Charlie Crute
Murray Bookchin in London

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The real question must be, first, what kind of a society are we going to have, and then, what is our relationship with the natural world.

Murray Bookchin, now in his early seventies, was born into a tradition of iconoclasm. His parents had emigrated to New York after the 1905 revolution in Russia — a grandmother had been a member of the (anti-Bolshevik) Social Revolutionary Party; he had been raised in a tradition of opposition to authority oriented to the notion of class oppression.

After 1917 those who, like his family, had suffered under the Tsars were swept into the Bolshevik movement; and Bookchin joined the Communist Children's Movement in 1930 at the age of nine. The executions of the Bolshevik leaders by Stalin led to a brief flirtation with Trotskyism; he was much influenced in his teens by the events of the Spanish Civil War, but he was not at that time aware of anarchism. Now, said Bookchin, he called himself an anarchist and had done so since the 1950s although he believed he had been one much earlier. How had the change come about?

Bookchin recalled that in his young days working people were class conscious; they saw 'the bosses' as their opponents; battles were fought to gain union recognition. Political activists had to use rough language, to be loud and forceful in debate; the atmosphere was one of conflict. But by 1948 he became aware that the workers were becoming assimilated by the capitalist system. The new idea was that what was good for General Motors was good for America. In the aftermath of the Second World War everyone had been led to expect a cornucopia. Nuclear energy was going to bring free power, free energy, free everything. It was going to be a marvellous world, and it could have been.

Bookchin noted the increasing penetration of the capitalist market into everyday life: the shopping malls in New York; the chemicalisation of food; the disappearance of the green areas he used to know, the brooks and fields of his childhood, under ticky-tacky houses; and the workers increasingly exploited but being bought off by the perks of free holidays and social security.

He drifted away from the labour movement and became increasingly concerned with larger issues of social change. From 1952, writing as Lewis Herber, he tried to formulate a theory of the domination of nature as stemming from a capitalist economy which he identified

with anarchism. The notion of domination, Bookchin came to realise, was based on hierarchical human relationships which existed before the emergence of class systems and was to be found in early organic societies. He noted that whereas a limitation of primitive societies was parochialism the modern city, for all its disadvantages, had broken down barriers and had produced a kind of melting pot inconceivable thousands of years ago.

Bookchin concluded that the Marxism on which he had been brought up had not gone deeply enough. The Marxists had taught that hierarchical relationships were necessary even as they attacked class society. Marx had attacked Bakunin. Seeing things in industrial terms, the Marxists asked how a steel mill could be run without hierarchical relationships. Bookchin came to see that such relationships were not simply economic but were based on status, that they involved for instance the domination of women by men, of people of colour by whites. Anarchism is concerned to oppose the one basic concept of authority as such.

The idea of the domination of nature, said Bookchin, is a projection of human domination onto the natural world, and the ecological crisis has its origins in a social crisis. To resolve the ecological problems we have to look within our own society.

In calling himself an 'eco-anarchist' he was aware that he was being disputatious — he was disliked by a lot of the more spiritualistic environmentalists, and he had no use for their sort of loose pantheism. His point was that before we can eliminate antagonisms between human societies and the natural world we must first eliminate antagonisms between human beings. Human inequality is at the root of the biospheric degradation of today.

The social nature of the ecological crisis

The market society, said Bookchin, identifies progress with competition, with rivalry, with the spirit of dog-eat-dog. He had come to the conclusion that some of his earlier warnings were underestimates: the market system has telescoped into decades environmental damage he thought would take centuries.

The rivalry was between the big business firms in the United States and between the EEC, America and Japan. At the Earth Summit big business would dictate terms to the world's government. The individuals who manage these firms are not people with bad intentions, but are locked into a system, and the system has to be changed. What, then, can we do?

My suggestion, said Bookchin, is that we form a counter-power to the State, a counter-power to the great corporations and a counter-power to the market. By that he did not mean communes or food co-operatives which could not challenge the giant corporations. What was needed is the re-creation of a public sphere in which people can feel they are members, not mere taxpayers; be citizens not constituents, go beyond merely paying taxes and obeying the rules. He had used the term participatory democracy, but he did not mean what John Major meant when he talked about 'empowering the citizens of Britain'. Nor did he mean that we should fill huge meeting places, or that we should make decisions by referenda: Shall we invade Nicaragua? Press red button for yes, green button for no.

He advocated neighbourhood centres, delegation of representatives under mandate as opposed to going to our MP or Congressman; advice centres on how to deal with the system. He warned against the dangers of parochialism of the small community, and urged the adoption of those forms of community that have been tried by history and seen to have worked. Bookchin's term for the form of politics he advocates is Confederalism.

Bookchin concluded by warning against the 'spiritual aspects of ecology'. He was not, he said, against spirituality but against spiritualism, a distinction many of his critics do not draw. People have to live, and only when they are fed can they talk about the environment. Unless this point is appreciated, only 'the most exotic people, who do not shape the world' will discuss such matters.

Break down the cities into neighbourhoods said Bookchin; it can be more easily done today than at the time of the French Revolution. Think of the German Green Party, and understand that all power corrupts; form a new non-hierarchical politics.