

Considering the Third Revolution: Popular Movements in the Revolutionary Era

J. Frank Harrison

Murray Bookchin, *Considering the Third Revolution: Popular Movements in the Revolutionary Era*, 2 vols. (Cassell: London and New York, 1996 and 1998).

MURRAY BOOKCHIN is perhaps the best known North American anarchist thinker and activist, a person whose name is linked with the movement and school of thought called "social ecology." International conferences have been organized to discuss and elaborate the concepts of social ecology — such as the one held in Portugal in August 1998. For more than four decades, his warnings even pre-dating Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*, Bookchin has made us conscious of the crisis facing the planet. Without wishing to oversimplify, at the heart of the argument is the assertion that ecological problems have their root in class structure and socio-political organizations. Therefore, to save the earth and all the things upon it, we must transform the way in which human beings relate to each other.

The direction in which we must move is that of anarchist communism. Anarchism, of course, encompasses a spectrum of arguments, the common theme of which is the rejection of hierarchy, the rejection of human domination in all of its forms (political, social, sexual, intellectual, economic). The social ecologist argues that these very hierarchies, in both capitalist and socialist states, establish the organizational and psychological conditions for the destruction of Nature and ourselves. Alternative organizations, especially alternative urban organizations, have become central to the discussion. The need for equality — impossible with private ownership of the means of production — and direct fact-to-face democracy is central to the social project.

We are so familiar with the elitist and undemocratic character of our so-called representative democracies that we tend to take them for granted. Direct democracy

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is regarded as utopian, an impossible nowhere. This is a poor attitude, and a result of poor logic. As utopian writers since Plato have argued, there are two good reasons for taking utopias seriously, even if they are impossible. First, they are a measure against which we can judge the inadequacies of our own social condition. Second, the utopia gives us a direction in which to move. Any small step, any increment, any improvement on the margin of the struggle is an improvement. Bookchin, on the other hand, is far more confident. He tries to show that the alternative is a practicality, not a utopia.

Now let us turn to the two volumes before us. Bookchin is not discussing social ecology in these books, although it must be understood as part of the discussion. He is discussing the possibility of revolutionary social change, the possibility of the alternate social organization, the direct democracy and common ownership required for a justice and morality in the past, to which must be added an ecologically sound environment in the present. He analyzes the history of revolution and rebellion in Europe and North America. He is determined to show that history does not have an inevitable process of development. Revolution does not inevitably have a Thermidor, a re-establishment of an authoritarian State after a period of disturbance (unlike Crane Brinton's *Anatomy of Revolution*, published in 1952). Similarly, Marxist determinism is rejected. Capitalism was not inevitable as a form of ownership and production. Nor was the modern State. They conquered, but there were other options that could have been established if the historical dice had fallen differently.

This brings us to the title of the two volumes before us: *The Third Revolution*. Bookchin, whilst denying inevitability, is pointing to a recurring possibility, one that has happened periodically, and one that has been available during revolutionary periods of time. It is appropriate, or perhaps intellectually convenient, to think in terms of three revolutionary stages in the violent disturbances of the modern period that is, since the Reformation. The first revolution, with the people or masses uprising, rid society and the State of the old regime of inherited land and power, of aristocratic elitism. The second revolution is the centralist restructuring of the political and economic system. The third revolution has been the action of the populace to reclaim the power which it had, and lost, during the second revolution:

... the insurrectionary people, almost alone, were seeking to reclaim and expand highly democratic institutions that had been established during earlier phases of the revolutionary cycle and whose power had been subsequently reduced or usurped by the parties and factions that professed to speak in their name. (Vol. 1, 3)

And

The first revolution had overthrown the absolute monarchy in 1789, the second in 1830 had given rise to a royal constitutional system. In the third, the uprising of February 1848, the

workers had to achieve their “democratic and social republic,” a hope that had gone unfulfilled because of the usurpers at the Hotel de Ville. (Vol. II, 144)

This search for democratic institutions, this third revolution, and its failure, is the theme of these two volumes. They take us from the peasant rebellions of the 14th century to the reformist and conformist activities of the Second International up to the beginning of World War I in 1914. A third volume is promised, giving us the details of the repression of the popular revolution in Russia by the Bolsheviks. In every case we see “statists” destroying real democratic possibilities; but the democratic possibilities were there, and in that Bookchin places his analysis and hope. We read the statement of Jacques-Pierre Brissot, the radical, but also the critic of “third revolution,” writing on 24 March 1793:

... we have to put an end to the third revolution, the revolution of anarchy. We will only be able to finish it off by establishing a good constitution in the place of this system of disorganization and of despotism, which some people would like to perpetuate. (Vol. I, 332)

Statists, though radicals, have ever worked against the democratic potential of revolutionary situations, pretending even that the potential was not there. Bookchin’s purpose in these volumes is to explode the myth of leadership, of the necessity of a vanguard. Ordinary folk, regular people, both men and women, have actively struggled to control their own lives, in the face of persistent and brutal opposition of every kind. That is the optimistic message of Bookchin.

In the first volume he gives us a summary analysis of peasant wars in the late medieval period, the 17th century English Revolution, and the American and French Revolutions of the 18th century. In the second volume he looks to the various French revolutions of the 19th century (1830, 1848-50, 1871), and proletarian socialism prior to World War I. He does not apologize for the “Euro-centrism” of his approach. In fact, he asserts that these revolutionary circumstances had a universalism that was lacking in the nationalist struggles against imperialism that characterize “Third World” revolutions in the 20th century. Concerning the latter, he says “... these revolutions should not be mystified, nor should their justifiable claims to freedom be compared to the universal appeals to humanity that marked the great revolutions that occurred in Europe.” (Vol. I, 18) I am not sure that this is entirely accurate, especially when we consider the writings of Mao Zedong in his pre-megalomaniac period, or the reflections of Frantz Fanon on the psychology of imperialist and revolutionary violence. Indeed, some Third World thinkers would argue that Western thought was part of the imperialist project. However, Bookchin’s assertion that the intellectual core and model of modern revolution is found in “The West” is worth consideration — and he himself has the personal insight to acknowledge his attachment to the Enlightenment, to rationalism and the “revolutionary spirit.”

Bookchin's rationalism even leads him to the rejection and denial of the more radical elements of the English Civil War — the Diggers and the Ranters, who were actually communists who denied the legitimacy of property and the State. Their inspiration was, however, not the intellectual and structured argument of the Levellers — the democratic parliamentarians of the Putney debates, for whom Bookchin has far more admiration:

... if the Ranters were anarchists, they were mystical anarchists, and their mysticism tended to completely paralyze their capacity to change the real world.... The Levellers had tried to set things right by the sword, and the Diggers, more feebly, by the space ... but the Ranters could offer nothing more than another millennium. (Vol I, 132)

Bookchin is not a fan of religiosity, anti-intellectualism, intuitionism or blind passion.

Yet revolution is not for Bookchin an intellectual experiment, a "proven" necessity, however much we may use the intellect to justify it. Revolution, the transformation of things through destruction of the old order and the creation of popular institutions, has and always will be the work of the masses. Bookchin debunks the Marxist idea that the French Revolution of '89 and after was a "bourgeois revolution." For him, the bourgeoisie have "never been politically revolutionary," (Vol. I, 13) and the destruction of the *ancien regime* in France was not their achievement. His study concludes that the revolution occurred "in spite of — and against — the capitalism that was emerging in western society as a whole." (Vol. I, 264)

The central message of the two volumes is the organizational creativity of ordinary workers and peasants, and the story of the repression of their liberatory projects. In the revolutionary committees in North America, in the Parisian sections after 1789, in the 1871 Commune, and in the numerous demonstrations and marches which dictated and directed every revolutionary period, we are shown a vision of popular sovereignty — "in effect ... enjoyed by *all* citizens, not preempted by 'representatives,' as was the case in earlier national bodies." (Vol. I, 319) What is of interest, however, is that the popular movements with which he is concerned are almost invariably uninterested in communism. As late as 1871, Bookchin informs us, looking at the revolutionaries in Paris, "the French industrial proletariat had still to find its identity and assert its interests in the largely artisanal capital." (Vol. II, 228) In this he follows the Bakuninist analysis of the period, which argued that communism was not simply a product of the insurrection of an industrial proletariat — who were easily seduced by bourgeois values anyway. It also places Bookchin in opposition to Marx, the thinker whom he has always called a bourgeois sociologist, authoritarian in politics and dominating of Nature.

Communist and/or socialist values did exist in the 19th century and earlier. Bookchin properly refers us to Babeuf and the Conspiracy of Equals during the late 1790s and reported by Buonarotti in the 1820s. Robert Owen was certainly a

communist, as were Bakunin and Blanqui and Marx. The social democrats of Marxist or other persuasions, despised by all anarchists, had a scientific faith in the necessity of public ownership of the means of production. There was, however, little "mass" demand for communism, small proprietorship being the normal concern of the revolutionaries of the time, as Bookchin recognizes. Of course, this does not say that rational human beings, faced with the idiocies of state socialism on the one hand, and capitalism on the other, will not come to the appropriate conclusion.

However, it does seem a little strange that Bookchin should take such great offence at the writings of Pierre Joseph Proudhon. Proudhon was probably the best known and most widely-read radical writer in France during the 19th century. Compared with him, Marx was a nobody. He was the first writer to call himself an anarchist. He was criticized by Marx for being a bad Hegelian in *The Poverty of Philosophy*, which is a nasty little piece that the young Marx put out in an attempt to promote his burgeoning historical materialism. Proudhon had the revolutionary spirit which Bookchin promotes. He was also read and promoted by Bakunin, and it was Bakunin who was so popular during the First International (1864-1872) that Marx took the leadership of the organization to the relative socialist backwoods of New York. Bookchin has accolades for Bakunin, the communist, but nothing but criticism for Proudhon: "A firm paterfamilias (indeed, a misogynist), ... his bitter anti-Semitism, combined with his patriarchal outlook, were to make many of his views congenial to European reactionaries, including outright fascists." (Vol. II, 39) Proudhonist views are condemned on the same page that he says "the Paris Commune of 1871 was not socialist ... let alone anarchist in Bakunin's sense of the word." (Vol. II, 230)

Should we be surprised that Proudhon did not rush forward as a full-fledged communist? The idea of small proprietorship, "petty bourgeois" economics, is yet with us as we enter the 21st century. It may well be something that we have to escape. However, it is not surprising that Proudhon should identify with the peasant and the artisan in the France of his time. Also, he did recognize the need for a common ownership in a factory system. There is more to be said of Proudhon than we have here, and better stuff. However, Bookchin also has his preferences and passions, and a dislike of Proudhon is one of them. Remember also that Karl Marx can well be regarded as a noted 19th-century anti-Semite, along with Bakunin. Personally, I prefer to malign the cruelty and mean-ness of my own tribe, the Scots. Stereotypes are not pleasant, but they are often used casually by the nicest of people. Ask any Canadian what they think about America and Americans.

In conclusion, one must say that these volumes are splendid summaries of radical western thought and behaviour. Bookchin has provided us with a summary of the stuff which historians and theorists have previously had to dig out in the radical publishing houses and on the shelves of the more obscure sections of libraries. He is also a fine writer, putting life into every sentence that he produces.

We do not have to agree with every word to recognize him as a writer of significant importance. As an anarchist, I am delighted that we have this two-volume history of the western radical tradition that does not deflate the finest revolutionary moments into extremist impossibilities. Direct democracy could be the call of the 21st century; and Bookchin provides a good argument for it. We should always remember, however, that this is not a political argument in the abstract. It is an argument that is necessary to the ecological project — central to Bookchin's concerns, not mentioned in these volumes, but ever present if we are to appreciate fully this thinker's full significance.