Social Ecology: Communalism against Climate Chaos

A Municipal Response

Brian Tokar

Contents

The theory and praxis of social ecology remains our best hope to fend off a dystopian future and meaningfully reshape the fate of humanity on this planet.

Illustration by David Istvan

Photo by Rob Crandall / Shutterstock.com

Since the 1960s, the theory and praxis of social ecology have helped guide efforts to articulate a radical, counter-systemic ecological outlook with a goal of transforming society's relationship to non-human nature. For many decades, social ecologists have articulated a fundamental ecological critique of capitalism and the state, and proposed an alternative vision of empowered human communities organized confederally in pursuit of a more harmonious relationship to the wider natural world.

Social ecology helped shape the New Left and anti-nuclear movements in the 1960s and 1970s, the emergence of Green politics in many countries, the alter-globalization movement of the late 1990s and early 2000s, and most recently the struggle for democratic autonomy by Kurdish communities in Turkey and Syria, along with the resurgence of new municipal movements around the world — from Barcelona en Comú to Cooperation Jackson in Mississippi.

The philosophical vision of social ecology was first articulated by Murray Bookchin between the early 1960s and the early 2000s, and has since been further elaborated by his colleagues and many others. It is a unique synthesis of social criticism, historical and anthropological investigation, dialectical philosophy and political strategy. Social ecology can be viewed as an unfolding of several distinct layers of understanding and insight, spanning all of these dimensions and more. It begins with an appreciation of the fact that environmental problems are fundamentally *social* and *political* in nature, and are rooted in the historical legacies of domination and social hierarchy.

Capitalism and Climate Change

Bookchin was among the first thinkers in the West to identify the growth imperative of the capitalist system as a fundamental threat to the integrity of living ecosystems, and he consistently argued that social and ecological concerns are fundamentally inseparable, questioning the narrowly instrumental approaches advanced by many environmentalists to address various issues. For climate activists today, this encourages an understanding that a meaningful approach to the climate crisis requires a systemic view of the centrality of fossil fuel combustion to the emergence and continued resilience of capitalism. Indeed, capitalism as we know it is virtually inconceivable without the exponential growth in energy usage — and widespread substitutions of energy for labor — that coal, oil and gas have enabled. As the UK-based Corner House research group explained in a 2014 paper:

The entire contemporary system of making profits out of labor depended absolutely on cheap fossil carbon [and therefore] there is no cheap or politically-feasible substitute for fossil fuels in the triple combination of fossil fuels–heat engines–commodified labor that underpins current rates of capital accumulation.

The perspective of social ecology thus allows us to see that fossil fuels have long been central to the capitalist *mythos* of perpetual growth. They have driven ever-increasing concentrations of capital in many economic sectors, and advanced both the regimentation and increasing precarity of human labor worldwide. In *Fossil Capital*, Andreas Malm explains in detail how early British industrialists opted to switch from abundant water power to coal-fired steam engines to run their mills, despite increased costs and uncertain reliability. The ability to control labor was central to their decision, as the urban poor proved to be vastly more amenable to factory discipline than the more independent-minded rural dwellers who lived along Britain's rapidly flowing rivers. A century later, massive new oil discoveries

in the Middle East and elsewhere would drive previously unfathomable increases in the productivity of human labor and breathe new life into the capitalist myth of unlimited economic expansion.

To address the full magnitude of the climate crisis and maintain a habitable planet for future generations we need to shatter that myth once and for all. Today the political supremacy of fossil fuel interests far transcends the magnitude of their campaign contributions or their short-term profits. It stems from their continuing central role in advancing the very system they helped to create. We need to overturn both fossil fuels and the growth economy, and that will require a fundamental rethinking of many of the core underlying assumptions of contemporary societies. Social ecology provides a framework for this.

The Philosophy of Social Ecology

Fortunately, in this respect, the objectives of social ecology have continued to evolve beyond the level of critique. In the 1970s, Bookchin engaged in extensive research into the evolution of the relationship between human societies and non-human nature. His writing challenged the common Western notion that humans inherently seek to dominate the natural world, concluding instead that the domination of nature is a myth rooted in relationships of domination among people that emerged from the breakdown of ancient tribal societies in Europe and the Middle East.

Social ecology highlights egalitarian social principles that many indigenous cultures — both past and present — have held in common, and has elevated these as guideposts for a renewed social order: concepts such as interdependence, reciprocity, unity-in-diversity and an ethics of complementarity, that is, the balancing of roles among various social sectors by actively compensating for differences among individuals. In his magnum opus, *The Ecology of Freedom*, Bookchin detailed the unfolding conflicts between these guiding principles and those of increasingly stratified hierarchical societies, and how this has shaped the contending legacies of domination and freedom for much of human history.

Beyond this, the philosophical inquiry of social ecology examines the emergence of human consciousness from within the processes of natural evolution. Reaching back to the roots of dialectical thought, from Aristotle to Hegel, Bookchin advanced a unique approach to eco-philosophy, emphasizing the potentialities that lie latent within the evolution of both natural and social phenomena while celebrating the uniqueness of human creativity and self-reflection. Social ecology eschews the common view of nature as merely a realm of necessity, instead perceiving nature as striving, in a sense, to actualize through evolution an underlying potentiality for consciousness, creativity and freedom.

For Bookchin, a dialectical outlook on human history compels us to reject what merely is and follow the potentialities inherent in evolution toward an expanded view of what could be, and ultimately what ought to be. While the realization of a free, ecological society is far from inevitable — and may appear ever less likely in the face of impending climate chaos — it is perhaps the most rational outcome of four billion years of natural evolution.

The Political Strategy of Social Ecology

These historical and philosophical explorations in turn provide an underpinning for social ecology's revolutionary political strategy, which has been discussed previously in *ROAR Magazine* by several social ecology colleagues. This strategy is generally described as libertarian or confederal municipalism, or more simply as *communalism*, stemming from the legacy of the Paris Commune of 1871.

Like the communards, Bookchin argued for liberated cities, towns and neighborhoods governed by open popular assemblies. He believed that the confederation of such liberated municipalities could overcome the limits of local action, allowing cities, towns and neighborhoods to sustain a democratic counter-power to the centralized political institutions of the state, all while overcoming parochialism,

promoting interdependence and advancing a broad liberatory agenda. Furthermore, he argued that the stifling anonymity of the capitalist market can be replaced by a moral economy in which economic as well as political relationships are guided by an ethics of mutualism and reciprocity.

Social ecologists believe that whereas institutions of capitalism and the state heighten social stratification and exploit divisions among people, alternative structures rooted in direct democracy can foster the expression of a general social interest towards social and ecological renewal. "It is in the municipality," Bookchin wrote in *Urbanization Without Cities*, "that people can reconstitute themselves from isolated monads into a creative body politic and create an existentially vital ... civic life that has institutional form as well as civic content."

People inspired by this view have brought structures of direct democracy through popular assemblies into numerous social movements in the US, Europe and beyond, from popular direct action campaigns against nuclear power in the late 1970s to the more recent alter-globalization and Occupy Wall Street movements. The prefigurative dimension of these movements — anticipating and enacting the various elements of a liberated society — has encouraged participants to challenge the status quo while advancing transformative visions of the future. The concluding chapter of my recent book, *Toward Climate Justice* (New Compass 2014) describes these influences in some detail, with a focus on the anti-nuclear movement, green politics, ecofeminism and other significant currents from the past and present.

Contributions to Contemporary Movements

Today, social ecologists are actively engaged in the global movement for climate justice, which unites converging currents from a variety of sources, most notably indigenous and other land-based people's movements from the Global South, environmental justice campaigners from communities of color in the Global North, and continuing currents from the global justice or alter-globalization movements of a decade ago. It is worth considering some of social ecology's distinct contributions to this broad-based climate justice movement in some greater detail.

First, social ecology offers an uncompromising ecological outlook that challenges the entrenched power structures of capitalism and the nation-state. A movement that fails to confront the underlying causes of environmental destruction and climate disruption can, at best, only superficially address those problems. Climate justice activists generally understand, for example, that false climate solutions such as carbon markets, geoengineering and the promotion of natural gas obtained from fracking as a "bridge fuel" on the path to renewable energy mainly serve the system's imperative to keep growing. To fully address the causes of climate change requires movement actors to raise long-range, transformative demands that the dominant economic and political systems may prove unable to accommodate.

Second, social ecology offers a lens to better comprehend the origins and historical emergence of ecological radicalism, from the nascent movements of the late 1950s and early 1960s right up to the present. Social ecology played a central role in challenging the inherent anti-ecological bias of much of twentieth-century Marxism-Leninism, and thus serves as an important complement to current efforts to reclaim Marx's ecological legacy. While the understanding of Marx's long-ignored ecological writings, advanced by authors such as John Bellamy Foster and Kohei Saito, is central to the emerging eco-left tradition, so are the political debates and theoretical insights that unfolded over many pivotal decades when the Marxist left was often vehemently uninterested in environmental matters.

Third, social ecology offers the most comprehensive treatment of the origins of human social domination and its historical relationship to abuses of the Earth's living ecosystems. Social ecology highlights the origins of ecological destruction in social relations of domination, in contrast to conventional views suggesting that impulses to dominate non-human nature are a product of historical necessity. To meaningfully address the climate crisis will require overturning numerous manifestations of the long historical legacy of domination, and an intersectional movement aimed toward challenging social hierarchy in general.

THE INFLUENCE OF BOOKCHIN'S THOUGHT

Social ecology and social movements

1960'S

Underground distribution of Bookchin's essays arguing for a fundamentally radical ecology in contrast to technocratic environmentalism.

1970'S

Efforts to "green" cities and bring alternative, solar-based technologies into economically marginalized urban neighborhoods.

Movement against nuclear power in the US. Social ecology inspired decentralized anti-nuclear alliances committed to direct action, nonviolence, and grassroots organization.

Critical re-evaluation of "ecofeminism", seeking to re-evaluate the legacy of the historical links between women and non-human nature in Western culture, rejecting the essentialist and biological determinist notions commonly associated with ecofeminism.

1980'S

Emerging Green political movements in many countries became divided between advocates for conventional party politics and strategies rooted in radically democratic, ecologically-centered movements from below.

1990'S

Global Justice Movement raised support for a politics of direct democracy to challenge centralized economic and political institutions and established grassroots democratic organizing and decision-making structures that helped shape the aspirations of social movement actors for a generation to come.

2000'S

Social ecology has become a central theoretical and strategic influence for militants in the Kurdish regions of the Middle East, where ethnically diverse populations have created institutions of confederal direct democracy in one of the world's most war-torn regions.

Fourth, social ecology offers a comprehensive historical and strategic grounding for realizing the promise of direct democracy. Social ecologists have worked to bring the praxis of direct democracy into popular movements since the 1970s, and Bookchin's writings offer an essential historical and theoretical context for this continuing conversation. Social ecology offers a comprehensive strategic outlook that looks beyond the role of popular assemblies as a form of public expression and outrage, looking toward more fully realized self-organization, confederation and a revolutionary challenge to entrenched statist institutions.

Finally, social ecology asserts the inseparability of effective oppositional political activity from a reconstructive vision of an ecological future. Bookchin viewed most popular dissident writing as incomplete, focusing on critique and analysis without also proposing a coherent way forward. At the same time, social ecologists have spoken out against the accommodation of many alternative institutions — including numerous formerly radical cooperatives and collectives — to a stifling capitalist status quo.

The convergence of oppositional and reconstructive strands of activity is a crucial step towards a political movement that can ultimately contest and reclaim political power. This is realized within the international climate movement through the creation of new political spaces that embody the principles of "blockadia" and "alternatiba." The former term, popularized by Naomi Klein, was first coined by the activists of the Tar Sands Blockade in Texas, who engaged in an extended series of nonviolent actions to block the construction of the Keystone XL oil pipeline. The latter is a French Basque word, adopted as the theme of a bicycle tour that encircled France during the summer of 2015 and highlighted scores of local alternative-building projects. Social ecology's advocacy for creative human participation in the natural world helps us see how we can radically transform our communities, while healing and restoring vital ecosystems through a variety of sophisticated, ecologically-grounded methods.

Global Inertia, Municipal Responses

Following the celebrated but ultimately disappointing conclusion of the 2015 UN climate conference in Paris, many climate activists have embraced a return to the local. While the Paris Agreement is widely praised by global elites — and activists rightly condemned the US Trump administration's announced withdrawal — the agreement has a fundamental flaw that largely precludes the possibility of its achieving meaningful climate mitigation. This goes back to Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton's interventions at the 2009 Copenhagen conference, which shifted the focus of climate diplomacy from the 1997 Kyoto Protocol's legally binding emissions reductions toward a system of voluntary pledges, or "Nationally Determined Contributions," which now form the basis of the Paris framework. Implementation and enforcement of the agreement are limited to what the Paris text describes as an international "expert-based" committee that is structured to be "transparent, non-adversarial and non-punitive."

Of course the Kyoto regime also lacked meaningful enforcement mechanisms, and countries such as Canada and Australia chronically exceeded their Kyoto-mandated emissions caps. The Kyoto Protocol also initiated an array of "flexible mechanisms" to implement emissions reductions, leading to the global proliferation of carbon markets, dubious offset schemes, and other capitalist-inspired measures that have largely benefited financial interests without meaningful benefits to the climate. While the original 1992 UN Climate Convention enshrined various principles aimed to address the inequalities among nations, subsequent climate diplomacy has often resembled a demoralizing race to the bottom.

Still, there are some signs for hope. In response to the announced US withdrawal from the Paris framework, an alliance of over 200 US cities and counties announced their intention to uphold the cautious but still significant commitments that the Obama administration had brought to Paris. Internationally, more than 2,500 cities from Oslo to Sydney have submitted plans to the United Nations to reduce their greenhouse gas emissions, sometimes in defiance of their national governments' far more cautious commitments. Two local popular *consultas* in Columbia moved to reject mineral and oil exploitation within their territories, in one case affiliating their town with the Italian-based "Slow Cities" movement — an outgrowth of the famous Slow Food movement that has helped raise the social and cultural standing of local food producers in Italy and many other countries. A Slow Cities statement of principles suggests that by "working towards sustainability, defending the environment and reducing our excessive ecological footprint," communities are "committing ... to rediscover traditional know-how and to make the most of our resources through recycling and reuse, applying the new technologies."

The ability of such municipal movements to build support and pressure for broader institutional changes is central to their political importance in a period when social and environmental progress is stalled in many countries. Actions initiated from below may also have more staying power than those mandated from above. They are far more likely to be democratically structured and accountable to people who are most affected by the outcomes. They help build relationships among neighbors and strengthen the capacity for self-reliance. They enable us to see that the institutions that now dominate our lives are far less essential for our daily sustenance than we are often led to believe. And, perhaps most important, such municipal initiatives can challenge regressive measures implemented from above, as well as national policies that favor fossil fuel corporations and allied financial interests.

For the most part, recent municipal initiatives in the US and beyond have evolved in a progressive direction. Over 160 US cities and counties have declared themselves as "sanctuaries" in defiance of the Trump administration's elevated enforcement of US immigration laws — a very important development in light of the future displacements that will result from climate change. Such ongoing political and legal battles over the rights of municipalities against states speak to the radical potential of socially and ecologically progressive measures emerging from below.

Social and environmental justice activists in the US are also challenging the trend of right-wing electoral victories by running and winning bold campaigns for a variety of municipal positions. Perhaps most noteworthy is the successful 2017 campaign of Chokwe Antar Lumumba, who was elected mayor of Jackson, Mississippi, in the heart of the Deep South, with a program focused on human rights, local democracy and neighborhood-based economic and ecological renewal. Lumumba ran as the voice of a movement known as Cooperation Jackson, which takes its inspiration from the Black American tradition and the Global South, including the resistance struggles of enslaved Africans before and after the US Civil War, the Zapatista movement in southern Mexico, and recent popular uprisings around the globe.

Cooperation Jackson has put forward numerous ideas that resonate strongly with the principles of social ecology, including empowered neighborhood assemblies, cooperative economics and a dual-power political strategy. Others working to resist the status quo and build local power are organizing directly democratic neighborhood assemblies from New York City to the Pacific Northwest, and developing a new national network to further advance municipalist strategies, as Eleanor Finley importantly recounted in her essay on "The New Municipal Movements" in *ROAR Magazine*'s Issue #6.

Visions of the Future

Whether local efforts such as these can help usher in a coherent and unified municipalist movement in solidarity with "rebel city" initiatives around the world still remains to be seen. Such a movement will be necessary for local initiatives to scale up and ultimately catalyze the world-scale transformations that are necessary to fend off the looming threat of a complete breakdown in the Earth's climate systems.

Indeed, the projections of climate science continually highlight the difficulty of transforming our societies and economies quickly enough to prevent a descent into a planet-wide climate catastrophe. But science also affirms that the actions we undertake today can mean the difference between a future climate regime that is disruptive and difficult, and one that rapidly descends toward apocalyptic extremes. While we need to be completely realistic about the potentially devastating consequences of continuing climate disruptions, a genuinely transformative movement needs to be rooted in a forward-looking view of an improved quality of life for most people in the world in a future freed from fossil fuel dependence.

Partial measures are far from sufficient, and approaches to renewable energy development that merely replicate capitalist forms may likely turn out to be a dead end. However, the cumulative impact of municipal efforts to challenge entrenched interests and actualize living alternatives — combined with coherent revolutionary visions, organization and strategies toward a radically transformed society — could perhaps be enough to fend off a dystopian future of deprivation and authoritarianism.

Democratically confederated municipalist initiatives remain our best hope to meaningfully reshape the fate of humanity on this planet. Perhaps the threat of climate chaos, combined with our deep knowledge of the potential for a more humane and ecologically harmonious future, can indeed help inspire the profound transformations that are necessary for humanity and the Earth to continue to thrive.

Brian Tokar is an activist and author, a Lecturer in Environmental Studies at the University of Vermont, and a board member of the Institute for Social Ecology and 350Vermont. His most recent book is *Toward Climate Justice: Perspectives on the Climate Crisis and Social Change* (New Compass Press, 2014). He is currently co-editing a new international collection on grassroots climate responses, titled *Climate Justice and Community Renewal*, which will be published by Routledge in the spring of 2020.

Brian Tokar
Social Ecology: Communalism against Climate Chaos
A Municipal Response

Roar Magazine, Issue #7. <roarmag.org/magazine/communalism-climate-chaos/>