, everything was put this way: there is the dream, but we have to take care of survival first. The dream represented life, and survival represented economic necessity.

Now the whole question has been reversed. If we do not begin to live, we will be incapable of having any kind of reality at all.

For that reason the anarchist vision of a decentralized, propertyless, Stateless, communistic society, in which men will live not only in harmony with each other but in harmony with nature, are no longer really dreams. They have become preconditions, necessities for the survival of man on this planet.



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