

Book Review: The Promise of Social Ecology

Mark Cohen

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*The Promise of Social Ecology:
A Celebration of the Work of Murray Bookchin*

John Clark

A collection of twenty pieces— mostly articles, but also a poem by Grace Paley and a song, “Hegel’s Lament,” complete with sheet music, by Jonathan Stevens — *Renewing the Earth: The Promise of Social Ecology* is a “celebration of the work of Murray Bookchin.” Like many celebrations, it is sometimes profound, sometimes silly, sometimes insightful, sometimes amusing, and in places so dull and boring that the reader feels like a guest at a testimonial dinner, looking at her watch and wondering if the speaker will ever either get to the point or just shut up and sit down. Most readers, fortunately, will have the advantage of being able to pick and choose among the contributions.

Murray Bookchin should need no introduction to most readers of *Social Anarchism*. One of the key figures in post war anarchist thought and in the social ecology movement, Bookchin is the founder and now Director Emeritus of the Institute for Social Ecology in Vermont and the prolific author of such works as *Post-Scarcity Anarchism* and *The Ecology of Freedom*. He is also the focus of considerable controversy in the environmental movement, particularly, in recent years, in his vocal disagreements with those in the “deep ecology” camp.

Most of the contributors to this volume, as one might expect, are sympathetic to Bookchin’s ideas. But in some cases, as the old saying goes, with friends like these, Bookchin doesn’t need enemies. John Clark offers a useful, brief introduction to some of Bookchin’s key concepts in his opening piece. But then Morris Berman takes off on what I can only characterize as a New Age (I use the term pejoratively) attack on his own caricature of a “Western science” that bears little relation to any philosophy or practice that actually falls under that label. It is, in fact, a perfect example of what Bookchin himself criticizes as a philosophy “patched together from the bits and pieces of alien outlooks” in his own piece at the end of this collection. As Bookchin recognizes, awareness of our ecological crisis has resulted in a lot of fuzzy thinking, from left and right, and from technophobes as well as those who claim to offer a “post-Western” paradigm, and much of it is on display here.

The next two pieces in the collection, however, implicitly critique Berman’s outdated image of a “mechanistic” science; Richard Merrill, in “Reflections on Science, Technology and the Biological Paradigm,” and John Ely, in “Animism and Anarchism,” both demonstrate how recent thinking and advances in the physical and biological sciences have contributed to and are compatible with libertarian and ecologically-oriented views of the natural and social world.

Daniel Chodorkoff contributes one of the best articles in the collection, “Social Ecology and Community Development,” applying Bookchin’s principles of participatory democracy, ecological perspective, decentralization and nonhierarchical organization to local community activism. As does Stephen Schecter in “The Dialectic of Modernity: Again on the Limits of the City,” the piece that follows, Chodorkoff at least attempts—

as social ecology as a philosophy demands—to connect abstract theories to specific, concrete situations, using an example from a Puerto Rican neighborhood in New York.

Too many of the articles in this collection, unfortunately, are frustratingly abstract and theoretical. Where the ideas are intriguing, as they sometimes are—Graham Baugh’s discussion of “self-managing democracy” in “The Politics of Social Ecology,” for example, is a fine example of what social ecology can offer that other critiques of contemporary life lack—this can be overlooked. But too often all we get is warmed-over Bookchin, in language even more abstruse and impenetrable than Bookchin’s—not (with all due respect to a man whose ideas have had a great influence on me) an easy task.

Two other notable exceptions: Robert Nicholls, in “A Literature of Alternatives,” suggests how a creative and imaginative fiction, an art “rooted in life,” might serve as a source of hope and inspiration. “Social ecology,” Nicholls says, “has developed many good ideas, but not enough practice. The main concepts of social ecology, taken in isolation, tend to thin out. For their vitality they need to be connected to *practice*.” One way to at least imagine that practice, he suggests, is through a politically-committed literature. As he rightly observes, “The situation is comic. We spend a week studying some abstruse book on local self-reliance and eight hours in a food co-op serving customers. Then, for entertainment, we go to a movie made by a transnational corporation for an audience of 300 million.”

Nancy Jack Todd and John Todd, cofounders of the New Alchemy Institute, relate an experiment in alternative technology, an effort to reintroduce sail-powered shipping, part of a broader effort to “investigate ecologically suitable strategies for supporting human populations,” in “The Saga of the First Ocean Pickup: An Adventure in Applied Social Ecology.”

Applied social ecology, even if applied only in “thought experiments,” is precisely what we need. But many more of the contributions to this volume bring to mind an old Yiddish proverb: A deaf man heard how a mute told that a blind man saw a cripple run. They are not only much too abstract and theoretical, they are so full of jargon as to be at times incomprehensible, and needlessly redundant.

Bookchin himself concludes this “celebration” with “Postscript: Ecologizing the Dialectic,” an expression of his “most recent” (that is, circa 1990) thinking on many of the issues addressed in the collection. Bookchin defends social ecology against both monism, whether Marxist, liberal, fascist or “biocentrism,” and dualism, in this context, conceiving man as something apart from nature. He rejects both “the mechanistic and the mystical,” both scientific reductionism and antirational mysticism. He outlines in their place an ecological dialectic, a philosophy, rather than a method of analysis, rooted in the concrete rather than the abstract, in process rather than fixed categories. This dialectic forms the basis for an ecological ethic, one that Bookchin states unabashedly involves human stewardship of the planet as well as the creation of an ecological society. It turns out to be, not surprisingly, one of the most thought-provoking pieces in this uneven but worthwhile collection.

Bibliography

Renewing the Earth: The Promise of Social Ecology: A Celebration of the Work of Murray Bookchin, edited by John Clark. 219 pp. Great Britain: Green Print, 1990.

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Social Anarchism #22. <www.library.nothingness.org/articles/1/en/display/284>

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