

Post Industrial Possibilities and Urban Social Ecologies: Bookchin's Legacy

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What is Murray Bookchin's legacy for the green Left in the unpromising times of the early 21st century? In posing this question, one can immediately anticipate two responses. First, the voice of orthodoxy will inform us that while the man is gone, the program is clear and the task simply a matter of implementation. A second response will begin with exasperated sighs, shift to irritated reactions, and then move swiftly to dissect and dismiss the man and his *oeuvre* in its entirety.

Throughout his richly productive life—a writing life and a political life which moved from haranguing Joe McCarthy in the 1950s to Marxists in the 1960s, dismissing neo-Malthusians in the 1970s to critiquing deep ecologists and many more still in the 1980s and 1990s...(the list grew and grew) —Murray Bookchin upset many, and plain irritated more. He sought to be read and followed. He also displayed a remarkable capacity for sabotaging whatever following he had established at any one point in time. Across a half century of engagements, Bookchin produced a vast body of scholarly and political writings, much of which is prophetic and insightful. Yet, he is primarily known today for his polemics. And while Bookchin's polemics on occasion offered brilliant lacerations of assorted misanthropes, sometimes amidst the firecracker prose one would read words—particularly in his later polemics—painful, acerbic words that merely seemed to diminish the man and his broader project. Such writings, though, do not exhaust the value of Bookchin's social theory, his urban writings, or his political thought any more so than Marx's more intemperate polemics allow us to invalidate the insights of historical materialism. So, let's move on. Moreover, the man is dead. So let's try and offer a generous but selective and unorthodox reading of the past and present value of his work.

Bookchin's body of work as a whole deserves a generous reading primarily because all but the most begrudging or ill-informed of critics would now have to admit that his five decades of writings are marked by some stunningly prescient interventions. Consider for a moment the following observations. Here is a critical social theorist who first addressed the problems of chemicals in food in 1952, who had written extensive treatments of the environmental and urban "crises" by 1962, and who suggested in 1964 that climate change might well be emerging as one of the defining political issues of the age. Such a set of "firsts" would be notable by any standard. Yet, let us continue. By the mid-1960s, Bookchin had not only done all this, but in such writings he had begun to anticipate the basic agenda of political ecology by demanding that "the ecological crisis" needed to be set within a broader social context that attended to social hierarchy and social domination in order to be of any value. In 1965, he wrote an essay on the possibilities that might exist for leftists in turning their attention to ecological and liberatory technologies. This essay was subsequently considered by many radical and eco-technologists in the 1970s as the single most influential piece of writing on the topic.

Despite all the polemics then, perhaps it is time that the Left, and the green Left in particular, gave Bookchin a little credit. Rachel Carson may well have got the postage stamps and the odd schools named after her, but Murray Bookchin got there first. And should *Ecotopia* ever actually emerge, he at least deserves a boulevard named after him.

A more serious reflection on his legacy and the contemporary relevance of his work, though, requires that we move forward in a *selective* and *unorthodox* fashion, leaving aside devotional readings (the only kind that Bookchin could ultimately tolerate). In being *selective*, I will leave to one side what many see as the core elements of Bookchin's "mature" thought: his social hierarchy thesis and dialectical naturalism, his libertarian municipalism, and his revolutionary romanticism. While these aspects of Bookchin's work have insights, I have engaged with them at length elsewhere. I will take it as fairly self-evident that in our postmodern times, few now have the stomach for the type of totalizing "civilizational" critique that Bookchin embarked on in *The Ecology of Freedom* or the near messianic demand for total metaphysical, institutional, and political transformation that runs through much of his political thought. I will equally take as self-evident that Bookchin's political sociology is ultimately inadequate for its failure to carefully distinguish the progressive aspects of liberal governance, constitutionalism and state intervention from its regressive features. In being *unorthodox*, it is less the "programmatically Bookchin" that I wish to focus on here, the "anarchist Bookchin" (which Bookchin himself eventually abandoned), or even "Bookchin as grand social theorist" but rather the aspects of Bookchin's writings that have tended to be more marginalized in discussions of his work to date. Reading Bookchin across five decades quickly reveals that there are many "Murray Bookchins." And I will suggest that perhaps it is less the revolutionary nostalgia of Bookchin's final works and more the Bookchin as post-industrial utopian, urban ecologist, and ecological humanist that runs through his earlier work that should preoccupy us. It is in these writings that Bookchin's thought is most suffused with a sense of agency, possibility, and potentiality. It is these writings that truly reveal Bookchin to be a venerable student of Ernst Bloch and a venerable defender of the *Principle of Hope*.

Post-Scarcity Ecologies

What justifies my utopian emphasis is the near total lack of material on the potentialities of our time.

Evaluating Bookchin's legacy in our present *post-political* times generates numerous ironies and perplexities. At one level the utopian-ecological-radical democratic project that Bookchin advocated for five decades is clearly more distant than ever. If we consider that we live in an era when even the most radical currents present seem to view the defense and reconstitution of social democracy and international law as defining the outer limits of the politically possible, at one level it is difficult to know what to do with a thinker who located himself with pride as an *ultra-left* critic of the *radical Left*. Yet, further ironies ensue in that what remains of the Left has largely followed Bookchin's advice and embraced ecology. Indeed, well beyond the Left, the language of ecology and environmentalism suffuses the body politic. Yet, it is striking how the style of eco-critique adopted by the remains of the Left is increasingly a dour affair. Consider this: in the 1970s, the emerging face of what we might identify as the pessimistic "green Right" represented by various neo-Malthusians such as Garrett Hardin, William Ophuls and Paul Ehrlich, offered us "limits" and "austerity," "constraints" and "lifeboat ethics" in the face of impending catastrophe. An emerging green Left represented by Bookchin and André Gorz sought to counter this vision by offering us an optimistic post-industrial ecologism that focused on possibilities, pleasures, and generalizing a different kind of affluence. It is striking how as the optimism of the New Left has faded from the contemporary Left, the polarities of environmental politics have now become reversed. Advocates of "natural capitalism" now offer us tempting notions of "win-win" scenarios, of better living through ecology in a post-hydrogen economy (if only nasty grey capitalism would get the message). In contrast, many currents of political ecology on the Left would increasingly seem to be drawn to a remarkably dreary ecology, where Marx, Burke and Malthus, structural determinism, pessimism and exhaustion, "it

can't work" and "it won't work" combine with a perchance for finding "eco-crises" around every corner. While eco-capitalists and assorted other eco-pragmatists are increasingly the new future-orientated utopians, some of the smartest voices of the green Left are now happy to frame their political project in terms of the need to embrace austerity.

Why read Bookchin today then? Well first, Bookchin is interesting to read and reflect on in these confusing times (when neoliberals, neoconservatives and assorted new imperialists on the Right are full of *revolutionary zeal* and many on the Left define their politics primarily in terms of *resistance to change*), because of all the early ecological thinkers, he was one of the few figures to be keenly aware of the *promise* but also the potential *pathologies* of social ecological critique. Bookchin was one of the first and most articulate figures to firmly reject a politics of ecology premised on guilt, renunciation, denial and toil. In contrast, he insisted a social ecology first and foremost had to be a politics of potentiality.

To illustrate this, let's consider the manner in which "scarcity" is dealt with in Bookchin's writings. While discussions of absolute natural "limits" and neo-Malthusian declarations of states of "eco-scarcity" are now treated across many currents of green-leftist discourse as axiomatic, non-negotiable elements of eco-critique, it is interesting to note that Bookchin, this pioneering figure of socio-ecological critique, never actually followed this path. Indeed, we can find across Bookchin's writings a persistent warning to green-minded critics from a very early point that talk of "limits" and "scarcity" are not unproblematic, that such concepts need to be understood in their social and historical complexity (paying due attention to how these concepts intertwine in complex ways with hierarchy/domination), and that eco-critique needs to be scrupulous in avoiding careless applications of such concepts, since they can as easily *preclude* as allow for a critique of existing arrangements.

Bookchin's concern with an ecological politics degenerating into a politics of austerity emerges at numerous points. For example, one argument repeated time and again in his writings is a concern to draw the attention of the ecologically minded to the manner in which the whole concept of "scarcity" or a "stingy nature" has been used historically as an ideology which "naturalizes" existing social relations, states of affairs, and outcomes. Thus, Bookchin notes that when "scarcity" has either been an actuality or endured by social factors across historical time, it has nevertheless long served as a rationale by ruling elites for "the development of the patriarchal family, private property, class domination, and the state." Second, Bookchin observes in *Towards an Ecological Society* that a central problem with declarations of generalized states of "eco-scarcity" in *contemporary* society is that such claims can obscure the extent to which the "absolute scarcities" proclaimed by Malthusians—that we are "running out" of water, oil, food... etc.—after investigation, frequently reveal themselves as moments of relative scarcity, which are the product of *structural economic and political factors*, rather than natural facts. Indeed, Bookchin argues in *Post-Scarcity Anarchism* that all talk of scarcity aside, such declarations have persistently concealed the extent to which technological and economic developments in post-industrial capitalism—perhaps for the first time in human history—have actually created the potential for all to have an adequate means of life and more. Indeed, much of the general thrust of *Post-Scarcity Anarchism* is to argue that such abundance could be maintained, developed and indeed rendered much more fecund if we transformed our social, cultural, political, institutional and technological relations.

On the notion of “natural limits,” while Bookchin’s work does deploy the notion of limits in his *grow or die* reading of the dynamics of capitalist accumulation, it is interesting how he uses such terms. In *Towards an Ecological Society*, Bookchin argues that capitalism cannot plunder the planet forever but “the greatest danger these practices raise is *not depletion* but *simplification...*” that is, “...the limits to capitalist expansion are *ecological* not *geological*.”

A further level of complexity to the concept of “scarcity” in Bookchin’s writing emerges from his observation that scarcity under capitalism does not just refer to a lack of the means of life or even new or exotic wants which social development turns into needs. Rather, Bookchin argues that what cruder forms of environmentalism often ignore is that certain forms of “scarcity” are not simply a product of structural economic factors but are additionally generated through a “socially contradictory hypostatization of need.” Arguing that capitalism not only leads to production for the sake of production but consumption for the sake of consumption—that the “grow or die” dynamics of capitalism has its counterpart in “buy or die”—it is observed:

...just as the production of commodities is no longer related to their function as *use-values*, as objects of real utility, so wants are no longer related to humanity’s sense of its real needs. Both commodities and needs acquire a blind life of their own; they assume a fetishized form, an irrational dimension, that seems to determine the destiny of the people who produce and consume them. Marx’s famous notion of the “fetishization of commodities” finds its parallels in a “fetishization of needs.” Production and consumption in effect, acquire superhuman qualities that are no longer related to technological development and the subject’s rational control of the conditions of existence.

To return, then, to the world of neo-Malthusian demographers, the basic problem with this approach is that by the logic of the commodity system:

...society would continue to increase its output of garbage even if its population was halved. Its advertising system would be mobilized to sell us three, four or five color television sets per family instead of one or two. Production rates would continue to soar and the switch turned from “scarcity” to “affluence” or vice versa depending entirely on the profitability of the commodities that were produced.

How then can a socio-ecological critique make a progressive intervention in a culture that is structurally premised around the social creation of insatiability? Once again, Bookchin’s thinking here is interesting in that his work persistently reminds us that talk of abstinence and voluntary simplicity can frequently degenerate into preachy and rather patronizing class-based rhetorics which will do little to construct a mass movement. As he notes:

Can we blame working people for using cars when the logistics of American society were deliberately structured by General Motors and the energy industry around highways? Can we blame middle class people for purchasing suburban homes when cities were permitted to deteriorate?...Can we blame blacks, Hispanic peoples and other minority groups for reaching out to own television sets, appliances and clothing when all the basic material means of life were denied to them for generations?

In *The Ecology of Freedom*, Bookchin instead argues for a carefully differentiated and political critique of consumer culture that links a critique of hyper-consumption more specifically with the broader decline of the subject. A progressive form of socio-ecological critique thus needs to highlight the manner in which a “buy or die” culture committed to fulfilling externally generated needs is constructed at the expense of “the autonomy of the subject.” It is this which needs to be exposed as the “fatal flaw” in the development of modern subjectivity. “Buy or die” needs to be

critically linked to “the inability of modern individuals to have the autonomy and spontaneity...to control the conditions of his or her own life.” To break the fetishization of needs, then, requires that we recover “freedom of choice” as political subjects, but also that we ensure that all have a “sufficiency in the means of life.” For it is only in a context where we have free autonomous individuals that we can envisage a transition from a “wealth of things” to a “wealth of culture and individual creativity.”

Underpinning Bookchin’s social-ecological and political critique of consumer capitalism in *The Ecology of Freedom* is a basic Aristotelian assumption: that the good life is the balanced life, and a rational person who is politically conscious and has a sufficiency in the means of life will recognize this and aspire towards developing an “autonomous personality and selfhood.” This and the availability of choice that post-scarcity conditions offer open the possibility that people define their needs in terms of “qualitative, ecological, humanistic, indeed, philosophical criteria.”

Bookchin’s theorization of limits, scarcity, and post-scarcity is fascinating. What is perhaps most striking is the extent to which his basic assumptions—informed as they are by his own unique blend of libertarian, eco-humanist, and Aristotelian impulses—are simply at variance with the basic ontological and normative assumptions of liberalism, vulgar Marxism, and green Malthusianism, with their shared economic views of human being (rational economic man/the purely materialist proletariat/man and woman as the insatiable and irresponsibly profligate producer). This critique of consumer capitalism is complimented with distinctly *Dionysian* moments in Bookchin’s other writings where he emphasizes the importance of a politics that redefines pleasure and then later a more pronounced attempt to argue for a more explicitly civic republican emphasis on the virtues of contrasting homo consumer to *zoon politikon*. These moments of Bookchin’s work are never fully brought together, but what often seems to hover at the backdrop of his social ecology is a powerful and attractive vision of a *Dionysian Civic Republicanism* as a counterpoise to the atomized world of consumption.

Bookchin’s skepticism of the casual use of green scarcity discourse can additionally draw from an extensive literature in the social and environmental sciences for empirical support. Thus, whether we consider Susan George’s observation that famine is very rarely in modern times the product of absolute scarcity but a question of the maldistribution of resources, or Erik Swyngedouw’s related observation that the unreliable access to drinking water experienced by one billion human beings “has very little, if anything to do with absolute scarcity” and more to do with purchasing power, available capital and the direction of capital investment, or Brian Milani’s more recent claim that a green economics needs to start from the recognition of the central role that *the production of material scarcity* plays in a developed capitalist economy, all these currents affirm Bookchin’s basic claims.

At the same time, this engagement with the question of scarcity is, to be sure, unfinished. Bookchin’s view of the role that “scarcity” has played in human history is never dealt with in an entirely consistent fashion across his writings. The claim that certain forms of scarcity are the product of a “social hypostatization of need” is suggestive but again underdeveloped. This clearly takes one into the difficult realm of distinguishing “true” from “false” needs, and it is not clear that Bookchin’s ethics provides us with the intellectual equipment to make this distinction any more than Herbert Marcuse. Bookchin’s theorization of “post-scarcity” conditions is allusive and avoids Ted Benton’s observation that in any conceivable emancipated future society, it is likely that such a

society would continue to be characterized by social struggle over a range of “positional goods.” What follows from this then is that it is neither credible nor desirable to believe that a concern with distributive justice could be transcended by a concern with “freedom” as Bookchin believed. The general emphasis we can find in Bookchin’s thought—that scarcity is a social as much as a natural phenomena, that declarations of scarcity have persistently been used historically as disciplinary measures, and that many existing forms of deprivation are the consequence as much of “planned scarcity” generated by the market as anything to do with a lack of natural resources—are vital insights. His warning of the regressive potential of a green politics framed around the politics of austerity is still salient as is his desire for re-grounding an ecological politics in a discriminating politics of pleasure and citizenship.

Towards a Liberatory Technology

...we need a new industrial revolution, one which will replace a patently obsolete, highly centralized wasteful technology designed to produce shabby, short-lived junk commodities in immense quantities by long-lived, high-quality, useful goods that satisfy rational human needs.

If the first lesson that one can derive from Bookchin’s eco-critique is that at a very general level of abstraction, attention needs to be given to the diverse forms of “constraints” and “enablements” that socio-ecological relations throw up at any one point in historical time, the second feature of his writings—which further underlines the distinctiveness of his social ecology compared to other currents of radical ecological thought—is found in his attitude to technology.

If we read Bookchin’s writings on technological development as a whole, we can find that most of his more interesting essays are attempting to develop a balanced social and ecological critique of current forms of “technics” while equally retaining a lively appreciation of the recuperative possibilities of post-industrial capitalism. His 1965 essay, “Towards a Liberatory Technology,” provides us here with an interesting statement of his general orientation. In this essay, Bookchin clearly acknowledges that a simple and direct one-to-one association between technological advance and social progress in the light of Stalinism and the Cold War lies shattered. Modern attitudes have become “schizoid, divided into a gnawing fear of nuclear extinction on the one hand and a yearning for material abundance, leisure and security on the other.” However, tendencies to resolve these tensions by presenting technology as “imbued with a sinister life of its own” resulting in its blanket rejection is presented “as simplistic as the optimism that prevailed in earlier decades.” If we are not to be paralyzed by this “new form of social fatalism” it is argued, “a balance must be struck.” Concerning where exactly the balance should lie and what exact contribution technological innovation can make to the development of an ecological society is a question that Bookchin answers in different ways in different decades. Yet, all his writings in this area are essentially works of speculative, applied utopianism. Running through virtually all the technology writings is the claim that greens, and leftists more generally, need to find a way to make recuperative readings of the potential as well as the hazards of post-industrial capitalism.

In the 1960s and 1970s, Bookchin did this in various ways. *Towards a Liberatory Technology* can almost be read as an update of Kropotkin’s *Fields, Factories and Workshops*. Bookchin argues in this essay that a radically decentralized and democratized society is not only potentially compatible with many aspects of the modern technological world but potentially *facilitated* by new developments. Bookchin thus argues in this essay that certain technological innovations, such as the expansion of mass communications and transportation, may have actually made the need for huge concentrations

of people in a few urban areas *less* important. Concerning the viability of industrial decentralization, it is suggested in the same essay that new developments in miniaturization, computing, and engineering have ensured small-scale alternatives to many of the giant facilities that have dominated industrial societies, and that these alternatives are now increasingly viable. It is the smoky steel town and the huge factories inherited from the industrial era that have now become an anachronism, not the call for clean, versatile, and compact machinery. More generally, *Towards a Liberatory Technology* persistently focuses on the labor-saving possibilities that “automization” could create. Thus it is suggested that conditions have now developed with cybernation and automization where the potential exists for replacing a realm of necessity with a realm of freedom. Such developments are seen as suggesting that the critical issue now is not whether technology can liberate humanity from want, but the extent to which it can contribute to humanizing society and human-nature relations.

Over a series of essays across the 1970s, such themes are developed further. Thus, we can find Bookchin taking on counter-cultural technologists for holding anti-scientific prejudices. While at other points, it is Engels who is taken to task for holding a functional view of technology that assumes “technics” are simply a neutral instrument for humanity’s metabolism with nature. Bookchin argues that a central limit of this latter vision is that it simply assumes that the socializing or collectivizing toil and the technological apparatus is adequate. What is Bookchin’s vision then? In essence, what emerges most consistently is the claim that both work and technology need to become vehicles for meaningful self-expression. There is a need for a future society to be based on a new technological settlement, notably new eco-technologies which are both “restorative of the environment and perhaps, more significantly, of personal and communal autonomy.” Technology should not only “reawaken man’s sense of dependence on the environment” but restore selfhood and competence to a “client citizenry.” There may well be logistical/or technocratic reasons for why “small is beautiful,” since it allows the conservation of energy. But for Bookchin, attention to the human scale is primarily important, since it renders society *comprehensible* and hence *controllable* by all. What is needed “...is not a wholesale discarding of advanced technologies then, but indeed a shifting, indeed a further development of technology along ecological principles.”

Once again, we can recognize that these writings on technological development are not unproblematic. Largely sympathetic critics such as Eric Stowe Higgs, Alan Rudy, and Andrew Light over recent times have all fairly pointed out that there are distinct shifts and inconsistencies in Bookchin’s assessment of the merits of particular technologies and that his early writings on technology are limited to the extent to which they are not informed by a consistent philosophy of technology. Bookchin’s writings, moreover, never quite extend his discussion of particular green technologies to actually discussing at a much broader level how diverse green and liberatory technologies could be comprehensively integrated into further social, cultural, and economic institutions and mechanisms that could give rise to a green mode of production. More generally, it seems almost impossible to conceive of how such an eco-technological infrastructural project could be enacted today without the state and private capital being brought into some kind of corporatist arrangement with civil society actors to enact such changes.

Yet equally, Bookchin’s writings on technology are an important part of his legacy for the green Left. They are important because Bookchin once again was one of the first left green thinkers to embark on a serious social and political investigation on the question of technology without descending into green technophobia or infantile primitivism. It is additionally worth remembering that he did so when the sociology of technology was in its infancy and that his writings in this area

had an enormous practical impact on the alternative technology movements of the 1970s. More generally, further ironies emerge here in that at the beginning of the 21st century, it is stunning how silent the green Left is on the question of technology. We are now all familiar with the critique of technological determinism and the fallacy of the technical fix. Enormous energy has been devoted to unpacking and critiquing the power relations and inequalities that have emerged from the expansion of biotechnology. And this literature is indeed vitally important and insightful. Yet, at a time when fascinating developments continue to occur in technical literatures on clean production engineering and eco-design; when attempts to develop zero-waste systems, hybrid or even post-hybrid engines, solar, wind and wave, industrial ecology and more seem to be moving ahead, where is our contemporary Murray Bookchin that could make a selective and recuperative reading of such literatures that could move such discussions beyond the crudities of the technical fix? Why is it that beyond a few *Viridian Greens* and *Bioneers*, the notion that technology, technological recuperation and transformation—and even envisaging the contours of an alternative industrial and energy sector—are necessary parts of any viable left green project has been so comprehensively sidelined?

Urban Political Ecology

Aside from acid rain, our greatest environmental concerns are urban ones, not those that are related to rural areas and wilderness. What impresses us most as environmentally concerned individuals is the cultivation of gardens *in* the city or the use of solar collectors on urban dwellings...What fascinates people most is when we attempt to bring the countryside into the city as gardens or when we use alternative energy sources on apartment houses. The failure of environmentalists to see this distinctly urban bias has done much to marginalize many of their ideas and efforts.

A third legacy of Bookchin's reconstructive thinking that has received very little attention to date are his writings on cities. Bookchin's urban writings of course need to be set within his broader concern with the metabolism between "town" and "country." Yet, it is the future of the city that is increasingly accented; these urban writings are interesting in that they are marked by distinct apocalyptic and pragmatic moments in relation to the future of the modern metropolis. In some writings, Bookchin seems to give up on the modern city. We are told at such moments "New York, Chicago, Los Angeles—or Paris, London, Rome—are cities in name only," the modern megalopolis must be "ruthlessly dissolved." Yet, in less apocalyptic and arguably more interesting moments, we can find in Bookchin's urban writings a defense of the ever-present possibilities that the modern metropolis throws up. Contemporary London and New York, rather than being undifferentiated urban masses, emerge as cities of a thousand villages. We can find moments in Bookchin's urban writings where he is full of admiration for a broad range of pragmatic reformist and civil society strategies that would both make existing cities more livable and open the scope for further social and ecological experimentation. In such alternative moments, it seems that even the modern metropolis—even of the scale and complexity of New York or London—can be reclaimed.

For example, it is interesting to note that for all the revolutionary bluster of much of Bookchin's prose, *Crisis in Our Cities* is full of straightforward pragmatic public policy recommendations that attempt to demonstrate how large metropolises like New York could be rendered more ecological and convivial in the here and now. Bookchin argues in *Crisis* that while some health hazards "are unavoidable features of life in a metropolis," many threats to public health "could be eliminated with only a small measure of civic foresight and concern." He suggests that underground transportation systems, rail, pedestrianization, effective air pollution devices, and

staggered working hours could all reduce “automobile, industrial and domestic pollution” in Manhattan and elsewhere.

Indeed, it is striking, as John Clark has observed, how Bookchin’s urban writings of the seventies are marked by further pragmatic moments, as a diverse range of civil society strategies are championed as a potential means to facilitate a social and ecological “retrofit” of the inner city and through this create possibilities for further change. In *The Limits of the City*, we are told that cultivating gardens in the city or using solar collectors on urban dwellings are the most productive ways to facilitate an urban ecological consciousness among urban dwellers. Bookchin speaks with warm regard for countercultural planners in Berkeley experimenting with new methods of popular planning. In “The Concept of Ecotechnologies and Ecomunities,” Bookchin champions the strategy followed by the Institute for Local Self-Reliance, which promotes rooftop gardens, social energy units, waste recycling and retrofitting projects “in the very mid East of Washington D.C.” In “Self Management and the New Technologies,” attention is drawn to the appropriation of French intensive community gardening techniques by ghetto dwellers in the gutted neighborhoods of New York City and the potential that the rise of “block committees” in New York City might offer for expanding neighborhood governance. In “Towards a Vision of the Urban Future,” Bookchin provides glowing commentary of emerging neighborhood alliances between young radicals and community activists, which emerged with the East Eleventh Street movement in the late seventies. Bookchin notes such alliances brought together radical activists with the Puerto Rican neighborhood organization to not only rebuild a tenant building but “retrofit with energy saving devices, insulation, solar panels for reheating water, and a Jacobs wind generator for some of its electrical power.” Indeed, even up until the early 1990s, one can find Bookchin championing a further range of cultural and political experiments and modes of urban community development as a necessary first step towards generating any further moves towards a more ecological and socially just future. As he states:

...community organizing is a key element of a radical new politics, particularly those forms of association where people meet face-to-face, identify their common problems, and solve them through mutual aid and volunteer community service. Such community organizations encourage social solidarity, community self-reliance, and individual initiative. Community gardens, block clubs, land trusts, housing co-operatives, parent-run daycare centers, barter networks, alternative schools, consumer and producer co-operatives, community theaters, study groups, neighborhood newspapers, public access television stations—all these meet immediate and usually neglected community needs. But they also serve, to greater or lesser degrees, as schools for democratic citizenship. Through participation in such efforts, we can become more socially responsible and more skilled at democratically discussing and deciding important social questions.

As is well known, as Bookchin developed his increasingly abstract politics of libertarian municipalism, he turned his back on his earlier urban writings. Unearthing the more pragmatic moments of Bookchin’s reconstructive urban thought is important. His attempt, in *Towards an Ecological Society* in particular, to envisage an urban social ecology that grants a central place to the creative role that urban neighborhood movements could play in developing new modes of community development, experiments in developing bottom-up eco-technologies, new cultures of self-management, and new participatory institutions, arguably reveal one of the most fecund and creative moments in his writings. If one considers the growing literature in urban political ecology and urban environmental justice, there is a sense, moreover, that there still might be considerable importance to left-green interventions that focus on and seek to further radicalize the diverse social

and ecological practices of urban dwellers that expand the realm of self-management in everyday life in the here and now.

Ecological Humanism and Utopian Dialogue as “Public Event”

The final aspect of Bookchin’s work that deserves continued reflection and engagement is his commitment to formulating an ecological politics that negotiates between humanism, naturalism, and the utopian imagination. Bookchin lost a good deal of his green audience for his critiques of deep ecologists in the late 1980s. Many dismissed his claim that an ecological project would find itself on very shaky grounds if it was premised on a denial of humanism and the dynamic possibilities that exist for human agents to act creatively according to his vision of humanity as “nature rendered self-conscious.” His claim that much post-humanist ecological talk had a rather frequent tendency to collapse into misanthropy was viewed by many as outrageous. Yet, two decades on from Bookchin’s broadside “Social Ecology versus Deep Ecology,” we can point to a vast literature in political ecology that has demonstrated that “coercive conservation,” neo-Malthusian population rhetoric, and romanticized Northern views of “wilderness” are now regularly imposed on people of the South. More generally, a denial of human agency (or we might say the denial that humans could productively and creatively engage with the multiple agencies we find ourselves surrounded by on this planet) along with a denial of the value of utopian thought has now come to define the rhetorical strategies of post-political life.

We are now more than familiar with the critique of utopian thought and its alleged associations with dogma and authoritarianism, with hyper-rationalism and a lack of realism. Yet too much “realism” and demands for policy-relevant research would equally seem to provide the surest thing possible to kill the principle of hope and sustain our post-political milieu. In this context then, perhaps we need less utopias of form (Bookchin’s vision of “the rational ecological society”) and more dynamic utopias of process. The final pages of *The Ecology of Freedom* are interesting in this respect in that they seek to give theoretical coherence to such an approach by pluralizing and democratizing the utopian project. It is not a static use of utopian speculation that Bookchin ultimately defends in this text but an open-ended use of the utopian imaginary crossing the political and cultural realms, the technological, and the personal. Thus, in relation to utopian thought, Bookchin argues:

Now, when the imagination itself is becoming atrophied or is being absorbed by the mass media, the concreteness of utopian thought may be its most rejuvenating tonic. Whether as drama, novel, science fiction, or as an evoking of tradition, experience and fantasy must return in all their fullness to stimulate as well as to suggest. Utopian dialogue in all its existentiality must infuse the abstractions of social theory. My concern is not with utopian “blueprints,” which can rigidify thinking as surely as more recent governmental “plans,” but with the dialogue itself as public event.

A social-ecological politics, a left-green politics that attends to constraints but also enablements, that is informed by the limits of technology but also by the potentialities of a liberatory technology (situated more broadly within the context of a new green mode of production), that would seek to recoup humanism, the city as a public space, the citizen as active agent and through this suffuse our social-ecological lives with “utopian dialogue as a public event,” such a politics hardly approximates Bookchin’s ecotopian hopes in any full sense. Indeed, he would have despised such a reformist and minimalist reading of the legacy of his work. Yet, in a dark era where even a

dose of rational left reformism would constitute an important gain, it probably makes for his most viable legacy.