

Book Review: Minding Nature

The Philosophers of Ecology

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Minding Nature sets out to trace ideas of democracy and nature in the thought of a variety of philosophers and social theorists who, according to editor David Macauley, “have enabled us to rethink the possibility of creating a more democratic *and* ecological society.” The book, which is part of Guilford’s ecosocialist series “Democracy and Ecology,” consists of thirteen essays, many of which originally appeared in the ecosocialist journal *Capitalism Nature Socialism*. Each essay highlights a single thinker whose work will in some way help us “move toward both democracy and ecology.”

Given this goal, the choice of thinkers who are subjects of the essays is, however, sometimes peculiar. Politically they range over a wide spectrum: some (like Herbert Marcuse and Juergen Habermas) are critical theorists, one is an orthodox Marxist (Ernst Bloch), one is a quasi-Marxist social democrat (Barry Commoner), and one is a fascist (Martin Heidegger). They are joined by a theorist of the public sphere (Hannah Arendt), a regionalist (Lewis Mumford), an anarchocommunist and social ecologist (Murray Bookchin), and a philosopher whose political orientation is undefined (Hans Jonas). An arcane philosopher (the phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty), jostles against popular writers on concrete environmental topics (Rachel Carson and Paul Ehrlich). Most of the thinkers discussed did their work during the twentieth century, but two are entirely preindustrial (Thomas Hobbes and Charles Fourier). Conspicuously missing are the anarchists Reclus and Kropotkin, which suggests that one purpose of the book is to explore the possibilities for an ecosocialist tradition that could parallel the better-defined ecoanarchist tradition.

As might be expected with such diverse thinkers, the essay’s discussions stray far afield from democracy and ecology, to a broad array of topics including religion, language technology, science, ethics, political power, and capitalism; many interesting ideas are raised that deserve consideration. But I will limit my own social-ecology reading of this book to asking how well it succeeds in helping us “move toward both democracy and ecology.”

The writings of Thomas Hobbes, of course, express no such goal but rather some of the obstacles it faces: as essayist Frank Coleman argues (although somewhat overstating the case), Hobbes’s vision is “a principal reason that the domain of nature is presently at risk.” As an authoritarian, Hobbes typically expressed the bourgeois-capitalist’s conception that nonhuman nature is a realm of scarcity. Modernism, Coleman shows, posited a “defect of nature” that is, a limitation of natural resources or scarcity. Capitalism “generates the perception” of natural scarcity, then tries to “extricate” us from it “through the biblically derived project of dominion over the earth.” These passages of Coleman’s essay are a fine statement of the presumption of scarce resources that provided a rationale for capitalist exploitation, not to speak of nation-state domination.

Charles Fourier, in turn, properly belongs to the various traditions that have attempted to avert these social developments. Still, essayist Joan Roelofs’s characterization of Fourier as “red-green” is grating, since the absence of coercive institutions in Harmonian society (“passionate attractions” among individual members were to be its

ordering principle) places Fourier at least as squarely in the black-green tradition. As a preindustrial thinker, however, his phalansteries were almost entirely agricultural, indeed even horticultural, in nature; cities and machines remained in the dim background. As such, his “ecology,” too, is one that minimizes cities and machines and emphasizes agriculture and rural living. Roelofs finds these features of Harmonian society appealing, including its “labor intensive” nature, since “human capital is most important for productivity”; but Harmonian work will be not only tolerable but pleasurable. As a theorist of democracy, however, Fourier is of scant interest: Roelofs herself admits that his phalansteries offered no processes for democratic decision-making.

Since Fourier’s time, the most militant sectors of the various socialist and anarchist traditions have shared at least one thing in common: an aversion to religion, which (apart from Christian socialists and the like) was most often seen as a source of oppression. Anarchists and socialists alike favored taking a secular, rational look at both nature and society, the better to comprehend those realities. This atheism was always salutary, and today some parts of the fragmented left, including but not limited to social ecology, have refused to change with the political weather by adapting themselves to today’s prevailing religiosity. One might expect that this book, as a project of ecosocialists, would treat the topic of nonhuman nature in similarly secular terms. But if anything, when the topic arises, the essays tend toward spiritualistic sensibilities and in some cases mysticism.

Accordingly, several authors in this book seem to identify the historical causes of the ecological crisis less as social than as idealistic in nature, pinning its deepest roots in erroneous ideas, especially religious beliefs. Essayist Michael Zimmerman avers that “dualism between humanity and nature leads to serious ecological (and social) problems.” For essayist David Abram, “The ecological crisis may be the result of a recent and collective perceptual disorder in our species.” If the ecological crisis is caused by ideas, in this line of thought, then ideas are what can provide a solution—especially religious or spiritual ideas. By his understanding of the human subject as “embodied,” says Abram, Merleau-Ponty offers us a new “ecological thinking,” a “renewed awareness of our responsibility to the Earth.” But Abram takes this thinking to a mystical level when he associates Merleau-Ponty’s statement that “the flesh of the world ... is sensible ... it is absolutely not an object” with the “Gaia hypothesis,” the mystical notion (based on an extrapolation of some scientific facts about the Earth’s temperature) that “the Earth’s biosphere acts as a vast, living physiology.” Such mysticism (like Zimmerman’s urging that “we need to step back from our incessant action” in favor of “meditative ‘thinking’”) is in accordance with nature romanticism but not with a socially active movement that tries to build a democratic, ecological society.

In some cases the essayists must contort their subject to make him or her relevant to ecological thought. Apologizing for the fact that Merleau-Ponty was a “committed humanist,” even a “recalcitrant” one Abram takes the notion of “embodiedness” into antihumanism, rejecting the notion that “language [is] that power which humans possess and other species do not.” So “embodied” is language, in his reading, that it

nears dissolution into carnality, while “the real Logos,” he tells us, “... is Eco-logos.” In this avowedly “creative reading” of Merleau-Ponty, the phenomenologist becomes “the voice of the earth.” Abram “creatively” inserts nonhuman creatures, especially cats and birds and whales, into his subject’s thought: their absence from Merleau-Ponty’s actual writings, he assures us, “is not crucial.” Abram even speculates about a parallel between animal abuse and Stalin’s purges: knowledge of animal abuses by science and agribusiness, he thinks, might have been “as crucial for [Merleau-Ponty’s] rethinking of philosophy, as were the revelations concerning Stalin’s purges when these were disclosed in Europe.” Such formulations only serve to trivialize human suffering and have no place in a socialist or leftist outlook.

That Martin Heidegger also has a place in this book is equally bizarre and equally symptomatic of its spiritualistic tilt. Michael Zimmerman has long sought to convince deep ecologists of the relevance of Heidegger’s thought to their ideas. In his essay here he continues this effort (it is a rather unambiguous fact). In any case, his article is explicitly addressed not to ecosocialists but to deep ecologists, warning them rather mildly of Heidegger’s “political drawbacks” and “reactionary political views.”

One has to credit Zimmerman for persistence, however: he still maintains that “radical ecologists can learn from Heidegger’s philosophy.” (His project, incidentally, is contradicted by his fellow essayist Lawrence Vogel, who warns that “Heidegger’s existentialism gives us no good reason to care about future generations or the long-term fate of planet Earth.”) But what exactly can ecologists learn from this fascist? “Heidegger is right that certain kinds of naturalism are dangerous,” Zimmerman advises the movement he supported was the one that made those dangers into genocidal realities. Least of all can we say that Heidegger has much to contribute to a philosophy of democracy.

Other thinkers discussed in this book are far more relevant to democratic thought but are not in any sense nature philosophers or philosophers of ecology. Hannah Arendt’s writings, most notably, are highly significant for her ideas on democratic political communities and active political citizenship, as well as civic virtue and engagement; her implied commitment to face-to-face decision-making certainly makes her relevant for philosophies of direct democracy, including social ecology’s libertarian municipalism. As essayist David Macauley rightly points out, Arendt “identifies herself with or praises the revolutionary tradition, direct political action and direct democracy (rather than representation), decentralization, forms of organization such as the council system (rather than political parties), and *potestas in populo*.”

But her relevance to ecological thought is far from clear. Her writings on democracy in *The Human Condition* suggest, if anything, that the achievement of democracy depends upon the transcendence of nonhuman nature. Essayist Macauley, aware of this problem, admits that “Arendt follows Locke and Marx in characterizing nature as the ‘realm of necessity’ which must be overcome... in order to reach the ‘realm of freedom’... Arendt’s concept of nature is therefore as ‘blind’ as Marx’s.” Yet he also tries to suggest an “ecological” Arendt by taking up her rather trite discussion of the earth

as seen from outer space and inflating it, suggesting that she is afflicted by “earth alienation.” “Themes of homelessness and rootlessness are at the center of Arendt’s political concerns,” we are told: Arendt “feels that we must recover the earth as our home.” None of this is convincing as ecological philosophy, least of all by comparison with her general ideas on nonhuman nature. As if Macauley also realizes that Arendt cannot be reconstructed into a nature philosopher, he acknowledges in the end that she was an “urban” and “cosmopolitan” thinker.

In a similar vein, Joel Whitebook’s “The Problem of Nature in Habermas,” written in the late 1970s and reprinted here with a retrospective introduction, took up the “challenge” of “thinking both democracy *and* ecology” in the thought of the Frankfurt School theorist Juergen Habermas. Habermas, Whitebook showed, objected to linking the two in a political sense. A defender of the Enlightenment, he attempted to advance “the completion of modernity’s unfinished project of democratization”; yet his position in relation to ecology was “troubling” for ecologists, since it “appeared to relegate nature to the status of a meaningless object of instrumental control.” Using a framework that was largely social ecological in nature (as social ecology was understood in the late 1970s), Whitebook attempted to resolve this dilemma, seeking “the transformation of our relation to the natural world,” in such a way as to address the ecological crisis, while still preserving the “indisputable achievements of modernity,” including its “advances in democratization.” He admits, however, that “the results” of his own article “were anything but conclusive,” since “Habermas’s transcendentalism necessarily precludes any reconciliation with nature.” Once again, democracy remains unreconciled with an ecological approach.

Far more of the thinkers discussed in this book suffer from the opposite problem: their ideas are pertinent to a discussion of nature and ecology but have little to do with democracy. In his discussion of Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring*, essayist Yaakov Garb compares this celebrated work with Bookchin’s *Our Synthetic Environment*, which treated similar themes and many others and was published six months before Carson’s book’s 1962 publication, to much less notice. Garb points out that “Bookchin’s account of the dangers of pesticides was part of a comprehensive and politically forthright chronicle of the many assaults on the environment and human well-being that he claimed were inevitable in an industrial capitalist society.” By comparison, Carson limited her concerns to the strictly environmental and “remained safely within the bounds of the American mainstream,” ignoring the social concerns that Bookchin expressed. Least of all was Carson a theorist of democracy (nor, to be fair, was Bookchin in 1962): her “call for democratic control and public accountability of scientists and the chemical industry” was “partial and often indirectly phrased.”

As for the regionalist Lewis Mumford, essayist Ramachandra Guha pulls together many of his ideas from a wide variety of sources to remedy what he sees as a lacuna in American environmental history: recognition of Mumford’s significance. Unfortunately, in his eagerness to assemble Mumford’s thoughts on nonhuman nature, Guha’s essay creates the illusion that Mumford wrote systematically on ecology and espoused

a thought-out ecological philosophy. But as Guha himself also admits, Mumford's ecological ideas are not presented systematically at all but are "scattered through his writings"; some of the quotations Guha assembles are culled from relatively ephemeral writings. One could make the same point about Mumford as a writer on democracy: his references to it, while they exist, are also scattered, and usually they are references to representative democracy, not face-to-face or direct democracy. (Many writers today seem eager to place Mumford, brilliant polymath that he was, in a radical ecological tradition, be it anarchist or socialist, but his writings do not live up to their expectations. His decentralism and regionalism were not so thoroughgoing as to qualify him as an anarchist, and although Guha refers to him as a "socialist," Mumford most often rejected socialism, not least in *The Pentagon of Power*.) Without diminishing the originality of Mumford's writings or their significance for social ecology, especially on green cities, it must be acknowledged that neither ecology nor democracy was a primary area of interest for him.

The most complete nature philosopher discussed in *Minding Nature* is Hans Jonas, whose *The Phenomenon of Life* also influenced the development of social ecology. Essayist Lawrence Vogel does a fine job of synthesizing Jonas's ideas on purposiveness, metabolism, emergent mind, and evolution. He rightly shows that, despite his attributions of value as an "objective reality" to nonhuman nature, Jonas would have rejected biotic egalitarianism: "although Jonas believes that nature carried value independent of us because Being is 'for itself' from the inception of life," he writes, "the *moral* worth of life only comes into being with the phenomenon of obligation, and obligation requires the evolution of a being capable of moral responsibility" that is, a human capability. Here Jonas is fully in accord with social ecology. (His nature philosophy, it should be noted, diverges from social ecology in that it culminates in an "imperative of responsibility" rather than social ecology's "potentiality for freedom"; where Bookchin seeks an ontological foundation for a principle of social freedom, Jonas sought "an ontological foundation for a principle of responsibility for the future.")

Moreover, Jonas, whose ideas were explicitly anti-utopian, "grounds an ethics in the depths of Being" (rather than in Becoming, as social ecology does), which leaves his ethics more static than developmental. Still, as a humanist, Jonas would agree that, as Vogel puts it, "we not only must, but should which can only mean something divine. His conclusion to his otherwise useful essay, which expresses this viewpoint, represents not only a contribution to the dumbing-down of philosophical thought but yet another depressing defection from the secularism of the socialist tradition.)

Mysticism surfaces yet again in Henry T. Blanke's article on Marcuse with Freudian ideas of repression, and by extension he posited a strong connection between the "domination of internal and external nature." His aim in doing so was not to conserve ecosystems, but to articulate the psychoanalytic underpinnings for a civilization that would be free of sexual repression.

In general, in the 1950s and 1960s, Marcuse sought to shift the balance of civilization's concerns away from the reality principle and toward the pleasure principle. If he

advocated shorter working hours and reduced consumption, it was in order to free the pleasure principle not to avert the destruction of the biosphere. Indeed, where Bookchin advocates social arrangements that would shorten working hours in order that people could manage their own affairs as citizens in a democracy, Marcuse wanted shorter working hours in order to foster erotic liberation.

It is my own belief that the presumed connection between “the domination of internal and external nature” is highly misleading. In the first place, “external nature” can’t be dominated; “the domination of nature” is an anthropomorphic phrase whose meaning vanishes on closer examination. Some forces of nature can be controlled by human beings, who are certainly polluting the biosphere, mineralizing organic life, and simplifying the complex development of natural evolution. But nature as a whole cannot be “dominated,” least of all by people who are a part of that “nature.”

Second, the existence of a “homology between human nature and external nature (both animated by erotic energy)” is not at all self-evident. One would certainly like an ecological society to be a sexually liberated one as well, but the idea that sexual repression has much directly to do with the damage inflicted on the biosphere seems rather far-fetched. Capitalism has much more to do with it. Once upon a time, certainly, the Calvinist work ethic provided a psychological supplement to the economic and social forces that generated the rise of capitalism. But today’s sex-drenched popular culture suggests that erotic repression is hardly necessary for the continued success of capitalism.

One point that Blanke does ably demonstrate, however, is that Marcuse’s thinking in *Eros and Civilization* is “unabashedly mystical.” But again, far from condemning him for it, he actually praises him, even arguing that Marcuse’s mystical consciousness “points to the radical nature of his thinking.” He approvingly says that “Marcuse anticipates a leitmotif of those ecological theorists who call for a radically new relationship with the environment grounded in a mystical consciousness.” Anticipating the objections of critics of mysticism, he invokes the failure of social revolution in Europe: “Western Marxists,” he says, employed “consciousness, subjectivity, and depth psychology” to explain this failure.

The assumption that a reversion to mysticism is warranted because traditional socialism, a failure, rejected it, is highly questionable. If socialist and anarchist thought had made an appeal to religion and spirituality, certainly they might have been more successful but does that mean that socialists and anarchists should now accept capitalism?

Irrationalistic mindsets, when introduced into politics, are most likely to produce quietism on the part of the powerless and manipulation on the part of the powerful. Yes, earlier generations of radicals, like seventeenth-century Protestant sects, were mystical, but they were mystical in a framework that was exclusively religious to start with. Introduced into what remains of the Left today, religiosity does little more than teach people to accept existing conditions. The fact is that our best means of apprehending reality tell us that religion, including mysticism, is a lie: there is no God, not even a

“a conscious perspective outside our own *for* whom our destiny matters”; there is no “oneness” or “greater self” of which we are a part, except for nature itself. To adopt the belief, or make outward professions of belief, that any supernatural or intranatural being or spirit exists is a moral and intellectual abdication.

Nor is mysticism capable of contributing to a democratic outlook or fostering civic virtues in citizens the virtues about which Hannah Arendt, for example, to Macauley’s approval, wrote. Direct democracy, and the processes of decision-making endemic to it, depends on the ability to rationally debate alternatives based on facts and ideas that are accessible to all. Mystical thinking is, by definition, not publicly available; it is intrinsically a private experience, one that can seldom, if ever, be shared; nor can its “insights” even be expressed but remain ineffable. As such it is hardly a mindset that fosters citizenship: one cannot persuade one’s fellow citizens of the rightness of one’s own views on rational grounds if one’s views are based on ineffable, incommunicable insights.

By assessing these thinkers in terms of their ideas on democracy and ecology, I am aware that I am placing many of them on a Procrustean rack. Many of them had no intention of focusing on either of those issues, and as thinkers they should be judged by their intentions. The problem is that in seeking essays on subjects who addressed both democracy and ecology, editor Macauley had a difficult task on his hands: few of them exist in recent social theory and philosophy.

Among all the thinkers discussed in this book, only one which is one reason, unlike his fellow essay subjects, his thinking is both democratic and ecological. He underpins both his democratic and his ecological ideas with a philosophical system called dialectical naturalism, conjoining them into a unified whole. Ironically, the thinker who is best able to fill the ecosocialists’ bill is a social anarchist.

Given his unique distinction among these thinkers, the treatment he receives is quite disproportionate (if not exactly surprising, considering the ideological contradiction between ecosocialism and ecoanarchism). Suddenly it no longer suffices to be a philosopher of both ecology and democracy. Indeed, Bookchin comes in for a degree of criticism far more intense than the other thinkers receive I will necessarily address Alan Rudy and Andrew Light’s essay on Bookchin at greater length than the others.

The primary criticism that Rudy and Light make against Bookchin concerns the issue of labor. “Our central critique,” they write, “is that Bookchin powerfully underplays the importance of labor as a mediating force within and between the social relations of humans, and within and between humans and the nonhuman natural world.” Bookchin, they argue, “neglects ... labor as a category of analysis” and “social labor as a defining characteristic of capitalism and its contradictions.” Rudy and Light themselves, it should be noted, prefer “analysis informed by Marxist investigation of economic, political, and environmental crises.”

By calling for a “transclass” constituency for a social revolution, the essayists argue, Bookchin omits the notion of class from his analysis and program. Certainly Bookchin long ago rejected Marxism’s image of the industrial proletariat as the hegemonic revo-

lutionary agent, but Rudy and Light exaggerate this rejection to absurd proportions, accusing him even of “skepticism about the existence of the working class in any meaningful form.” This would be a remarkable error indeed, but it is not one that Bookchin commits. His issue was never the existence of the working class but its revolutionary potential in the industrial workplace.

Rudy and Light further object that by subsuming exploitation under the category of domination, Bookchin fails to perceive that “capitalist exploitation” arises “as the central moment of a qualitatively different mode of production.” He fails, they say, to recognize “the qualitative transformation of the social forces and relations of production and reproduction” in order to “understand *why*, as well as *how*, economic, political, and ecological crises occur under capitalism.”

Bookchin has explained on numerous occasions that he did not intend for the terminology of “hierarchy” to replace “class,” nor that of “domination” to replace “exploitation.” In 1970, when he faced his Marxist critics after writing “Listen, Marxist!” he wrote: “Exploitation, class rule, and happiness,” he wrote, “are the *particular* within the more *generalized* concepts of domination, hierarchy and pleasure.”⁽¹⁾ As he has often said, he feels that Marx covered the subject of exploitation very thoroughly already, and he had no improvements to offer on it.

Nor is his work on domination in contradiction with Marx’s work on exploitation. Continuing: “Is it conceivable that I could have used terms like ‘capitalist’ and ‘bourgeois’ without working with a ‘class-based analysis’?” What was actually frustrating his Marxist critics, he pointed out, was that his class analysis was not “a *Marxist* ‘class analysis’” one “in which the industrial proletariat is driven to revolution by destitution and immiseration.” But “a ‘class analysis’ does not necessarily begin and end with Marx’s nineteenth-century version,” and the class struggle “does not begin and end at the point of production.”⁽²⁾

Bookchin also wrote in 1970 that he had made “no claim that a social revolution is possible without the participation of the industrial proletariat.” Rather, he tried to show “how the proletariat can be won to the revolutionary movement by stressing issues that concern the quality of life and work.”⁽³⁾ Here and in later writings, Bookchin tried, not to ignore class struggle, but to take it out of its erstwhile confinement to the factory and bring it into the neighborhoods; he addressed working people not as workers in their workplace but as members of a community or neighborhood, and as subject to a variety of other oppressions in addition to class exploitation.

This contribution to left-radical social theory is highly original and is based not on academic speculation but on revolutionary history itself: “Every class culture,” he wrote in 1986,

¹ Murray Bookchin, “A Discussion on ‘Listen, Marxist!’” *Post-Scarcity Anarchism* (San Francisco: Ramparts Books, 1971), p. 265.

² *Ibid.*, pp. 248, 249.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 250.

was always a community culture, indeed a civic culture.... While the factory and mill formed the first line of the class struggle in the last century,... its lines of supply reached back into the neighborhoods and towns where workers lived and often mingled with middle-class people, farmers, and intellectuals. Wage earners had human faces, not merely mystified “proletarian” faces, and functioned no less as human beings than as class beings.... This communal dimension of the industrial era is of tremendous importance in understanding how class conflicts often spilled over beyond economic issues into broadly social, even utopian, concerns.⁴

Historically, revolutionary class struggles have been based in municipalities even more notably than in factories. Red Petrograd in 1917 and Barcelona in 1936–37 both had strong neighborhood and civic cultures and were crucial arenas for their respective revolutions. Even earlier, the uprisings in Paris in 1848 and in 1870–71, with the Paris Commune, were largely neighborhood affairs, where people fought behind barricades located in their own neighborhoods. Working people defended not just their workplaces but the communities of which they were a part and gained solidarity through their neighborhood civic cultures, which existed in cafes, squares, streets, and parks; local branches of clubs and societies; as well as local National Guard battalions and defense committees.

What alternative to Bookchin’s approach do Rudy and Light offer? Their attacks on him for rejecting the proletariat might lead one to think that they stand for standard Marxist class struggle in the industrial workplace; and they do seem to confine ecological struggles, for example, to the factory alone when they write that “with cost-cutting, worker health declines, unemployment rises, resources are depleted, and pollution increases.”

But for all their talk of wage labor and production and exploitation, Rudy and Light’s “social labor” concept is actually by no means limited to the labor of the industrial proletariat within the factory: “within the socially organized labor of each mode of (re)production,” they write, in their definition of “social labor,” “is included the (re)production of ethics, culture, gender, politics, economy, art, and geographical and ecological space.” Although the idea is expressed in somewhat different terminology Rudy and Light, as much as Bookchin, are dispensing with the industrial-proletariat-within-factory in favor of a broader concept of community whose members are afflicted not only with class but other oppressions as well, facing a common ecological threat.

The difference, in their case, is that their Marxist language obscures their expansion of the concept, while Bookchin is quite clear about what he is doing. No more than Bookchin do our eco-Marxists really want to confine ecological struggles to the workplace: they find arenas of struggle not in the factory alone but in “the destruction of the conditions for capital’s own (re)production: human beings and their reproductive

⁴ Murray Bookchin, *The Rise of Urbanization and the Decline of Citizenship* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1986), p. 214.

health; global, regional, and local ecosystems; and the organization of *communities and social spaces in and through which people interact with their ecosystems*" (emphasis added). What are the issues in these spaces if not the "issues that concern the quality of life and work" that Bookchin frequently discusses issues that pertain not to the factory alone but the broader community? These authors appear to have created a straw Bookchin, then appropriated his actual position for themselves.

Astonishingly, Rudy and Light then take it upon themselves to lecture Bookchin about the fact that *capitalism has limits*. "Capitalism must grow in order to survive, much less prosper, but it cannot grow indefinitely." This is a remarkable statement to make to the man who, more than anyone else, has popularized the Marxian concept of capitalism as a "grow or die" economy in the ecology movement. The idea that capitalism is on a collision course with the biosphere, a favorite among the ecosocialists, is certainly not news to Bookchin. He wrote in 1968 that "the contradiction between the exploitative organization of society and the natural environment is beyond co-optation: the atmosphere, the waterways, the soil and the ecology required for human survival are not redeemable by reforms, concessions, or modifications of strategic policy." (A footnote added: "The economic contradictions of capitalism have not disappeared," although they are without "the explosive characteristics they had in the past").⁵

In March 1974, to take another instance, he wrote that "capitalism... turns the plunder of nature into society's law of life.... A society based on production for the sake of production is inherently anti-ecological and its consequences are a devoured natural world." The prospect that "the biosphere will become so fragile that it will eventually collapse from the standpoint of human survival needs" will eventuate "from a society based on production for the sake of production" is "merely a matter of time."⁶ Some of the ideas circulating around *Capitalism Nature Socialism* are essentially restatements of this idea, albeit in Marxist dress.

On the subject of the nature of capitalism, Rudy and Light make Bookchin's analysis seem ridiculous when they quote him as saying that "'the grand secret from which [the market] draws its power' is 'the power of anonymity'" (emphasis added). "In fact," they scold, "the key to capitalism after mercantilism is not anonymity in the marketplace, but the wage labor that is at the root of production." But the reader who refers to Bookchin's original passage, from which the "grand secret" quotation is taken, will find no such definitive declaration: anonymity, Bookchin wrote there, is "*a* grand secret" of the market hardly the same thing.⁷ Rudy and Light would do well to quote their subjects more accurately if they wish to carry on a fruitful debate. Nor is it true that

⁵ Murray Bookchin, "Post-Scarcity Anarchism" (written 1968), in *Post-Scarcity Anarchism* (Berkeley: Ramparts Press, 1971), p. 38.

⁶ Murray Bookchin, "Toward an Ecological Society," *Win* (Mar. 28, 1974); republished in *Toward an Ecological Society* (Montreal: Black Rose Books, 1980), pp. 66–67.

⁷ Rudy and Light's quote appears on page 330 of *Minding Nature*. The original quotation is in "Market Economy or Moral Economy?" in *The Modern Crisis*, 2nd revised ed. (Montreal: Black Rose Books, 1987), p. 84.

“Bookchin treats capitalist economics as ‘the buyer-seller relationship,’” or at least not exclusively. In fact, the central points of Bookchin’s critique of capitalism are its commodification (of which anonymity is a feature) and its growth imperatives.

Another flaw in Rudy and Light’s presentation is that they appear to have stopped reading Bookchin after about 1986, and thus their description of his views on technology is not only wrong but wholly unrecognizable. In 1986, they observe, Bookchin wrote that he would “‘temper the importance [he gave] to the technological ‘preconditions’ for freedom.’” But our eco-Marxists leap from this quotation to assert categorically that Bookchin “no longer believes modern technology to have the potential to eliminate scarcity” and to announce that “Bookchin’s views on technology have changed,” consigning to the past his “idea of retaining certain forms of technology that had emerged under capitalism.”

These supposed renunciations of postscarcity, they go on to judge, are the “greatest problems” of Bookchin’s utopian philosophy.” But actually, the “tempering” in Bookchin’s quote had nothing to do with abjuring the idea of postscarcity; he was speculating that in precapitalist times it might have been possible to achieve communism even without a postscarcity technology, because needs (and not only fetishized needs) were fewer. Rudy and Light to the contrary, postscarcity remains very much in Bookchin’s present thinking, as any number of his technophobic disputants among anarchists will testify, and as Rudy and Light would know had they consulted *Remaking Society*, *Social Anarchism or Lifestyle Anarchism*, and especially *Re-enchanting Humanity*. (The latter contains an entire chapter on technology, including a sharp criticism of technophobia.)

Rudy and Light go on to object to the absence of an internationalist framework in Bookchin: for him, they say, the “transclass constituencies necessary for truly liberatory social movements are situated almost exclusively in the North.” It is true that Bookchin is most interested in revolutions whose most prominent aims have been universal social and political liberation; since the Third World was historically an arena of colonization for Western capitalist nations, their subsequent movements for liberation have understandably been far more nationalistic than universalistic in content; and as movements to achieve independence from imperialist oppressors, their orientation has understandably been more materialistic, seeking to develop domestic production.

But Bookchin has long adduced another reason, one Rudy and Light do not mention, for advising Euro-American radicals to concentrate on revolutions at home rather than in the Third World. As he explained to his Marxist interlocutor in 1970, an excessive focus on Third World movements, on the part of American radicals, had led “to a bypassing of the social tasks in the First World.... [Our] real job is to overthrow domestic capitalism by dealing with the real possibilities of an American revolution.”⁸ The same problem prevails today: somehow it is much easier to express solidarity with uprisings overseas than to try to organize one in the heart of the empire. Yet it is pre-

⁸ “Discussion,” pp. 256, 257.

cisely the job of Euro-American radicals, Bookchin has long argued, to generate social revolution at home, especially in countries that have historically been and continue to be the sources of oppression for the Third World, whether colonial or “postcolonial.” If Bookchin’s focus, in his writings on revolutionary practice, is largely on revolutionary protagonists, it is not in order to “lay the blame for the failure of these struggles” on them but so that present-day radicals may learn and absorb their lessons, in order to avoid repeating them.

Finally, Rudy and Light fault Bookchin for offering a political program that is “unreasonable.” Presumably they mean libertarian municipalism although it is far from being the “gradualist movement in which communities guard themselves with militias against ‘the ever-encroaching power of the state’” described by Rudy and Light. On the contrary, libertarian municipalism is a concrete program for forming a revolutionary movement, building a dual or counterpower, carrying out a social revolution, and constructing an ecological anarchocommunist society. How this can be construed as “gradualist” and defensive escapes me, especially coming from those who later accuse Bookchin (once again, wrongly) of advocating “a move from international capitalism directly to ecocommunism.” The process of forming a dual power, such as libertarian municipalism offers, is neither gradualist nor immediatist but a viable, empowering program for a revolutionary transition.

Equally fallacious is their accusation that Bookchin’s “political program... suggests localism in the face of an increasingly powerful, internationally coordinated capitalist world system”; Bookchin, far from being a localist, is a critic of localism and a fervent advocate of confederalism and internationalism.

At the same time they accuse Bookchin of demanding of revolutionaries “impossible measures of success.” What are these measures? Bookchin belongs to the libertarian socialist tradition that has long sought to eliminate the state and capitalism. Eliminating them would be the “measure of success”; if Rudy and Light believe that that is an “impossible” standard to meet, then it’s unclear why they claim in any sense to wear the mantle of Marxian socialism, which at least sought to eliminate capitalism if not the state.

Marxists that they are, it is certainly to be expected that they would hold a favorable view of the state, as “serv[ing] the interests of the public as well as those of political and economic elites”; and it’s not surprising that they would find some things to be “worth saving” about “hierarchy and domination.” But what is surprising is that they themselves offer no program beyond a vague assertion of “myriad cultures and individual acts of resistance within the capitalist workplace,” “acts” whose nature remains undefined, in contrast to Bookchin’s clearly spelled-out program.

Rudy and Light do, however, call militantly for analysis of capitalism’s contradictions which surely exist. But are we to wait for those contradictions to generate the conditions for a social revolution? Shouldn’t we be developing a program and building a revolutionary movement now, in preparation for coming crises? There is no substitute for either activism or analysis, for theory or practice. (Given the importance Rudy

and Light attribute to analysis, incidentally, one wonders why they do not criticize their spiritual and mystical colleagues for obscuring such analysis.)

Insofar as this book sets out to delineate an ecosocialist intellectual tradition, in sum, it must be considered a failure. Too often, by the admission of many of the essayists themselves, a thinker who is strong on democracy is weak on ecology, and vice versa. The only exception is the anarchist, who is scolded for rejecting Marxist categories. If this book represents the best the ecosocialists can do along these lines, then their prospects for developing a intellectual tradition are not at all auspicious.

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Janet Biehl
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The Philosophers of Ecology
January 09, 2001

Social Anarchism, Issue 25 (Review Essay).
<www.socialanarchism.org/issue/25/minding-nature-the-philosophers-of-ecology>

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