

FORUM

Reply to John Clark's "Domesticating the Dialectic"

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CNS readers, upon encountering John Clark's contribution to the recent *CNS* symposium on Murray Bookchin, may well have thought they had fallen into a mud bath. Actually, it's just the latest installment in Clark's vilification campaign against his former and once-revered mentor, ongoing now for nigh unto fifteen years. The sophomoric mockery, personal insults, ad hominem invective, and pervasive loathing are standard operating procedure on Clark's part—he seems to mistake them for wit. In any case, those interested in Bookchin's reaction to this type of thing may consult a piece he wrote in response to Clark ten years ago—yes, it was happening even then:
http://dwardmac.pitzer.edu/Anarchist_Archives/bookchin/turning.html.

Now, in 2008, a defender of Bookchin might well respond to the symposium piece in kind, making disdainful remarks about Clark. But really, in a high-minded journal it's far more illuminating to wash the mud off ourselves and discuss issues of substance.

Dialectical philosophy is the subject under discussion here, dialectics being an ancient school of thought that went through many permutations over the millennia and reached a culmination in the work of Hegel. Hegelian dialectic (to oversimplify) concerns itself with the interactions of phases of consciousness, which it sees as partial and limited; concepts are always inadequate and one-sided, and when they encounter an "other," their boundaries are demolished and they reciprocally influence each other. As Hegel wrote in *Logic*, dialectic is "this immanent going beyond, in which the one-sidedness and limitedness reveals itself for what it is, namely, as its negation. It is the nature of everything finite to sublimate [*aufheben*] itself." That is, contradiction upsets previously established phases, generating a succession of new ones—indeed, generating development, as identity is transformed while partial insights are also retained

Dialectical philosophy is essentially retrospective in nature, describing processes of development rather than making fast and sure predictions about the future. Marx (again to grossly oversimplify) tried to change this situation by making dialectic scientific, replacing Hegel's logical categories of consciousness with social processes. While the Marxian dialectic too was retrospective—social systems of primitive communism, slavery, feudalism, and capitalism arrived in determinate order—it was also predictive, maintaining that the coming system, the one that would "transcend" or "sublate" capitalism, would be socialism.

Other philosophers have built on the Hegelian-Marxian dialectic, not least among them Bookchin, who had absorbed the tradition in his Marxist youth. His renovation of dialectic is distinctive for his attempt to ecologize it—that is, to root it not only in historical and social processes but also in natural evolution. There Bookchin rightly saw increasing differentiation and complexity, as well as increasing consciousness, culminating in human rationality. He looked at history and saw a social-revolutionary tradition, in which each generation of revolutionaries built on its predecessors, addressing new conditions, learning

from the past, and further elaborating liberatory ideas and institutions. These social and ecological processes, he believed, show that even amid setbacks and digressions and defeats, people retain within them the potentiality to construct a free, rational, ecological society.

Clark, who hangs out his own shingle as a dialectical philosopher, takes quite a different approach. Long an aficionado of Asian philosophy, he has made it his project to marry the Western dialectical tradition with Taoism and Buddhism. In this curious effort, the third-century Buddhist philosopher Nagarjuna plays a prominent role. For his part, let it be known, Hegel didn't think much of Asian philosophy, writing that there

what is highest and the origin of things is nothing, emptiness, the altogether undetermined, the abstract universal ... But if Philosophy has got no further than to such expression, it still stands on its most elementary stage. What is there to be found in all this learning?"

Undeterred by such considerations, Clark plunges in with a remarkable statement: "Zen mind is dialectical mind."

Now, if the Hegelian-Marxian dialectic sees contradiction between partial phases as generative of developmental change (and in Marxism's case, of revolutionary socialist politics), can the same really be said for Zen Buddhism? To my mind, where dialectical contradictions generating change speak to the *vita activa*, paradoxes like those of Zen speak to the *vita contemplativa*. I will leave it to the reader to determine the success of Clark's effort.

To return to Bookchin. For heuristic purposes—that is, to illustrate what he meant by development—Bookchin found it helpful to use simple analogies from plant growth. Such analogies are very helpful in this particular respect; Aristotle and Hegel used them too. But the growth of an acorn into an oak is in fact an instance of hard teleology, which is commonly understood to mean the existence of some necessary connection, some degree of causative determination, between a process and an end or goal (*telos*). The acorn, for example, contains DNA for an oak and for nothing else. Its DNA is its genotype, and its expression in the mature oak is its phenotype, the "telos" into which it grows. Absent genetic mutations, there's no room for variation. Long ago, Aristotle thought so too: "for it is not any chance thing that comes from a given seed but an olive from one kind and a man from another."

Bookchin clearly understood that social and historical processes do not act this way, the way genotypes manifest in fixed phenotypes. Natural evolution, social and historical development, and human cultural growth are analogous to plant growth in that all are developmental, but they are not analogous insofar as they lack a determinate end such as DNA determines. So Bookchin wrote about the process in terms of "tendency," or "potentiality," or "the implicit," or "directiveness." Human beings may contain the potentiality to create a free, rational, ecological society, for example, but that doesn't mean they will inevitably do so.

Clark, in his efforts to mock and ridicule Bookchin, would have us believe that the botanical illustration is the centerpiece of Bookchin's philosophy. He extracts a Hegel quote that Bookchin used but conveniently omits Bookchin's caveat that the "distinct directionality of 'conscious beings'" (in contrast to the growth of plants) is "purpose as will." And he

ignores Bookchin's numerous statements that progress toward the good society depends upon people themselves, of which the following is typical:

We are in a position to choose between an ignominious finale, possibly including the catastrophic nuclear oblivion of history itself, and history's rational fulfillment in a free, materially abundant society in an aesthetically crafted environment. ... Yet our decision to create a better society, and our choice of the way to do it, must come from within ourselves ... What is clear is that human beings are much too intelligent not to have a rational society; the most serious question we face is whether they are rational enough to achieve one.

Having set up his straw man, Clark proceeds to heroically knock it down. "It seems not to have occurred to Bookchin," he spits, "that there is a crucial difference between determining the potentialities of a bird's egg and determining those inherent in a social phenomenon." That's true only in John Clark's presentation, which contains only the pieces of straw he chooses to include. Curiously, on the very next page our Zen dialectician actually goes on to chastise Bookchin for failing to live up to Clark's straw man—that is, for failing to provide evidence that any process in human society "is analogous to the healthy growth of a plant or animal across its life cycle." Yes, Bookchin did not do so—because he didn't believe they were analogous in that way, and only Clark has said, falsely, that he did! Continuing in this remarkable vein, Clark proceeds to complain about "Bookchin's vague musings on development and directionality in history." Vague—that is, they don't fit the straw image Clark has fancifully created! The only remarkable thing about these passages is the spectacle of Clark actually scolding Bookchin for failing to conform to his own caricature of him!

As I mentioned, Bookchin wrote about developmental processes in terms of tendency, directionality, potentiality; meanwhile our Zen dialectician carries on about Bookchin's supposed teleology in thinking people make revolutions like plants grow. Then he does a strange thing. With consummate professionalism, he turns to a source no less estimable than *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy* to find a definition of teleology. The word really means something much milder than all that hard-and-fast stuff—it means "tendency"! But *tendency* is one of the words Bookchin used frequently. Let me get this straight: Clark condemns Bookchin for failing to consult a dictionary that supports—Bookchin's own outlook? Evidently Clark's left hand doesn't know what his right hand is doing. Is that some kind of Zen paradox, perhaps?

Bookchin may or may not have consulted that dictionary, but he did consult the writings of Aristotle himself. And Aristotle was quite clear, and indeed rather stringent, about his definition of "final cause." He said it was "the end, that for the sake of which a thing is done." Regardless of how the *Cambridge Dictionary* defines *teleology*, Bookchin was right to feel the need to dissociate himself from determinate causation after all. Actually if anything in Clark's article resembles Aristotelian teleology, it's the lines from Gary Snyder that he quotes: "plankton ... call for salmon," Snyder tells us, with Clark's approval, "and salmon call for seals and thus orcas. The Sperm Whale is sucked into existence [sic] by ... squid" and so on. How neo-Aristotelian can you get!

Let's quickly review some other issues. Did Bookchin really present no "normative basis on which to judge that any particular development of humanity constitutes what 'should be'"? Of course not. He often wrote about the ethic of complementarity, usufruct,

the equality of unequals, and reason as the basis for ethics—see most notably *The Ecology of Freedom*. Did Bookchin really “make no attempt to relate ‘the history of freedom’ to the ‘specific social conditions that might make freedom and justice into historically grounded realities?” Even a passing familiarity with Bookchin’s works shows that he made more than an attempt, and readers of everything from “The Forms of Freedom” in *Post-Scarcity* (1971), to *The Limits of the City* (1974), *The Spanish Anarchists* (1977), *The Rise of Urbanization* (1982), and *The Third Revolution* (1996-2003) will be surprised to hear anything to the contrary. Did Bookchin really ignore the fact that “the dynamics of a political movement can exist only in relation to specific state formations ... the global nation-state system ... capital ... cultural practices ... developing institutions,” as Clark alleges? Fulfilling Clark’s demand to provide “specifics” and more “specifics” would make all theorizing impossible, yet Bookchin was entirely concrete about his aims: I refer the reader to *Urbanization*, and his untiring efforts to form a libertarian municipalist movement against the nation-state, and his grounding of its tradition in very specific historical phases.

Bookchin, one of the great utopian thinkers, devoted his life to developing and advancing a program, history, philosophy, and politics for the creation of a free, rational, ecological, and above all *socialist* society. Are people going to create such a society inevitably? Of course not. Is its achievement a fixed and determinate end of social evolution? No. But do human beings have the potentiality to create such a society? Indeed. Is such a society, in Bookchin’s view, the “what should be”? Yes, and what engaged political radical does not cherish at least some notion of “what should be”?

Clark belittles Bookchin for his failure, during his lifetime, to create a broad revolutionary movement, but in these unpropitious times, he cannot be faulted for such, any more than other radical philosophers can. (Rare is the philosopher, however, who advances a program as comprehensive as Bookchin’s.) Lacking favorable political and social conditions, Bookchin himself was content to hold up an ideal. In the meantime, those of us who embrace his vision will keep his ideas alive, and build on them, so that they will be available to new generations.

As for Clark, the deeper and thicker the mud he throws, the thinner are his substantive arguments. He’ll doubtless tell you now, as he has in the past, that for defending Bookchin I’m some kind of brain-dead hack. Buckets at the ready!