It Is What It Isn't

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Contents

Critical Comments On "The Politics of Cosmology"

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The Politics of Cosmology is a thousand-page manuscript by social ecologist and political theorist Murray Bookchin, based on his study of the history of philosophy and his lectures on that topic that were given at the Institute for Social Ecology and to study groups in Burlington, Vermont. I have been familiar with this text since Bookchin gave me several hundred pages of it many years ago, during the time that we worked together closely (during the 1980s and into the early 1990s). More recently, I have been able to read the complete manuscript. Copies have circulated on the internet and have been discussed by a few people.[1] Nevertheless, the details of the work and even its very existence have not been very widely known.

When I first read parts of the text, I thought that it had the potential to become a major work. Indeed, I expected it to be much more important theoretically than Bookchin's *The Ecology of Freedom*, a work that I admired as a general vision of social ecology, but nevertheless thought of less as a developed theoretical work than as an introduction to a theory that would be elaborated later in detail. I urged Bookchin to focus on this work, in part because of the promise I saw in it, and in part because I thought that his polemical works directed at deep ecology, neo-Marxism, spiritual ecofeminism, and other tendencies were weakening social ecology theoretically, and postponing the basic theoretical work that had yet to be undertaken. Now that I have been able to evaluate the entire work, and especially the parts that are of central philosophical significance, I am forced to conclude that it did not in the end fulfill its promise. Rather, it exhibits many of the serious problems that emerged in Bookchin's polemical articles of the late 80s, and that are endemic to his later work, including *The Philosophy of Social Ecology,* his most explicitly philosophical published work.

I will first make a few general remarks about *The Politics of Cosmology* and then present a number of very specific points about its content. Initially, I was favorably impressed with the broad scope of the undertaking and the amount of effort that obviously went into it. In addition to possessing these qualities, the text certainly contains some illuminating discussions of the history of ideas, and at times these are presented well. However, the work as a whole has fatal flaws that far outweigh these positive dimensions. On careful reading, it quickly becomes clear that Bookchin's range of knowledge and his critical abilities were not up to the level of his ambitions. As I will illustrate in detail, many discussions show misunderstandings and naïveté in dealing with fundamental philosophical issues. Furthermore, there are serious misinterpretations of major philosophers, even on some points that are common knowledge among specialists in philosophy and advanced students in the field.

If a work purports to be serious philosophical analysis, it is incumbent on the author to be familiar with the theories that he or she explicates, and especially those that he or she attacks, and to present arguments that show real knowledge of the claims of his or her opponents. Unfortunately, *The Politics of Cosmology* almost never does this, and when it occasionally does, it does not do it very well. It often suffers from the same flaws as those that afflict Bookchin's more ephemeral polemical works. This is particularly evident when he indulges himself in complaints about the sad state of the world, the stupidity of his opponents, and the shortcomings of people in general. He sometimes uses straw-man

[1] For example, at https://hollaforums.com/thread/1276528/activism/looking-for-the-user-that-posted-politics-of.html. Several addresses where the manuscript was available were posted but were later blocked.

arguments in which he parodies opposing positions, and he attributes views to his opponents that they simply do not hold. The text includes numerous attacks on certain of his favorite targets (analytical philosophy, deep ecology, postmodernism, etc.) that do not contain any citations from the thinkers who are attacked. In these cases, Bookchin substitutes generalized abuse of his opponents for careful analysis and critique of their specific ideas and theories.

Bookchin goes into some detail in his discussions of a number of philosophers and schools of philosophy. This is the case, for example, with the Continental Rationalists, the British Empiricists, Rousseau, and Kant, all of whom will be discussed here. However, he does not really come to grips with many of the core ideas of these philosophers, and he sometimes leads the reader astray in interpreting these ideas. A case in point is his analysis of Descartes. Bookchin badly misunderstands this philosopher's project, focusing one-sidedly on the view that it is "anchored in subjectivism." (p. 451) He is aware of the fact that Descartes' thought represents, as it is famously called, a "subjective turn" in the history of philosophy. What he does not seem to comprehend is the correlative *objectivist* turn that took place at the same moment. This is a truly dialectical reversal that Bookchin misses entirely. The Cartesian "quest for certainty" was "anchored" (and the word is much more apt in this case) in an ideal of *objectivity*, for which Descartes, a mathematician, found the model in mathematics as a deductive system. He is thus the father not only of modern subjectivist philosophy but also of modern foundationalism and the quest for an objective basis for truth and knowledge. This is exactly why some contemporary speculative realists, for example, consider themselves Cartesians. They look to Cartesianism as an escape from the subjectivism that they see as pervasive in mainstream Western philosophy. Chomsky (whom Bookchin always looked at with a certain animosity and resentment), is also a professed "Cartesian" rationalist, at least in general inspiration, but is far from being a subjectivist. In fact, Chomsky's quasi-Cartesian linguistic foundationalism looks to a supposed deep structure of language as a kind of *objective* basis for resistance to behaviorist and authoritarian forms of conditioning.

While Bookchin's analysis of Descartes is fundamentally misguided, his treatment of Spinoza exhibits even more weaknesses. He summarizes the diverse literature on Spinoza, which diverges radically from his own views, with the following statement: "If we divest Spinoza of the rubbish that has accumulated around his work by so-called 'materialist,'[sic] 'idealists,' and in more recent times, by California-baked 'misanthropic ecologists,' we cannot ignore the striking affinity of Spinoza's rationalism with that of Aristotle and Hegel..." (p. 513) Bookchin thus alludes to the fact that Spinoza has been a major inspiration in contemporary philosophy. His thought has been an inspiration for Marxists such as Negri and Hardt, for ecological thinkers such as Naess, and for other prominent philosophers such as Deleuze and Guattari. It has also received careful attention from major thinkers on the left such as Badiou and Balibar. Most significantly, there are contemporary anarchist readings of Spinoza that are analyzed at length in Daniel Colson's "Lectures anarchistes de Spinoza,"[2] and Colson's own work presents one such reading in one of the most important works in contemporary anarchist thought, his *Petit Lexique Philosophique de L'Anarchisme*.[3] Bookchin does not cite any of these thinkers, or engage their work in any way. Instead, he casts vague aspersions on the entire philosophical literature on Spinoza, while presenting a position that does little more than recognize the commonplace that Spinoza is an important figure in the rationalist tradition in Western philosophy.

This illustrates one of the greatest shortcomings of the work: its detachment from major currents in philosophy during the time that it was being written. It relies on a limited body of secondary works, primarily from an earlier generation of scholarship, and ignores the widespread reassessment of major figures that was taking place. The sketchy treatment of Spinoza is a glaring example; yet, it is far from atypical. One would also not know from reading Bookchin that Machiavelli has been a topic of widespread debate in contemporary political thought. And most ironically, one finds that even though for most of his life Bookchin worked in the anarchist tradition and considered his own thought to be

[2] *Réfractions* 2 (Summer 1998): 119–148.

[3] Paris: Le Livre de Poche, 2001.

the fulfillment (and, in the end, the surpassing) of anarchist thought, not only Colson, but anarchist philosophers in general are given almost no attention at all in this quixotic magnum opus manqué of philosophy.

However, the problems with Bookchin's discussion of Spinoza go far beyond such a neglect of the philosophical literature. They extend to his understanding of basic concepts in that philosopher's thought. Surprisingly, Bookchin seems confused about what Spinoza meant by the crucial term "attribute." At one point, he correctly notes that Spinoza specifies two attributes, "thought and extension," (p. 482) but elsewhere he gives as an example of an attribute the quality "hot." Spinoza quite clearly and distinctly defines this central concept in his thought as denoting "what the intellect perceives of substance as constituting its essence." Even if one has read none of the original texts, is difficult for one to think that Spinoza had "hotness" in mind. Furthermore, Bookchin thinks that the fact that Spinoza has an instrumentalist view of animals refutes attempts to find ecological inspiration in that philosopher's thought. (p. 512) I remember Bookchin long ago recounting with glee his first discovery of "anti-animal" passages in Spinoza and his satisfaction at how devastating this would be to the deep ecologists. Yet, philosophical analysis doesn't work in this naïve, simplistic way. If one examines a philosophy in depth, one often finds implications that conflict with facile depictions and vague generalizations. The fact that a thinker is not an advocate of "animal rights," "animal liberation," or other "pro-animal" positions simply does not imply that there is nothing in that thinker's thought that has major implications for ecological philosophy.

Serious problems also plague Bookchin's critique of British empiricism. One of the weakest discussions in the entire work is his treatment of David Hume, who, whether one likes it or not, is widely recognized to be the most influential figure in the history of English-language philosophy. Bookchin correctly sees Hume as a major threat to much of his worldview, but he is unable to come to grips with Hume's skeptical position and doesn't seem to understand why philosophers generally take it so seriously. He fails entirely to engage with Hume's argument, merely saying that he "cannot help but note the crudity of the examples which form a perfect fit with the crudity of the argument." (p. 616) One could never imagine, based on Bookchin's dismissive account, how Hume's "crude" arguments could have "awakened" the great Immanuel Kant "from his dogmatic slumber." In short, the reader who reads Bookchin without any prior familiarity with Hume's philosophy will have no idea why major philosophers from Kant to the present have taken his skeptical challenge seriously, and why so many admire Hume's brilliance, even while disagreeing fundamentally with him.

Some examples may help show the depth of this problem. Bookchin seems amazed by Hume's statement proposing "That the sun will not rise tomorrow is no less intelligible a proposition, and implies no more contradiction, than the affirmation, that it will rise." Bookchin concludes that in view of such a position Hume is "distinctly idiosyncratic" in "an age that ... emphasized an orderly, predictable universe modelled on a machine." (p. 622) However, Hume's point is not at all about "predictability," but about "intelligibility" and "non-contradiction." The idea of predictability is in fact quite central to Hume's thought, and his radical empiricism, far from being "idiosyncratic," was rather quite prophetic in an age in which experimental science and technological innovation were on the rise.

In accord with this empiricism, Hume's account of causality (which is often called a "regularity analysis") stresses its basis in the observation of "constant conjunction," and Humean empiricist science substitutes *predictability* for any rationalist quest for hidden "universal laws." Far from questioning the predictability of phenomena, Hume emphasizes the central importance (both psychologically and scientifically) of predictability based on empirical evidence. It is not an exaggeration to say that Hume's position on this topic is part of basic undergraduate philosophy, but nevertheless, Bookchin does not seem to comprehend it.

Furthermore, in his discussion of Hume's moral philosophy, Bookchin mentions the crucial issue of the fact-value dichotomy, which derives above all from Hume, and has been a major preoccupation in modern and contemporary ethics. Bookchin opposes Hume's position, but he never presents an account of it, explains why it has been so important, or gives any argument against it. (p. 623) The case is

similar for his significant claim that Hume "tries to argue the self away" but nevertheless "assumes its existence in the very course of his argument." (p. 627) This claim is never defended. There is neither a clear presentation of Hume's argument, nor any explanation of precisely how that argument assumes the existence of the self.

Instead, Bookchin merely begs the question (in the strict sense of this term). He quotes the famous passage in which Hume describes what happens when the philosopher "leaves his study" and enters the common-sense world inhabited by the rest of society. Bookchin claims that in this passage Hume admits that skepticism is not "a workable view of reality," and in doing so presupposes "a sense of selfhood that his philosophy is meant to challenge." (p. 628) However, none of this is true. Hume's skeptical analysis presents powerful arguments that we can have no clear idea of the self, and challenges through careful analysis the coherence of the very idea of personal identity. The fact that in everyday life we succumb to certain feelings and beliefs, and that we are creatures of habit, in no way threatens the validity of his argument. His theory of knowledge is in fact an account of how such feelings and beliefs arise in the absence of personal identity or of a clear conception of selfhood.

Bookchin's presentation of Rousseau's thought is generally accurate. However, even here Bookchin gets into trouble when he tries to take on one of the most vigorously debated issues concerning the interpretation of that philosopher. He attempts unconvincingly to defend Rousseau from the widely-accepted charge that his idea of "forcing to be free" can have authoritarian implications. Bookchin trivializes the question by equating "forcing to be free" with merely "obliging" lawbreakers "to defer to" the law. He glosses over the fact that Rousseau does not exclude force and coercion as means of "obliging" such "deference." He shows no understanding of how Rousseau's conception of freedom fits into the debate over positive versus negative freedom, or of why Rousseau has been seen both as a radical participatory democrat and as a prophet of "totalitarian democracy." In the end, his account obscures rather than clarifying the deep ambiguities, and indeed contradictions, in Rousseau's thought. (p.779)

Bookchin's treatment of Rousseau also exemplifies another problem that occurs periodically in the work. He often relies excessively on direct quotation in the place of a reasonable balance of citation, exposition, and critical commentary. This tendency mars a number of Bookchin's analyses, but it is particularly flagrant in the case of Rousseau. In about thirty pages of discussion of that philosopher, roughly twelve pages, or forty-percent of the whole, consists of direct quotation. Often Bookchin's excessive use of direct quotation is accompanied by hasty generalizations concerning a philosopher's position, and by bare assertions of the superiority of his own ideological position.

Bookchin's discussion of Kant is, in principle, one of his most important topics, given the enormous stature of that philosopher, and his relation to Hegel, the key figure this entire work. However, it consists mainly of the kind of superficial exposition that is repeated in numerous philosophy textbooks, and it exhibits the excessive use of quotations that was just mentioned. However, Bookchin runs into his most serious problems with Kant when he abandons direct quotations and reliable secondary sources and is left to his own devices. Thus, he points out the dualism inherent in Kant's distinction between the phenomenal and noumenal realms, but then lapses into crude psychologism when he claims that Kant thought that "the individual is conflicted between his empirical self and his noumenal self." (p. 780) He also goes astray in his claim that "Kantian morality" is "the result of pure reason." (p. 761) Kant holds that good moral decision-making results from the exercise of *practical* reason, as he explains in great detail in his second critique. Despite Kant's best efforts to make his theory of moral obligation clear, Bookchin seems to think that because Kant's reasoning is not empirically based that it must therefore be founded on "pure reason."

There are also numerous problems in Bookchin's analysis of Hegel, which is the culmination of the entire work. He recognizes Hegel as a towering figure in philosophy and thinks of his own thought as a continuation (and, in his mind, a fulfillment) of the Hegelian dialectic. He claims that in Hegel "we approach ... a dialectical naturalism that I have advanced as the philosophy of social ecology." (p. 902) What this means in practice is a distorted, highly Aristotelianized, version of Hegel that ignores the philosopher's most radically dialectical aspects and reduces dialectic itself to the actualization of

potentialities that are inherent within a being. (pp. 905–906) He contends in this chapter that Hegel's radically dialectical idea of the negation of the negation (which influenced Marx and many others so profoundly) means something as mundane as the process of a tree growing to maturity and producing fruit, after which the process begins again. (p. 906) This serious misunderstanding of dialectic pervades this work and Bookchin's writings in general.

The Hegel chapter also contains one of the worst examples of Bookchin's distortion of opposing viewpoints. He spends some time comparing what he conceives of as Hegelian dialectical reason to what he identifies as "analytical reason." However, he goes on to present an outrageous caricature of analytical thinking. He claims that this form of reasoning cannot be "developmental and organic" but only "factual and structural." (p. 909) According to his account, it "arrests a development, freezes a segment of it." (p. 908) But Bookchin seems never to have really thought through the implications of such claims or looked at typical examples of what analytical thinkers do when they analyze. Whether they are natural scientists, social scientists, or philosophers, they certainly quite often present accounts of the "development" of beings and phenomena. His core complaint about analytical reason seems to be that isn't teleological, according to his rather neo-Aristotelian conception of immanent teleology. However, he confuses not being teleological with not being "temporal" or "developmental." In reality, development (temporal, structural, etc.) is a central concern in many varieties of analytical thought, including functionalism, structuralism, and systems theory, one of Bookchin's favorite objects of attack.

Bookchin claims furher that in analytical philosophy (in supposed contradistinction to dialectical philosophy) "a fact consists precisely of its immutable boundaries and the components that make up its structure." (p. 909) However, unfortunately for Bookchin, the philosopher who is arguably the most famous figure in the analytical philosophical tradition is Wittgenstein. And probably the most widely cited discussion in Wittgenstein's works is his analysis of "family resemblances." There, he points out that the one thing that concepts in ordinary language quite glaringly do not have is "immutable boundaries," and to think of them as having such boundaries is typical not of "analytical" thinking but of "bad" thinking. It may be true, as Deleuze said, that Wittgenstein was "a catastrophe" for philosophy. But even if this is true, it would in any case be important to know the precise *nature* of the disaster. Sometimes we can learn a lot from catastrophes, but only if we understand them correctly.

Bookchin is thus rather weak on analytical philosophy, but the single greatest problem in *The Politics of Cosmology* is Bookchin's defective presentation of the nature and history of dialectic and dialectical philosophy. This is particularly the case in view of the fact that Bookchin claims to be a dialectical thinker and to speak on behalf of the beleaguered dialectical tradition. Near the beginning of the work, he tellingly gives Aristotle undeserved credit for being a great dialectical thinker, while the details of the Platonic dialectic, which is of enormous importance to the dialectical tradition, is passed over in silence. Late Platonic dialogues that have always been of great interest to dialectical thinkers are not even mentioned by Bookchin. His conception of dialectic is modelled overwhelmingly on Aristotelian teleology, though Bookchin avoids this term because he quite incorrectly thinks that it must necessarily imply a kind of rigid determinism. Bookchin's neo-Aristotelian evisceration of dialectic does not occur only in the chapter on Aristotle, but is pervasive throughout the text. For example, in the chapter on the Renaissance he claims that dialectic "applies only to developmental processes." (p. 327). He makes much of the fact that dialectic is more than "motion" and "process," which is certainly true, but his own idea of dialectic is reductionist and ill-informed. His impoverished conception reduces it to the unfolding of an immanent teleology within beings.[4]

For example, in the discussion of Leibniz's philosophy, Bookchin describes that philosopher's "law of continuity," which posits intermediate gradations between various levels of complexity found in nature, as "almost dialectical." (p.545) He says that it anticipates "dialectical gradations" in Hegel, by which he means the progressive actualization of a being's potentialities. (p. 547) He criticizes Hume for using

[4] For a discussion of this problem throughout Bookchin's works, see John Clark, "Domesticating the Dialectic: A Critique of Bookchin's Neo-Aristotelianism" in *Capitalism Nature Socialism*, vol. 19 #1 (March 2008): 51–68; online at https://www.academia.edu/2546877/_Domesticating_the_Dialectic_A_Critique_of_Bookchin_s_Neo-Aristotelianism_.

the example of an acorn growing into an oak tree as part of his critique of identity, contending that this phenomenon "is one of the most striking examples of a dialectical development," while in fact it is just a mundane example of organic growth. The idea of dialectic meaning essentially the movement from potentiality to actuality is also found in the discussion of Rousseau, (p. 710) and forms the core of Bookchin's interpretation of Hegel's thought. The Hegel of radical negativity, shocking dialectical reversals, and strikingly anti-intuitive cases of the "cunning of reason" is replaced by a tame, pseudo-dialectical Hegel, the sum of whose philosophical wisdom might be summarized as "great oaks from little acorns grow."

One reason for Hegel's undeserved bad reputation in contemporary thought is that the philosopher's subtle and complex position has been unjustly reduced by opponents to precisely the simplistic teleological one that Bookchin takes it to be. Fortunately, Zizek and others have been exploring radical dialectic in Hegel since the 1980's, though Bookchin unfortunately never seems to have taken account of this literature. In the end, one of the greatest shortcoming of this thousand-page work is not that it contains a thousand pages of generally inept analysis, but rather that it should, in the name of "dialectical naturalism," mislead the reader so badly about the meaning of dialectic. Beside this, the fact that a huge, rambling work called *The Politics of Cosmology* would say almost nothing about cosmology seems almost like a minor detail.

Finally, given the sweeping pretentions of the work, it is impossible not to mention its markedly Eurocentric nature. It touches on our primarily non-European world in the same way that conventional histories of European philosophy do. Non-European thought is accorded attention to the degree that it plays a significant role in the origins and development of European thought. Thus, the history of ideas in the ancient Near East, in ancient Judaism, and in early Christianity are deemed worthy of attention as the crucible of early European philosophy. Granted, in his fourteen pages on medieval Islamic philosophy, Bookchin takes thinkers such as Alfarabi, Avicenna and Averroes seriously, but it is clear that they deserve his attention because they carry on traditions rooted in classical Greek thought, and because their own thought interacted significantly with European philosophy. On the other hand, the bulk of the huge corpus of East Asian and South Asian philosophy does not really exist for Bookchin, other than as the object of the polemics found in many of his works. Buddhist radical dialectic is dissolved into an amorphous sphere of mysticism that can be immediately dismissed. Most of Arab and Persian philosophy, and Islamic philosophy in general, are similarly non-existent. Needless to say, Bookchin sees no need to explore important traditions of African and Latin American philosophy, or the indigenous wisdom that constitutes the philosophy (and cosmology) of much of the world, and which haunts the rest of it.

In the end, this work is instructive, but not as a study of the historical dialectic between politics and "cosmology." Rather, it is useful for the manner in which it demonstrates how a program of "politics in command" distorts a reading of the history of philosophy. In radically dialectical thought, reason and understanding always remain open to the phenomena, and are formed and reformed by the course of those phenomena. One is tempted to say that radical dialectic is the manifestation in the realm of thought of the principle of "mandar obedeciendo." In radically dialectical thought, nothing is really in command.

Ecological Thinking and the Crisis of the Earth

Date: August 11, 2017

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Facing the Crisis

If a visitor from another galaxy were sent to Earth to report on the latest news here, it seems rather obvious what the alien observer would take back to the home planet. Our extraterrestrial investigator would certainly report that our planet is going through one of the six periods of mass extinction and biodiversity loss in its entire four and half billion-year history, and that other major disruptions in the biosphere are interacting to cause a major crisis for life on Earth. In short, the big story from Planet Earth would be that we have entered a period of massive planetary death. In fact, among the many names that have been suggested for the emerging era or epoch of life on Earth, the most precisely appropriate would be the Necrocene, the "new era of death."[1] Strangely, this rather shocking news is met with either denial or disavowal among the members of our own species, who are living in the very midst of this crisis. The deniers among us simply reject the clear evidence of global ecological crisis. The disavowers, on the other hand, accept the truth of evidence but fail to undertake actions that are even vaguely proportional to the gravity of our predicament.

Information on the severity of the ecological crisis has hardly been a well-kept secret. For example, researchers at the Stockholm Resilience Centre and their colleagues have in recent years formulated a conception of "planetary boundaries" defining the limits in various areas beyond which there is likelihood of ecological disaster. They summarized their findings in three concise articles that are readily available to the public.[2] The authors concluded that "transgressing one or more planetary boundaries may be deleterious or even catastrophic due to the risk of crossing thresholds that will trigger non-linear, abrupt environmental change within continental- to planetary-scale systems."[3] The boundaries were identified as lying in the areas of climate change, ocean acidification, stratospheric ozone depletion, biogeochemical nitrogen and phosphorus cycles, global freshwater use, rate of biodiversity loss, land-system change, chemical pollution, and atmospheric aerosol loading. They found that at least three boundaries had already been passed and that most others are in danger of being transgressed soon. In the most recent article, the authors concluded that "two core boundaries—climate change and biosphere integrity—have

[1] This would focus quite logically on the fact that the current "new era of death" follows an era called the "Cenozoic," meaning the "new era of life." The current era is a radical break with the Cenozoic, but is continuous with the developments in the brief epoch called the "Holocene" (meaning the "entirely recent").

[2] Johan Rockström et al. "A Safe Operating Space for Humanity," in Nature 461 (Sept. 2009): 472 –75. Johan Rockström et al. "Planetary Boundaries: Exploring the Safe Operating Space for Humanity," in Ecology and Society 14, no. 2 (2009), online at www.ecologyandsociety.org; and a recent update, Will Stefens et al., "Planetary Boundaries: Guiding Human Development on a Changing Planet" in Science (13 Feb 2015): Vol. 347, No. 6223 (Feb. 13, 2015); online at http://science.sciencemag.org/content/347/6223/1259855.full, in which there is a new focus on five planetary boundaries that have "strong regional operating scales." The delineation of areas in which boundaries are located was also revised slightly.

[3] Rockström et al. (2009)

been identified, each of which has the potential on its own to drive the Earth system into a new state should they be substantially and persistently transgressed."[4]

It is not only scientists who have sounded the alarm about ecological crisis in rather clear and not uncertain terms. Recently, *The Guardian*, a major British newspaper, announced the gravity of the biodiversity crisis in almost alarmist language, saying that the "biological annihilation' of wildlife in recent decades means a sixth mass extinction in Earth's history is under way" and that "it threatens the survival of human civilization, with just a short window of time in which to act."[5] Yet, this seemingly inflammatory article was not at the top of the stories for the day, and if one reads the numerous readers' replies to it, one finds very little sense of direction about how to respond to this developing global catastrophe. Furthermore, such news somehow quickly fades from the popular consciousness. One might therefore conclude that there is simply not enough good "environmental thinking" going on in today's world. It might seem that the public is just not prepared to understand adequately the meaning of global ecological crisis, and is therefore incapable of facing it with full seriousness. Thus, there are injunctions that we need to work harder on creating good environmental education so that the public can engage in more effective environmental thinking.

Granted, this would be a very good thing. However, one of the problems with conventional ideas of "environmental thinking" or even "ecological thinking" is that it assumes that correct thinking will in itself have a significant transformative effect, or more to the point, the kind effect that will be necessary in order to avoid disaster. For example, it is thought to be crucial that climate deniers be convinced that anthropogenic climate change really exists. This is not at all a bad idea, but it almost inevitably ignores the fact that that the vast majority of *non-deniers* are in a state of *disavowal*, and that reformed deniers are highly likely to join the ranks of these disavowers. The disavowers are willing to admit that a problem exists, and may get certain satisfactions out of being on "the right side of history," and perhaps even from engaging in various beneficial activities that reduce greenhouse gasses. However, they are not willing to consider, and then actually work diligently for, the kind of deep, fundamental changes in society that will be necessary to change the ecocidal course of history. A basic problem for the problematic of "better environmental thinking" is that the needed transformation cannot result from abstract thought and the understanding of concepts, but can only come from engaged thinking that is an integral part of an engaged participation in transformative social ecological processes. We need therefore to consider how such engagement might begin to take place. But first, we might consider further the implications of our modes of thinking.

Part of the problem with the appeal to "environmental thinking" is the very idea of the "environment." The dominant conception of "the environment" assumes a certain practical ontology. According to this ontology, there is a world that consists of individual egos surrounded by "environments," and societies that consist of collections of separate egos, surrounded in turn by larger "environments." This prevailing conception of the environment is an expression of the binary subject–object thinking that is built into to the dominant social ideology. Meanings are social, not merely individual. Thus, even when this ontology is not consciously intended, or when it is even abstractly rejected, such a problematic reinforces the pervasive hierarchical dualism that is the deep ideology of civilization. Given such problems, explicitly ecological thinking is a great advance over *environmental* thinking.

The term "ecology," derives from the Greek terms *oikos* and *logos*. It is concerned with the logos, or underlying meaning, truth, and way of the *oikos*, the local, regional, or planetary household. In its emphasis on the oikos, ecological thinking replaces both the egocentric and the anthropocentric perspective with the perspective of the larger ecological whole. This is a whole that is never a completed or closed totality, but rather a whole that is always in a process of becoming whole. The ecological whole is an ever-becoming-one that is also an ever-becoming-many, a dynamic unity-in-diversity. Ecological thinking is inspired by the quest for the social-ecological equivalent of what Hegel called the "concrete

[4] Stefens et al. (2015)

[5] Damian Carrington, "Earth's sixth mass extinction event under way, scientists warn," in The Guardian (July 10, 2017); online at www.theguardian.com.

universal," the universal that must always be expressed through the particular and the singular, the regional and the local, the communal and the personal. This implies that we need to contemplate how we fit into the planetary dialectic of developing parts and wholes. Our question here is how we might begin to develop a thought and practice that is in accord with such a truly social-ecological perspective, and that will open a clear pathway out of our planetary crisis.

Finding the Way

Though it cannot be developed in any detail in this introductory discussion, the answer that seems most promising is that we begin to create a well-grounded and multi-dimensional social and political base for the regeneration of human community and the community of life on Earth. This means reorganizing our social world into networks of awakened and caring transformational communities that are dedicated to undertaking whatever actions are necessary to put an end to the Necrocene and initiate a new era characterized by the flourishing of life on Earth. We might call such a new era the *Eleutherocene* – the era of a liberated humanity and a liberated nature. In this endeavor, we can find inspiration in the ancient Buddhist concept of Appamāda. "Appamāda" is a Pali word ("Apramada" in Sanskrit) that conveys the ideas of both "mindfulness" and "care." The practice of Appamāda implies that we must be awakened to the world and all the beings around us, and that in such an awakened state we become capable of responding to and caring for them effectively. In this, it has much in common with concepts in contemporary feminist, and especially ecofeminist, care ethics, which rejects the patriarchal model of an abstract ethics of principles in favor of an approach that non-dualistically recognizes the inseparability of moral rationality, moral sensibility, and moral imagination.[6] It affirms that what we need more than anything is neither environmental thinking, which takes us in the wrong direction, nor even ecological thinking, which takes us only part of the way, but an *ethos* of Appamāda that pervades and shapes both our everyday practice and our social institutions. The practice of care involves attention to the truth of all beings, acceptance of the way of all beings, and responsiveness to the needs of all beings. It also implies engagement in the personal, social, and political practice that is necessary to establish mindful care for all beings in our purview and for the Earth itself as our overriding priority.

Such an outlook of attentiveness, acceptance and responsiveness helps us discover what we might call the "Four Noble Truths about the Earth." These truths are that the Earth is suffering, there is a cause of the Earth's suffering, there is a cure to the Earth's suffering, and there is a way to achieve the cure to the Earth's suffering.[7] As in the case of the ancient Noble Truths, we find that our craving is the cause of all this suffering. This craving has a transhistorical element, but develops to differing degrees and takes on different qualities in different historical contexts. So, in order to cure our own suffering and that of the Earth, we must come to an understanding of the very particular, historically conditioned, nature of the craving that causes it. We all have knowledge of its nature at some level. If we cannot express it consciously, we do so through our symptoms and our defense mechanism. However, to authentically confront our predicament we must develop a clear, fully-conscious awareness of its nature, and the ways that it causes the suffering of the Earth, the suffering of a myriad of other living beings on Earth, the suffering of billions of other human beings, and our own personal suffering. We must understand, for example, how the craving that causes of the suffering of the billion human beings who

[6] The most advanced form is materialist ecofeminism, which situates the ethical most explicitly in real-world practice and everyday life. It shows that the most significant sphere of ethical practice today, and our model in many ways for social-ecological transformation, remains the caring labor of women and indigenous people around the world. See Ariel Salleh, Ecofeminism as Politics: Nature, Marx, and the Postmodern (London: Zed Books, 1997); new edition forthcoming.

[7] By "suffering" is meant damage to the good of a being and interference with the flourishing of that being. Suffering is manifested in all dimensions of a being's existence. The Earth's objective suffering is manifested subjectively (within the Earth's self-conscious dimensions or "organs of consciousness") through an ethos of anxiety and depression and through a nihilistic sensibility and ideology.

live in a world of absolute poverty also causes the suffering of another billion who live in an affluent world of nihilistic egoism.

We must, moreover, understand that the craving that causes so much suffering has, in turn, a cause of its own. This cause is the world in which most of us live, which is best described as the late capitalist society of mass consumption. It is this society, as a powerfully functioning yet self-contradictory social whole, that generates a certain form of selfhood that is inclined to obsessive desires, powerful addictions, and sick attachments. As Jason Moore has aptly stated it, the crisis we are facing is above all "capitalogenic,"[8] though this should not lead us to neglect the degree to which it is simultaneously "statogenic" and "patriarchogenic." There is an entire system of production that depends on the generation of such craving to operate successfully (at least in the pre-catastrophic short term). There is an entire system of consumption that feeds such craving. There is an entire culture of consumption that socializes us into believing that a world of obsessive craving is the only one possible, or, if we do not believe that this is true, socializes us into resigning ourselves in practice to the inevitability of that world, and to living our lives as if it were true.

As in the case of the ancient Noble Truths, the cure to the suffering is not merely knowing the cause of the disease, or even knowing that the cause must be removed. The teaching was that the cure can only be carried out through following the Way, which was called the Noble Eightfold Path. There was no onefold, twofold or threefold path. The cure was not effected by choosing one or more forms of practice that appealed most to one personally, or that seemed to be leading generally in the right direction, or that might "hopefully" have some kind of mysterious "snowball effect." This would be succumbing to mere whim or superstition. The path consisted of all the forms of practice that were necessary to carry out the radical transformation that was needed. The promise was that if the path is followed "another world is possible."

How is this World Possible?

So, we are in need of another world—another world that we find in many ways by returning in a more awakened and compassionate way to this one. However, the means by which "another world" might be actualized (the Way) has not been given enough of the kind of diligent thought that is inseparable from effective social practice. "Another world is possible" becomes mere abstract escapist ideology unless it is expressed through transformative action that is not only prophetically "pre-figurative," but also immediately "figurative." Such action announces the arrival of another world and shows us the very "face" of that other world, here and now. It is in an important sense "world-making," for no world ever exists, including the present one, except by unceasing, moment-to-moment efforts on the part of all its inhabitants to make that world. But it is also in a very important sense *openness* to the world and to its common Logos, in opposition to the privatized or "idiotic"[9] *logoi* that are egoically generated artifacts. "Another world is possible" in part because that other world is a creative possibility. But another world is also possible because that other world has existed and still endures in the midst of the present one. We must therefore give much thought to the questions of *how the present social world is possible*, and *how it can be made impossible*. This means that we need to undertake a thorough inquiry into the major spheres of social determination that are the grounds of possibility of any world, either actually-existing or imagined.

There are four spheres of determination that are essential to the analysis of how social reality is generated, how it is maintained, and how it might be transformed. These spheres are the social

[8] See, for example, Jason W. Moore, "The Myth of the 'Human Enterprise': The Anthropos and Capitalogenic Change" on World-Ecological Imaginations: Power and Production in the Web of Life (Oct. 30, 2016); online at jasonwmoore.wordpress.com.

[9] From the Greek idiōtēs, a private person.

institutional structure, the social ideology, the social imaginary, and the social ethos.[10] Since there is a dialectical relationship between these spheres, they should not be thought of as discrete realms. For example, no social institutional structure is conceivable without reference to the social ethos, since structures embody, in part, structures of social practice. Thus, mass media as an institutional structure is inseparable from forms of concrete social practice that make use of and are in turn deeply conditioned by mass media technologies. Similarly, no social imaginary signification is conceivable apart from its relation to social ideology, since images in many ways reflect and interact with concepts. For example, the imaginary signification "rugged individualist" reflects and interacts with moral injunctions about the virtues of "hard work" and "self-reliance" that form part of the social ideology. Very significantly, the megastructures of the society of advanced consumer capitalism, the technobureaucratic militaristic state, and the technological megamachine all immediately generate awe-inspiring images of power and wealth. In short, the spheres of determination are theoretical constructs or systemic abstractions that are useful in analyzing a social whole that consists of constellations of phenomena that interact dialectically and are internally related.

It will perhaps be helpful to summarize the nature of these four interrelated spheres of social determination. The social institutional sphere consists of the objective and external structures of social determination (when abstracted from the simultaneously internal-external and objective-subjective social whole). It includes, notably, the structure of capital and its various sectors, the structure of the state apparatus, and the structure of the technological and bureaucratic systems. It includes the external, formal structure of social practices, and the material infrastructure, since institutions consist not merely of structural principles, but of the actual structuration of material resources in accord with such principles. The other three spheres are the internal and subjective realms of social determination (given all the qualifications just mentioned). It is important that we not look upon the relation between the "objective" institutional sphere and the three "subjective" spheres as a "base-superstructure" relationship, but rather one of mutual determination and internal relation. Thus, perhaps paradoxically, the "external" is internally related to the "internal."

The second sphere of social determination consists of the social ethos. "Ethos" is used in the sense of the constellation of social practices that constitute a way of life. Ethos is the sphere of social psychological reality. It can only be understood through a very specific analysis of everyday life and all the habits, practices, gestures, and rituals that it entails. Ethos consists of the way that we live and enact the social and cultural world in which we live, and which lives in and through us. The common weakness of counter-ideologies to which many give lip-service, and in which some believe very deeply, results from the fact that they abstractly theorize that "another world is possible," but the adherents proclaim and legislate through their everyday lives, through their immersion in the dominant social ethos, that "this world is inevitable."

The third sphere of social determination is the realm of the social imaginary. This is the sphere of the society's or community's collective fantasy life. It is the realm of the "fundamental fantasy," a self-image that is much more highly invested with psychic energy than any mere "self-concept,' and which is a central determinant in the life of each person. The social imaginary includes socially-conditioned images of self, other, society, and nature. It encompasses the images of power, success, heroism, and personal gratification expressed in the prevailing myths and paradigmatic narratives of the community and culture. The study of the social imaginary explores the social dimensions of desire and demand. Because social imaginary significations are so intimately related to our quest for meaning, and, in the

[10] See John P. Clark, The Impossible Community: Realizing Communitarian Anarchism (New York and London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013). The conceptualization of "four spheres" of social determination seems the most useful theoretically. Yet, there are, of course, valid alternative conceptualizations of a social topology of such spheres. The social imaginary as discussed here encompasses the Lacanian imaginary and symbolic orders (or "registers"). Some theoretical advantages would be gained and some lost by dividing the sphere of the social imaginary into two spheres in a Lacanian manner. Furthermore, there are, of course, other useful social topologies, such as a topology of fields, that are not discussed here, but which may further deepen and enrich the analysis.

contemporary world, for self-justification, they are invested with intense levels of psychic energy. Much as in the case of the social ethos, this sphere has been generally neglected not only in mainstream social theory, but also in most leftist and radical social thought.

Finally, the fourth sphere of social determination is the realm of social ideology. A social ideology can mean simply a system of ideas that is socially significant and contains a greater or lesser degree of truth and value to the society. However, in the critical sense, an ideology is a system of ideas that purports to be an objective depiction of reality, but, in fact, constitutes a systematic distortion of reality on behalf of some particularistic interest or some system of differential power. Though we might be tempted to say that we need to replace the dominant institutional structure, social imaginary, social ethos and social ideology with new liberatory ones, in the case of ideology it would be better to say that we aim to replace all social ideology with a new form of ecological and communitarian reason (thus, restoring the common Logos).

What is important for liberatory social transformation is an understanding of the ways in which the spheres of social determination interact dialectically to create a social world. Among the major goals of the project of a dialectical social ecology are the following: to theorize adequately, and in a historically and empirically-grounded manner, the spheres of social determination as spheres of dialectical mutual determination; to explore the ways in which the interaction between these spheres of social determination shapes the nature of the social whole; to explain the ways in which many elements of these spheres also contradict and subvert one another, and thus to point the way toward possibilities beyond the existing social world; and to demonstrate the relation between the modes of functioning and the dynamic movement and transformation of these spheres and the social ecological crisis of humanity and the Earth.

Is this the End?

Let is conclude by going back to the beginning. This means "the beginning" in the sense of origins. But it also means the process of "beginning" by returning to the most elementary, simplest, most obvious, and most essential truths. These are the kind of truths that can often be recognized only by those with "beginner's mind." If only we could all become, in the deepest sense, "masters of the obvious."

If we hope to engage in authentic ecological thinking, which implies that we engage at the same time in transformative ecological practice, it is essential that we ask the question: What are the deep, fundamental causes of ecological degradation and impending ecological collapse (the causes of suffering, and the causes of these causes)? We have less trouble focusing on the obvious when we look at other historical epochs. If we look back at the social and ecological destruction under the ancient empires, the cause is obvious. The imperial system, given both its ultimate ends (the amassing of imperial power and the imposition of a hierarchical system of values glorifying such power) and its adoption of means that were eminently suitable for those ends, was both a human and an ecological catastrophe. The ancient empires initiated massive wars of conquest, enslavement of populations, and rituals of large-scale human sacrifice, while at the same time devastating the natural world, causing the first anthropogenic ecological collapses and widespread desertification.[11] That was the beginning of Empire. We are now approaching the death of Empire, and are confronted with the question of what it will take with it, as it finally succumbs to its fatal condition. We now know the etiology of the disease and have a good idea of the prognosis. We have certainly been given enough hints concerning the nature of the cure. Yet, we remain at an impasse in one area: the initiation of treatment.

So, we need return to the question of the determinants of our crisis today. If "four spheres" is too abstract, we might look at the more specific content of these spheres: concentrated economic power that becomes socially and ideologically dominant; a system of values based not on intrinsic good but

[11] This story is summarized concisely in Clive Ponting, "Destruction and Survival" in A New Green History of the World: The Environment and the Collapse of Great Civilizations (New York: Penguin Books, 2007), pp. 67–86, though perhaps no one has summarized it more succinctly than the anarchist Romantic poet Percy Bysshe Shelley in his poem "Ozymandias."

on the constraints of profit maximization and capital accumulation; the continuing power of an even more primordial system of patriarchal values rooted in aggressiveness, conquest, and domination; a system of mass marketing and manipulation of consciousness that gains increasing power to shape selfhood and character-structure; a centralized nation-state that negates any authentic, participatory democracy; state and corporate bureaucracies that impose an instrumental, manipulative rationality; a culture of commodity-worship that traps people in an alienated world of privatized consumption; forms of nature-denying anti-spirituality in the form of fundamentalist religion; a system of technology that becomes a de facto self-moving and autonomous megamachine; a voraciously appropriating egoic self that is the product of all these social realities.

We need to admit to ourselves that the ecological crisis will not be resolved and global ecological catastrophe avoided without imminent, far-reaching, and fundamental changes in the dominant institutions, ethos, ideology and imaginary. Ecological destructiveness is built into the hegemonic structures, operating procedures, and decision-making processes. We need to allow the realization of this fact to penetrate deeply into our being, particularly as we open ourselves up to the deep experience of the tragedies and losses that the system of domination inflicts on humanity and nature. This is called learning solidarity with humanity and nature. We need to allow ourselves to go through the trauma of disillusionment with the dominant system and the dominant reality, so that this can lead to a radical break with that reality. As sages have rightly taught throughout history, we need to go through the agony of the Dark Night of the Soul, so that so that we can emerge from its depths as another kind of being, a fully awakened and caring kind of being.

In practical terms, the reversal of the disastrous, ecocidal course of history will require a radical devolution of power through the democratizing of political, economic, and informational systems. It will also require a radical transformation of values (a deep, world-historical cultural revolution) that encompasses a rejection of economistic values, consumer culture, patriarchal values, and the egocentric self. In short, it will require a radical break with the political institutions, the economic institutions, the technological system, the means of communication, the ideology, the imaginary and symbolic expressions, the cultural values, and the forms of selfhood that are now dominant.[12]

To put it differently, it will require the creation of a material, spiritual and practical basis for the liberatory, transformative vision presented by the axial philosophies and religions that emerged two and a half millennia ago, and which in term looked back to the sane, humane and ecologically sound aspects of the indigenous communities that existed over the vast majority of world history. We need to seek the rational core of what ancient societies expressed poetically in such concepts as the Garden of Eden, The Golden Age, and the Dynasty of the Yellow Emperor, that is, the image of a free, cooperative, and ecologically-attuned world that existed before the rise of systems of social domination. We need to be able to express this idea of reason and attunement in nature (called the Logos, the Dharma, the Dao) in a way that is meaningful for our own age.

We will then be able to face the difficult and demanding truth that we are nearing the end of that world-historical Fall we call Civilization. The question is whether we can emerge from an age of nihilism and resignation and give birth to a new era of creative and regenerative action. We must ask whether there is still hope that the historic Fall and all the suffering that it has entailed can be redeemed, a hope expressed classically in the Latin exclamation "Felix Culpa!" or "Blessed Fall!" The question is whether it is an ultimate Fall into the abyss of planetary death and devastation or a provisional Fall that culminates in a rebirth, in a "true resurrection of humanity-in-nature."[13] Through such a rebirth,

[12] As subsequent discussions will show, we find powerful evidence of progress in this direction in the Zapatista communities in Chiapas, in the Democratic Autonomy movement in Rojava, and in indigenous movements in Bolivia and elsewhere.

[13] To revise and ecologize further a famous formulation of Marx that was restated in a more visionary form by Herbert Marcuse in his concept of the "liberation of nature." See Karl Marx, "Private Property and Labor" in Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts, online at https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1844/epm/3rd.htm, and Herbert Marcuse, "Nature and Revolution" in Counterrevolution and Revolt (Boston: Beacon Press, 1972), pp. 59–78.

we would learn again to celebrate ourselves, our communities, the Earth, and the entire Cosmos as *Natura naturata* and *Natura naturans*, as wonders of creation and creativity.[14]

[14] We would thus achieve the kind of ecological sensibility expressed in Thomas Berry and Brian Swimme's The Universe Story From the Primordial Flaring Forth to the Ecozoic Era—A Celebration of the Unfolding of the Cosmos (New York: Harper, 1994), but the rebirth would also entail creating the material and social-ecological basis for such a sensibility to prevail historically.

A Critical Introduction to Bookchin's "Theses on Libertarian Municipalism"

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Murray Bookchin's political thought is noteworthy for helping to transmit core anarchist ideas of decentralized direct democracy and free federation to several post-60's generations of anarchists and libertarian socialists. His text, "Theses on Libertarian Municipalism,"[1] was a significant step in the development of that project. Moreover, the work is of more interest at the present moment in history than it has been at any time since it was published. This ground-breaking manifesto in defense of communal participatory democracy was completed in September 1984, and was first published in 1985 in the Canadian anarchist journal *Our Generation*.[2] On its appearance, the journal's editors commented that "after several decades of writing critical analysis of historical and contemporary issues, Bookchin initiates a long-awaited and much-needed movement-building perspective."[3]

For almost thirty years after this initiation, there was scant evidence of the emergence of such a movement, including in the U.S., Canada, and Western Europe, where Bookchin focused his efforts. However, more recently, largely unanticipated historic tendencies have emerged, including the Democratic Autonomy Movement in Rojava, the Zapatista Movement in Chiapas, grassroots indigenous movements in Bolivia and elsewhere, that have given the work a much greater historical significance. In these movements, communal assemblies, citizens' committees, and other forms of base democracy have once again become historical realities. Though these current developments differ in some important ways from what Bookchin envisioned in 1984, they constitute a radical libertarian and decentralist turn in the global Left that makes his work on municipalism an important link between historical anarchist thought and practice and the most advanced contemporary revolutionary politics.

What has often been missing in contemporary anarchist thought is a vision of how an anarchist or libertarian socialist approach might transform society in practice. Bookchin proposes an alternative to two unpromising approaches that are common in recent anarchism. One is to focus almost entirely on resistance and oppositional work, while leaving constructive counter-institution building for possible future consideration. The second is to put one's efforts into a variety of constructive but basically marginal projects, hoping that somehow this will transform the world. Bookchin's crucial contribution was to help revive debate within anarchism and libertarian socialism concerning the possibility of a realistic program that had a meaningful and reasonably concrete vision of how society could be deeply transformed in the foreseeable future. On the other hand, Bookchin's approach also demonstrates the pitfalls of theory degenerating in some ways into ideology, as exhibited in a certain programmatic rigidity, and in a tendency to distort opposing views, as exemplified by the clumsy caricature of anarchism that he presented when he was in the process of renouncing it.

Contrary to his later claims, Bookchin points out correctly in the "Theses" that what he labelled libertarian municipalism, and later came to call "communalism," is inherent in the works of the classical

[1] This text was written as a preface for the new edition of "Pour un municipalisme libertaire," the French translation of "Theses on Libertarian Municipalism," published by the Atelier de Création Libertaire in Lyon. Thanks to David Watson of the *Fifth Estate* and Michael Pelias of the Instititute for the Radical Imagination for very helpful suggestions.

[2] Murray Bookchin, "Theses on Libertarian Municipalism" in *Our Generation* Vol. 16, Nos. 3 & 4. Spring/Summer 1985, pp. 9–22. For a fully-developed version of Bookchin's position see Murray Bookchin, "The Communalist Project" in *Social Ecology and Communalism* (Oakland: AK Press, 2006), pp. 7–116.

[3] "Theses," in *Our Generation*, p. 7.

anarchists. This was true to a certain degree of the first major theorists, Proudhon and Bakunin, but became much more pronounced in the thought of communist anarchists such as Kropotkin and Reclus. Later, it was also expressed powerfully in the communitarian anarchism of Gustav Landauer. In such a politics, ultimate power lies in the hands of the citizens of the local community, and in Bookchin's version, above all in the democratic assemblies of these citizens. Bookchin describes it in the "Theses" as "the re-embodiment of the masses into richly articulated assemblies, the formation of a body politic in an arena of discourse, shared rationality, free expression, and radically democratic modes of decision-making." He hopes that this politics will allow "the People" to reemerge as the world-historical subject of revolution, based on a "'general interest' that is formed out of public concern over "ecological, community, moral, gender, and cultural issues."

Bookchin's focus on the primacy of the assembly exhibits both the strengths and the weaknesses of his position. He argues for the assembly as the major force in shaping members of the community into true citizens. In the "Theses," he describes this institution as essential to "the character formation which transforms 'men' from passive objects into active subjects." Elsewhere, he depicts "new forms of citizenship" and the assembly as the "social gymnasium"[4] in which the citizens develop the "muscularity of thought"[5] that allows them to be judicious and rational decision-makers. A strong point in this analysis is the idea that for authentic communal self-rule or self-management to exist, a kind of person must emerge who is capable of making decisions that are wise, impartial, and for the good of the community. For successful social transformation, any collective or universal "subject" of revolution, whether a specific class or "the People" in general, must be rooted in the individual "subject" of revolution as the free, communal, rational, and responsible person. This image of personhood is a stark contrast to late capitalist subjectivity, in which there is a disintegration of character-structure and a loss of sociality. However, there are also problematic aspects to Bookchin's conception of selfhood. One of the most significant problems is that his images of activity, strength and management often exhibit a masculinist bias in his thought. As this dimension develops, especially during his more programmatically municipalist period, he gives a rather restricted concept of "rationality" a more central place, while there is increasingly less emphasis on community members as caring, loving and nurturing beings.[6]

A major issue for Bookchin's confederal municipalism is the relationship between assemblies and structurally higher-level bodies that are in principle subordinate to the power of the base. He asserts in the "Theses" that "only if assemblies ... maintain the most demanding vigilance and scrutiny over any coordinating confederal bodies is a libertarian democracy conceivable." He assures the reader that "structurally, this issue poses no problems," since "communities have relied on experts and administrators without losing their freedom from time immemorial." His first point is indisputable from a radical libertarian perspective. Delegates at any federal or confederal level, council members, and members of administrative bodies such as citizens' commissions must be subject to mechanisms such binding mandates and recall, if power is to be maintained at the base. However, structural constraints that work beautifully in theory are not always adequate to prevent abuses in practice. In the real world, assemblies can only oversee, interpret, and execute policy to a very limited degree. This is the reason why recent revolutionary movements have found that the expression of democracy through other means—for example, through the kind of diverse citizens' councils that exist in Rojava, through the Zapatistas' good government councils and *comisiónes de vigilancia*, and above all, through diverse aspects of the ethos of the community—is so important.

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[4] Murray Bookchin, *Toward an Ecological Society* (Montréal: Black Rose Books, 1980), p. 290.

[5] Murray Bookchin, *The Philosophy of Social Ecology: Essays in Dialectical Naturalism* (Montréal: Black Rose Books, 1990), p. 138.

[6] A major gap in Bookchin's social ecology is his failure to address (or learn from) the ecofeminist ethics and politics of care. A good introduction to ecofeminist themes of embodied materialism and ("meta-industrial") caring labor is Ariel Salleh's *Ecofeminism as Politics* (London: Zed Books/New York: Palgrave, 1997; new edition forthcoming) and her collection *Eco-Sufficency & Global Justice: Women Write Political Ecology* (London: Pluto Press, 2009).

Bookchin's position has been controversial among many anarchists because of his advocacy of participation in local elections and local governmental institutions. He stresses in the "Theses" the need to "alter city and town charters," in order to create "directly democratic institutions" at that decentralized level. He replies to critics that "there is no reason why such a politics should be construed as parliamentary, particularly if it is confined to the civic level and is consciously posed against the State." One reason might be, however, that explicitly parliamentary regional and local systems have existed and still do, and city councils in general can meaningfully be interpreted this way. So, it might be best to recognize the "parliamentary" dimensions of this politics and confront consciously the challenges and even dangers that these aspects pose. Bookchin describes his municipalism as a politics that is "structured around neighborhood assemblies, recallable deputies, radically democratic forms of accountability, and deeply rooted localist networks." The final point, which concerns the larger ethos in which the formally democratic procedures are situated, is a very crucial one. We must ask how they can be deeply rooted in a pervasive ethos that is not only libertarian and egalitarian, but also communitarian and caring. The potential for developing a strong community of care at the local level will depend in part on the "ethical substantiality" (to use Hegel's pertinent concept) embodied in a community's living traditions of mutuality and care. Bookchin calls the town, village or neighborhood community a person's "most immediate environment" in a rather ahistorical, generic sense. However, it will constitute such an "environment," not merely in theory, but in actuality, to quite different degrees, depending on the degree to which it is part of a more traditional society in which such communal practices are central, or part of a highly technological, mediatized, commodified and atomized one in which these practices are increasingly alien. Bookchin focused his efforts almost entirely on North American and European societies in which traditional communal roots were weakest, while he largely neglected non-Western, and above all, indigenous contexts in which the radical communitarian potential has been greatest, as we now see in Chiapas, Rojava, and Aymara communities in Bolivia.

Among the major issues that Bookchin confronts in the "Theses" are several interrelated ones: the role of class politics in revolutionary struggle; the significance of the economic dimension; and the relation between the community and the workplace. He is highly critical of what he sees as an over-emphasis on the role of the working class and of economic factors by the traditional Left, and he proposes a radical shift to the centrality of the local community or commune. One of his criticisms of working-class movements, including both Marxism and anarcho-syndicalism, is that in their worldview "the economy has acquired a predominant position over the community" and there is a "shift from an ethical emphasis on socialism to an economic one." However, this claim is questionable. It seems difficult to deny that the workers' movement's enduring crusade against sweatshops, child labor, slave labor, hazardous workplaces, exploitation of women and children, destruction of the health of workers, poisoning of both workers and communities, etc. have expressed deeply moral concerns and constituted a deeply ethical critique of capitalism. While the French version of the Internationale invokes "la raison," and the German invokes "das Recht," the two together epitomize the ethical core of the classical worker's movement.

Gaston Laval, in his study of the working-class Spanish anarchist movement, argues that its experience shows that the preparation for any "social revolution that is truly socialist ["révolution sociale et vraiment socialiste] ... must be, above all, moral [doit être, avant tout, morale.]"[7] The successes of the movement depended to a significant degree on the fact that its vision of a free and just libertarian communism captured the *moral imagination* of the masses. Bookchin's claim that there was "a disturbing shift in emphasis from communitarianism to industrialism, from communal values to factory values" is valid to the extent that Spanish workers found industrialism and factories to be much more central to their everyday lives and practical struggles than in earlier periods. Yet, this is not equivalent to a weakening of the ethical dimension within their own movement, in which ideas of justice and injustice, equity and exploitation, solidarity and brutality all remained strong. There has, in fact, been a weakening of the ethical in modern society. However, this has, ironically, been primarily the result of the *antithesis* of

[7] Gaston Laval, *Espagne Libertaire (36–39)* (Paris: Editions du Monde Libertaire, 1983); online at cras31.info.

what Bookchin, points out: the *decline* of the industrial working class and its productionist values (the dignity of labor, the need for equitable distribution, etc.) and the rise of the "post-industrial" capitalism of the society of mass consumption, with its values of self-image, lifestyle, comfort, and immediate gratification.

In the "Theses," Marx and Engels come in for particularly harsh criticism on the issue of economism. Bookchin goes as far as to say that in their analysis "the myth that the factory serves to 'discipline,' 'unite,' and 'organize' the proletariat" led workers "to ignore its authoritarian and hierarchical role. It is true that Marx was optimistic in many ways about the ability to the working class to self-organize based on its experience in the modern capitalism industrial system but he was, in fact, quite critical of the authoritarian and hierarchal aspects of highly mechanized factory production. Bookchin is obviously correct in questioning the over-optimism of Marxists and even anarcho-syndicalists concerning the possible results of mere seizure and operation of the existing industrial system by the working class. However, it is not true that either branch of the workers' movement overlooked the hierarchical and authoritarian nature of the existing factory system. To cite one of Marx's numerous statements on this topic, he writes in *Capital* of "the technical subordination of the workman to the uniform motion of the instruments of labor" and "a barrack discipline, which is elaborated into a complete system in the factory, and fully develops the labor of overlooking, thereby dividing the workpeople into operatives and [overseers], into private soldiers and sergeants of an industrial army."[8] The classical anarchist movement, even as it embraced the cause of the workers and celebrated the International, made similar criticisms of industrialized and mechanized factories and farms, as expressed, for example, in Elisée Reclus's pamphlet "A Mon Frère le Paysan,"[9] and in other works.

In his effort to discredit what he sees as a misguided workerism, Bookchin makes the significant but rather curious claim that "the factory, and for much of history the workplace, has actually been the primary arena not only for the exploitation but of hierarchy—this together with the patriarchal family." This claim is fascinating in that it states and refutes its own thesis within the space of a single sentence. The factory is the "primary arena"—with the exception of whatever else is primary. A rather reductionist view of domination is initially asserted, and then correctly rejected, in partial recognition of the reality that domination is, in fact, a complex dialectical process in which the person, the family, the community, and the workplace are all "primary sites" of domination that profoundly condition one another, and are, indeed, present in one another. The Rojava Revolution has been unusually explicit on the patriarchal roots of domination and exploitation. Öcalan's thought has made a real advance in emphasizing the fact that it is not only the traditional family that reflects deeply-rooted patriarchal values, but the individual psyche, the community, and the workplace. This dialectic of mutual determination must be understood as encompassing all forms of domination. including not only capitalist and patriarchal domination, but other forms such political domination through the State, and technological domination through the Megamachine.

One of the most valuable, yet also quite problematic, aspects of Bookchin's interpretation of world history is his treatment of the liberatory role of the city and of the civilizing process, which he associates with cities. His analysis is strongest when he discusses the emancipatory possibilities opened by the city from the ancient Greek polis to the Paris or Barcelona of the modern revolutionary age. As he recounts it in the "Theses," "the emergence of the city opens to us in varying degrees of development not only the new domain of universal *humanitas* as distinguished from the parochial folk, of the free space of an innovative civicism as distinguished from tradition-bound, biocentric *gemeinschaften*; it also opens to us the realm of *polissonomos*, the management of the polis by a body politic of free citizens." This analysis points out an important truth. The development of the city helped establish the moment of universality in citizenship. In Hegelian terms, the city developed *universal particularity* through the unfolding of the possibilities within the community, while at the same time developing *universal singularity* through the

[8] Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy* (New York: International Publishers, 1967), Vol. I, pp. 423–424.

[9] Elisée Reclus, "A Mon Frère le Paysan," in John Clark and Camille Martin, *Anarchy, Geography, Modernity* (Oakland: PM Press, 2013), pp. 113–119.

unfolding of the possibilities of each person as a citizen. This is an inspiring historical heritage that the free community must claim and develop further. Yet, it focuses on only one side of the story.

The achievements of civilization have always contained both progressive and regressive moments. Thus, the Greek polis, in excluding women from a supposedly "universal *humanitas*" was a regression from some aspects of previous matrifocal societies. On this point, it should be noted how strikingly Bookchin's account of the civilizing process contrasts with that of the eco-anarchist philosopher-geographer Reclus, who thought that each "civilizing" advance in, for example, personal freedom or technological ingenuity, needed to be balanced against losses in areas such as communal solidarity and ecological sensibility.[10] Bookchin contends that "the Urban Revolution ... essentially created the idea of a universal *humanitas* and the communalizing of that humanity along rational and ethical lines. It raised the limits to human development imposed by the kinship tie, the parochialism of the folk world, and the suffocating effects of custom." His position echoes in some ways Marx's rather Eurocentric stigmatization of "the idiocy of rural life." Today such views sound, if not racist, at least rather unjustly dismissive of the valuable experience of many traditional societies, and, above all, of the liberatory dimensions of indigenous cultures. Thus, we might want to hesitate a bit before we hasten "beyond the band and village level of non-hierarchical social relationships" and reconsider what we must learn from these "levels."

Bookchin states in the "Theses" that "'civilizing' is merely another expression for 'politicizing' and rendering a mass into a deliberative, rational, ethical body politic." But it is not merely this. As he himself once recognized in his discussion of "organic society," it is, in some ways, another expression for the loss of forms of caring, mutual aid, and generosity. At that point, he was much closer to Reclus's more expansive view of history. To recognize these valuable moments of indigenous society is in no way to deny the urgently needed lessons that we can learn from what Bookchin considers the "most noteworthy" examples of the achievements of civilization, such as "the Athenian democracy, New England town meetings, the sectional assemblies and Paris Commune of 1793." These examples can serve as powerful sources of hope and inspiration, as long as they are approached in a deeply (rather than merely superficially) critical way, and other examples, including non-Western and indigenous ones, are given equal consideration as sources of lessons concerning liberation. Furthermore, we might always keep in mind the rather important fact that the civilizing process has always been in part a genocidal process.

Finally, there is the inescapable yet perplexing question of leadership. Bookchin says in the "Theses" that the emergence of "a viable libertarian confederalist movement" requires the existence of the kind of "radical *intelligentsia*" that has "provided the cutting edge of every revolutionary project in history." There are indeed many good examples of the crucial role played by such a political avant-garde. However, it would be more accurate to say that this role has been played in "many revolutionary projects" in "a certain period of history." Such a formation was not so central to the Mexican Revolution and has been even less essential to other peasant and indigenous revolts that should not be read out of or marginalized within revolutionary history. Furthermore, the Zapatista experience shows that the reality may at times be closer to the *opposite* of what Bookchin depicts. In Chiapas, the crucial turning-point occurred when the radical intelligentsia that came to instruct and lead the indigenous people realized that it had instead to learn and to follow if it was to play a truly revolutionary role. The "radical intelligentsia" that went to Chiapas to instruct the indigenous people ended up discovering that it had more to learn than to teach, and that what is necessary is, as the Zapatistas put it, *mandar obedeciendo*, or "leading by obeying."

On the other hand, one might point to Öcalan's influence in Rojava as supporting evidence for Bookchin's model, since he exemplifies the extraordinary power that even a single radical intellectual can have when such a figure also happens to be a long-time, dedicated movement leader. Yet, Öcalan also had a conversion experience similar to that of the Zapatistas when he discovered the role of women and feminine values in history and "pre-history," and realized that the centralist, authoritarian, patriarchal

[10] Elisée Reclus, "Progress" in *Anarchy, Geography, Modernity,* pp. 208–233.

concept of vanguardist revolution must be rejected in favor of an egalitarian, participatory and cooperative one. He also discovered that implicitly hierarchical ideas of leadership that prevail even among the Left need to be discarded, and that communal practice, and especially that of women, needs to take the lead.[11] In the case of both Rojava and (especially) Zapatismo, leadership does not disappear, but it is radically transformed, and evolves beyond the classic revolutionary instances on which Bookchin bases his paradigms.

In conclusion, the emergence of strong movements for and practical achievements in the creation of decentralized participatory democracy in Chiapas, Rojava, El Alto, and elsewhere have given Bookchin's Theses on *Libertarian Municipalism* a much greater significance as a link between the historical anarchist tradition and contemporary developments. We now have more evidence than ever that highly participatory communal assembles are an effective means for eliminating hierarchy and forms of domination and for helping to express the will of a free community. On the other hand, we find that real-world developments have in some ways moved beyond the municipalist vision expressed in the "Theses." Contemporary revolutionary movements, through actual social practice, have launched a much deeper critique of patriarchy and masculinist egoism, and revealed more about the transformative power of radical feminism. In addition, they have expanded our perspective by exploring the role in social revolution of the "non-party party" and of other institutions besides assemblies in a non-hierarchical, horizontalist, and democratic political system and culture. And finally, they have helped us reimagine the question of revolution as a question of the here and now.

[11] The degree to which a fully critical approach is taken to Öcalan's own ideas remains an important one.

Speaking a Word for the Wetlands: There is No Lotus in Spite of the Swamp

Date: May 8, 2017

"The lotus plant ... takes root in the fetid but nutrient-rich mud of swamps so that its beautiful flower may rise above the murky water. The flower's grace is inextricably connected to the noisome swamp, just as redemption exists in ruin, and creativity in destruction." – "Artistic Director's Statement" for *Prospect. 4: The Lotus in Spite of the Swamp.*

American Lotuses in the Louisiana Swamp (louisianaswamptour.blogspot.com)

We are in the midst of an assault on the swamp. Though this assault has both material and ideological aspects, its most pernicious dimension is, of course, the ongoing physical destruction of swamps and other wetlands. Industrial capitalism, and, above all, the globally ecocidal oil industry, has been waging a war of annihilation against the swamp for most of the last century. In my own lifetime, we have seen the disappearance of almost two thousand square miles of coastal swamps, marshes and wetlands in Louisiana.

This is but a recent battle in an age-old war against wetlands that in fact spans the entire history of Civilization. The project of annihilation of swamps began with the destruction of the wetlands of the Fertile Crescent in Mesopotamia by the despotic ancient empires, and helped cause the first anthropogenic ecological and societal collapses in human history. This project has continued and has spanned the subsequent centuries. Indeed, it recently returned to where it began, with a literal vengeance, in Saddam Hussein's crusade to drain the Mesopotamian Marshes and eliminate those who took refuge there to resist his barbaric regime.

In the subjective realm, the obsessive fear and hatred of swamps and other wetlands has a long history that parallels civilization's material project of conquest of nature and its ruthless destruction of nature-affirming indigenous cultures. There is no English word that describes the primordial fear of swamps in particular, but we have the generic term "limnophobia" for the morbid loathing of the troubling "murky" waters of swamps, marshes and lakes.

This visceral, emotional repulsion by wetlands has been accompanied by an entire limnophobic imaginary and limnophobic ideology. In popular culture, ranging from traditional folk tales to recent B movies, swamps are fantasized as the site of the appearance of ghosts, goblins, monsters, zombies, and psychopaths. Moreover, even the flora and fauna of this ecosystem are depicted as menacing and homicidal.

The Phantom Stranger #14 (DC Comics, 8/1/71)

There are exceptions. Indeed, the most notable swamp creature in the comics world, Swamp Thing, is portrayed as a defender of both nature and humanity. Yet, this has done little to transform swamps in the popular imagination. Recently, the popular TV series *Swamp People*, by identifying life in the swamps with the machismo and nature-battling involved in the trade of alligator-hunting, has reinforced the image of the swamp as a scene of struggle and conquest.

The imaginary assault on swamps has been accompanied an ideological one that has long been endemic to American society. In fact, it has been escalating recently. The most conspicuous evidence of this ideological intensification is, of course, Donald Trump's continued identification of everything that he finds evil and detestable in Washington as "the swamp," and his description the process of purging the country of all these evils and abuses as "draining the swamp."

One would hope that anyone using the theme of "Swamp" to conceptualize a major cultural event in a city whose identity is profoundly determined by swamps and other wetlands would reflect carefully on the nature of these ecosystems and strive to communicate that nature accurately. This is particularly important in the current climate of obscurantism and defiant rejection of clear scientific facts and crucial ecological realities. Unfortunately, the Artistic Director, despite his good intentions, seems only to compound the confusion, since he endows the conventional nonsense concerning swamps with a deceptive aura of sophisticated cultural theory.

It is worthwhile to look carefully at the specific words and images used in the "Statement," since they are a revealing example of how the limnophobic imaginary and ideology operate. The "Statement" calls Prospect.4 the fourth "iteration" of the event, adopting a fashionable technical term originating in mathematics and computer science. It claims that the event "finds inspiration in the lotus plant." The inspiration in question comes from the fact that the beautiful and spiritually evocative lotus flower grows in a swamp, which is fantasized according to the limnophobic imaginary as an environment that is, on the one hand, *filthy* and *repulsive*, and on the other, *hostile* and *threatening*.

Developing the theme of "filth," the "Statement" describes the swamp as "fetid," a term that is conventionally defined as "smelling extremely unpleasant," and "noisome," which is defined as "having an extremely offensive smell," In addition, the swamp is, of course, characterized by the inevitable adjective "murky," a term that means, specifically in relation to water, "dark and dirty," but that also has connotations of "dark and gloomy." To develop the second theme of "threat," the "Statement" identifies the swamp with "ruin," "destruction," "arduous challenges," and "difficulty and desolation." Just as art triumphs over such evils in society, the lotus is depicted as triumphing over all of them as they are somehow embodied in the swamp.

The latter part of this depiction may sound familiar, since it fits into a long and influential tradition in the social imaginary. The image of the swamp expressed in the "Statement" reflects the popular pseudo-Darwinian conception of nature. This conception is classically expressed through the image of the natural world as "the Jungle," which is fantasized as the scene of a ruthless struggle for existence (the "Law of the Jungle") in which higher, more refined, lotus-like things can only survive and flourish through a triumph over the brutal forces of nature.

"*Diagram* SHOWING THE – *inundated District – Sauvé's Crevasse* May 3RD 1849"

In truth, the swamp is not really "the Jungle." In fact, even the jungle isn't really "the Jungle." The graphic that accompanies the "Statement" is a well-known image dated May 3, 1849. It shows the severe flooding of the city in that year. This event was historic in that it was the last time the city was inundated by a break in the Mississippi River levees. It was one of the long series of traumas that our city has endured. On June 17 of that year, my great-great-great grandfather Paul Lobit wrote his brother Emile in France of the many disasters ("beaucoup de catastrophes") that had beset the city at that moment: a cholera epidemic, the widespread flooding, the destitution of individuals, the ruin of businesses. It was a significant historical moment for New Orleans.

However, the image depicting the flood seems to have been selected randomly with no knowledge of the history of the city and the surrounding wetlands. The salient element of the map is the large area flooded by the breach of the natural levee at Sauvé's Crevasse, upriver from New Orleans. The inundated area included both large expanses of backswamp and a significant part of the city itself. It certainly doesn't depict anything about a "lotus in spite of the swamp." It shows that flooding takes place in low-lying areas, which in this case included those in which the swamp had been cleared for the city to expand. There is no doubt that the extensive areas of remaining swampland reduced the degree to which the city itself was flooded and thus mitigated the disaster.

`][Louisiana swamp from National <em>Geographic Encyclopedic Entries</em>`

The online National Geographic *Encyclopedic Entries* site, which is aimed at educating young people and others in basic knowledge of nature, would be a convenient place for the Artistic Director or anyone to begin learning about true nature of swamps. The site's article on "Swamps" notes that these ecosystems are a particularly favorable milieu for the flourishing of life. It specifically mentions that the

freshwater swamps between the Tigris and Euphrates gave the region in ancient times the name "Fertile Crescent," because of its life-giving fecundity.

The article also points out that coastal saltwater swamps are called "the nurseries of the ocean" because so much life in the sea is spawned and nurtured there. It explains that swamps are "among the most valuable ecosystems on Earth" for "moderating the effects of flooding" (such as the flooding depicted in the Artistic Director's image), "protecting coastal areas from storm surges," and "filtering wastes and purifying water." Finally, the article notes foolish popular prejudices concerning swamps in the past, when they "were looked upon as wastelands" and thought to be "sinister and forbidding."

One of things that immediately disturbed me about the "Statement" was its depiction of swamps as extremely foul-smelling. In a way, it seems more forgivable that one would absorb what the dominant ideology says about nature in general being a ruthless "struggle for survival," since this is at least based on a one-sided exaggeration of an aspect of biological reality. But it seems much less forgivable that one would distort something that is a matter of basic sensory perception. One must wonder if the Artistic Director has ever had the opportunity to spend time in swamps.

In my experience, I have never found swamps to be "fetid," "noisome," or foul-smelling. The presence of noxious odors seems to me to be the exception in swamps (as opposed, for example, to many industrialized areas). As I look back on all my time since childhood fishing and canoeing in and around marshes and swamps, I remember marshes to be sometimes, but not always, pervaded by the smell of biogas, but swamps to be almost always free of such odors.

On the other hand, I have found that there is nothing I can imagine that is more magnificent than sunrise and sunset over the swamp. For this reason, the most significant adjective that occurs to me when I think of swamps is not "fetid," "noisome," or "murky," but rather "sublime." They are rightly classed among nature's "Cathedrals of the Spirit."

baconbaron.com)]]

It occurred to me, however, that it is possible that I have been a victim of "wishful perception," or perhaps more accurately, "wishful perceptual memory." Is it possible that because I am such a partisan of swamps that I notice noxious odors less when I am in such an ecosystem, and that I suppress memory of negative or unpleasant sensations when I recall my experience of such wondrous and inspiring places?

Consequently, I decided to question concerning their experience in this matter several of the people I know who have had the most extensive experience of swamps. All responded that during the long periods of time they have spent in swamps they have seldom if ever found them to be foul-smelling. One replied that in his experience they had never had this characteristic. He went so far as to say that to typify them this way was "ludicrous and insane," and expressed sadness that, despite the dedicated efforts of naturalists and other lovers of these ecosystems, such distorted stereotypes are still so widespread. Another noted that despite occasional releases of sulfide smell, "in my experience swamps in their undisturbed state have a deep, sensuous, organic smell."

It seems unfortunate that the Artistic Director found a quote from a jazz musician who described jazz as "a lily that grows, in spite of the swamp," and that he decided to take this depiction as his model in conceptualizing an important cultural event in our community. The quote is certainly appealing, and the point the musician makes about jazz is an excellent one. The history of that musical genre does indeed reflect the "triumph of the human spirit" in the face of social injustice and oppression. This is a deep and momentous truth that we should ponder and never forget. But the unquestionable validity of this truth does nothing to make the specific metaphor used to express this verity an appropriate one.

The process in which, as the Artistic Director puts it, New Orleans "gave birth to jazz ... under adverse circumstances" is not at all analogous to the manner in which swamps give birth to lilies or lotuses. A milieu that produces vast biodiversity is anything but "adverse" in relation to the flourishing of indigenous life forms. Louisiana swamps are famous for their beautiful lotuses, lilies, and irises – perhaps above all for the magnificent, indeed, seemingly miraculous expanses of blue irises. But these lotuses, lilies and irises do not grow and flourish in spite of the swamp. They do so precisely because of the swamp.

Blue irises in the Louisiana swamp (blog.albanywoodworks.com)

Biographical note: The author grew up in the St. Roch neighborhood of New Orleans on *Arts* near *Marais*.

“The Story of the Hundredth Monkey”

Date: December 29, 2016

by Max Cafard

Many have been inspired by “The Story of the Hundredth Monkey”

This is how it goes.

Once there was a Monkey who had a great idea for A Better Way.

It was an idea that could change the whole Monkey World if enough Monkeys did things A Better Way.

The Monkey thought “Why do we Monkeys have to keep doing it like *They* tell us to?”

And the Monkey thought, “Why can’t we do it A Better Way?”

And the Monkey thought, “Maybe if I start doing it A Better Way, other Monkeys will see what I’m doing, and start doing it A Better Way.”

And the Monkey thought, “If *enough* Monkeys start doing it A Better Way, eventually this will change the whole Monkey World!”

“We will stop doing it the way *They* tell us to!”

“We will all do it A Better Way!”

So the Monkey started doing it A Better Way.

Soon, another Monkey saw what the Monkey was doing.

And that Monkey thought, “Hey, this is A Better Way!”

And that Monkey started doing it A Better Way.

Then another Monkey saw what the other Monkeys were doing.

That Monkey thought the same thing.

And soon, that Monkey started doing it A Better Way.

And then another Monkey, and another Monkey, and another.

They all started doing it A Better Way!

Until finally, a Hundred Monkeys were doing it A Better Way!

And then something very strange and unexpected happened.

They noticed that things were getting out of control.

They killed the Hundred Monkeys.

The End.

The moral of this story is that it isn’t enough to have a Hundred Monkeys.

You also have to learn how to deal with *Them.*

“No New Leases! Keep It In The Ground!”

Date: September 30, 2016

I wrote the following statement early this morning (Aug. 23) before leaving to present a petition to the Gulf of Mexico regional office of the Bureau of Ocean Energy Management demanding the cancelling of tomorrow’s Gulf oil lease auction. After being barred from entering the waiting room, our group of four presenters remained in the outer entry way. After much negotiation, I was allowed to enter the waiting room and present the petition to a staff member. I was told that the petition would be forwarded to the Director and the President. We were then ordered to leave the entire building, but our group replied that we chose to stay until we received a reply from the Director and the President. We were told that since the Bureau offices are rented we were trespassing on private property and had no right to wait there for a response. We rejected this position as an illegitimate infringement on our freedom of speech, freedom of assembly, and right to petition. We remained and were eventually arrested and removed from the building. Three members of our group were given summonses and released in the afternoon and the fourth member is still in the Jefferson Parish Prison. [Note: He was released later in the day.]

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We have come to the Gulf of Mexico Region office of the Bureau of Ocean Energy Management (BOEM) to present petitions with 184,000 signatures demanding the cancellation of tomorrow’s Gulf oil lease auction and an end to all new oil drilling in the gulf. We are presenting these petitions as concerned citizens of a threatened and disappearing coastal Louisiana and citizens of a beleaguered and endangered Earth. We, the 184,000 signatories, and the millions of others who are in agreement with us, demand that President Obama cancel the oil lease auction and that additional drilling be ended.

My family came to southeast Louisiana almost three hundred years ago and has remained here for twelve generations. Both the City of New Orleans and our family are about to celebrate three centuries of life in our region. Native people whose traditional lands are being rapidly destroyed have lived here for thousands of years. We celebrate our long history here but we mourn both the previous injustices that have been part of it, and the fact that we are faced with a brutal end to that history. We must adopt the principle of indigenous people that we must think about the welfare of the Seventh Generation. We realize that none of our families and none of our peoples will remain here even a century from now if the oil industry merely continues its business as usual.

This harsh reality must be recognized fully and faced with courage and dedication. The land and people of coastal Louisiana will simply no longer exist if we accept this catastrophe as normal everyday reality. I have taught environmental ethics here in New Orleans for over thirty years. I strongly believe that it is important for us to reflect deeply on what is right and good for people and the Earth. However, I also believe that thinking about such things or even affirming our belief in what is right and good for both people and the planet are not enough. We must ultimately make a decision to act on behalf of what is right and good and to get to the roots of what is both wrong and destructive to both humanity and the Earth.

The oil industry has been the overwhelmingly most powerful destructive force in the devastation of both the land of our coastal bioregion and the waters of the Gulf of Mexico. In my own lifetime, this industry has caused the loss of an area of Louisiana coastline equivalent in size to the state of Delaware. It has caused both catastrophic major oil spills and continuous smaller yet still disastrous ones that have degraded and threatened the integrity of the Gulf ecosystem. It has been instrumental in producing the global climate change that causes increased hurricane activity and major climate disturbances. This

greatly increases the frequency of disasters like Hurricane Katrina and the recent 500 to 1000 year rain and flooding events in Louisiana.

We are in the midst of a global climate catastrophe, in addition to the sixth great mass extinction of life on earth, and other major ecological crises. Indeed, we are facing the possibility of the collapse of the entire global ecosystem. This possibility will soon become an inevitability if we do not rapidly transform the global economy and system of production. We must end all denial and disavowal of this reality, and fully recognize our role either in promoting and contributing to the coming ecological catastrophe or in preventing it.

The immediate and complete replacement of fossil fuels by ecologically sound energy production is essential to our survival and the survival of much of life on earth. It is essential that we begin to undertake immediate direct action on a massive scale, in addition to other forms of legal, political and economic action, to put an end to the ecocidal and genocidal fossil fuel economy, and replace it with a life-affirming one. The cancelling of tomorrow's Gulf oil lease auction is one important step in this fight for our own lives and for the future of life on Earth.

Freedom and Care are Inseparable

Date: June 30, 2016

Ronald Creagh interviewing John Clark

Centre Ascaso-Durruti, Montpellier, France, October 27, 2015

I'm happy to introduce John Clark, who was Distinguished Professor of Philosophy at Loyola University in New Orleans and was and still is a very important andwell-known activist … So, welcome John Clark, I'm very happy to listen to what you are going to tell us about Louisiana and your interpretations of a world which is, as we know, today, in a complete movement of change.

I'll be interested also in what might happen. I might begin with a little biography, perhaps. I began working in the anarchist movement in the nineteen-sixties. For many years, I was very active in the cooperative movement, working in childcare, education, food and worker co-ops. Central to my vision of what anarchism is about is an interest in everyday life, an interest in the minute conditions of existence. "Ethos," we might say. "How you live." "Living your life" as someone once said.

In the 1970s I became involved in a movement called social ecology, which had a profound intellectual effect on me. I discovered dialectical philosophy and radical social ecology. Just to be very brief about the transformations, in the 1990s I spent a decade working with issues of the Papuan people [who live] on the island called New Guinea by Europeans and Papua by the indigenous people. Since then, indigenous thought and indigenous experience have been very central to my view of anarchism. I've also worked with Tibetans for ten years and that has had a profound influence on me also – spending time in India.

However, I would say over a period of say, fifty years, 2005 was a very decisive point in my life, because it was the year that Hurricane Katrina hit and my city was flooded. Eighty percent of the city was flooded. Fifteen hundred people died. Almost the entire population went into exile and a hundred-thousand people have never returned. So it was a great traumatic event for me, for my family, and for my own local culture, which is central to my life.

When the hurricane hit, I was in India. I was setting up a program for students in India which has been going for the last ten years. So I was outside the city. I remember thinking, as my friends and I watched the images of the destruction of our city, "Who would it be who would do what was necessary for the community at that time?" And I thought: I was active in the Green Movement. Would it be the Green movement? I knew a lot of groups like the Quakers. Would it be the Quakers? I knew it wouldn't be the State. I knew it wouldn't be the corporate order. I doubted if it would be the political parties, liberals, etc. But I thought that maybe some of the groups that I had worked with – the ecology movement, that sort of thing — would come to New Orleans and be an important force in saving the city.

I was a bit skeptical about the anarchists being that force. But in fact, that's what happened. A friend of mine named Malik Rahim, who was a former leader of the Black Panthers in the nineteen-sixties, and a long time activist in the Green movement, was the major inspiration for a group called "Common Ground." Also, other people I knew got involved in it. Over a period of years, tens of thousands of people, mostly young people (probably thousands of young people influenced by anarchism) came to the city. And they acted with great dedication, with a certain sense of self-sacrifice, but also with a lot of joy, because they were with a lot of other people who were engaged in the same struggle.

I personally worked with a small group for the short period of time between the two hurricanes, Hurricane Katrina and HurricaneRita, that hit us. It was a small anarchist group in which we lived

together and worked together twenty-four hours a day, primarily fixing food and distributing food to the people who were still in the city, but also helping people in any way they needed, cutting down trees that had fallen on their houses, giving them transportation to the hospital outside the city (since there were no hospitals in the city that were operating), or doing whatever else people needed. And we were together, based on common values of solidarity, and, basically, love for the community.

At that point, I decided that practice was the most important thing. Theory was essential, but theory without practice was empty. So, since that time, I've devoted more of my efforts to helping create something at the grassroots level. In fact, one of my books, The Impossible Community, which is very theoretical in part, but also very historical and practical in large part, was very much inspired by the experience ofpost-Katrina and working with small groups at the local level.

About twenty-fiveyears ago I started buying land. I originally bought thirty-two acres, which is about twelve hectares, with the idea of starting a community, starting a land trust, where people would move out to the land. And that never happened. I planted a lot of trees. I planted thirty-five hundred trees. And we have had a lot of activities on the land. And I continue to buy land, and I now have about thirty-five hectares [eighty-seven acres]. We're beginning to create an Institute [La Terre Institute for Community and Ecology] and a few people are beginning to move out on the land. We're doing a permaculture project. There's a group of young people who have a collective house in one of the most devastated areas of the city and they do permaculture on the land. We're beginning to do a solar energy project. We have celebrations such as solstices and equinoxes. We just had fifty people who camped out on the land for either a week or a weekend. We do seasonal celebrations.

Obviously, we're very ecologically oriented. The place is called "Bayou la Terre" which is "the land" or "the Earth", so we have a very land-oriented and Earth-oriented focus, but one of the inspirations of the work that was done after Hurricane Katrina is the idea that everything that we do has to be rooted in the community, which means our little community of people working together, and the local community, and the regional community, and ultimately, the whole Earth community. So we want to avoid creating a little isolated island of hope and freedom in the midst ofa sea of hopelessness, nihilism and oppression. In back of me there's a poster on the wall saying "Tierra y Libertad." And that's about it! [Laughs] That's the idea! That we focus both on the land and the Earth, and on liberating human beings and the Earth at the same time, since the two are inseparable.

And of course, that's the idea of social ecology: that systems of domination among human beings are interrelated with systems of domination over the Earth, and over the land. Where I disagree with my ex-mentor Murray Bookchin is that he always said that the domination of nature is rooted on the domination of human by human. My own view is that it's much more dialectical than that; that there are deep roots of domination which we have to tie to every aspect of the human metabolism with the Earth, the interaction with the Earth, with plants, with animals, with human beings, so that there's a mutual interaction, so that the ways in which we are interacting with other species, with the land, mutually determine the ways in which we act toward one another. So I think that these forms of domination emerged together, in many ways, unconsciously, as our forms of production evolved. We won't get into that [now], it's a bit theoretical, but I think that what we can take from that is that just as forms of domination evolved, in interaction with one another, forms of liberation have to evolve – through an interaction with human relationships, our relationship to nature, our relationship to technology and all the other parts of the total system.

These are important issues, of course, the relations of human beings with nature and between themselves, and I think that you are pointing to something which for me is relatively new, the intersection of the different forms of domination which are too often just limited to human beings and we have to go much beyong all those aspects. You have also mentioned that one of the first experiences was in Papua – and I think in former conversations we discussed about what seems to you at present very meaningful in the struggles that are occurring in the world. Can you tell us something about this?

I think that my approach has been to find inspiration in both what is very close and also what seems to be very far away. And, in fact, in the end the two are not separable, because the distant is also very close in many ways. For instance, the way I got involved in the struggle of the Papuans was through the struggles in my own city, because the corporation that has devastated West Papua, the Freeport McMoRan Corporation, had its headquarters in New Orleans. And it was attempting to throw radioactive material in the Mississippi River, low-level radioactive waste into the ecosystem of the Mississippi River, which is the source of the water supply for New Orleans. They were doing other heinous acts in New Orleans and other places. So I got involved in that struggle against the corporation.

In fact, the same ten years or so that I spent fighting for the Papuans, I was fighting against what they were doing in my own city. But when I started studying the actions of the corporation I found that even though they were very destructive in my community, which is a relatively poor community in North America, when you look at what they were doing in the global South, in the so-called Third World, it was so much more destructive. They were allies of the Suharto dictatorship, which was engaged in genocidal activities (cultural genocide, actual genocide) and they were engaged in ecocide, destruction of rivers, destruction of the landscape, etc., because of their vast mining activities. So the whole engagement arose out of moving from the local to the global, while at the same time remaining at the local level.

At that time, the Papuan people sued this large corporation. So there were two suits for $5 billion, which were in courts in New Orleans. They sued in federal and state court, for, basically, the value of the corporation. They wanted to put the corporation out of business. Of course, they lost, but over the years, tribal leaders and representatives of the Papuans came to New Orleans. So I was able to work with them directly for that reason. One of the things that came out of that was that I learned a lot about Papuan culture and history, the history of imperialism, the history of neo-imperialism, the way in which Javanese imperialism succeeded Dutch and other forms of imperialism in that region. I learned about the role of institutions such as the World Bank, such as international insuring agencies, and other elements of the global economy that are an essential part of neo-imperialism and neo-colonialism today.

I also learned about the ecological dimension of Papuan culture, that the Papuans are people who have for the last ten thousand years had a relatively benign relationship with the natural world, and have learned modes of cooperation. Even though they are well-known as a very warlike people, there has always been a high degree of solidarity and mutual aid within groups and also a capacity to live in relative balance [with] and non-domination of the natural world. So that was a very important lesson for me. Part of it is learning about the living traditions of solidarity and living traditions of, in effect, the gift economy and the commons, which we talk about as something we would like to " recapture." But there still are cultures in which people continue to live these traditions as part of their everyday life. So that [lesson] was extremely important to me.

I might also say that one of the most important influences in my life is spending many years as a single parent. One of my children has had serious psychological problems, addiction problems, and some physical problems. So I've spent many years performing the function of a single parent. And this has helped me a lot to understand the world and to understand the nature of many people's lives. One of the central concerns that communitarian anarchists have is the domination of patriarchal values and the fact that most people do not know how to care. They've never been entrusted with the care of other human beings. This has traditionally been relegated to women as an inferior activity, when in fact it's the most central activity in human life. I began to develop an interest in this when my children were very young and I worked one day a week in a cooperative day-care project. In fact, my ex-wife taught every day in one co-op and I worked one day a week in another co-op which my children were in.

So I've had a lot of interest in this since the early 1970s, and child care and taking care of members of the family has been very central to my life. It's not a lesson that I have entirely chosen voluntarily, but it's something that has been very important to me. I think that the question of care is at the center of anarchism. In fact, it's more important in a sense than what we call "freedom." What is freedom ? Ultimately, our conception of freedom is not the conception of freedom of the right-wing libertarians, the "free-market" people. "Freedom" [for them] means "being left alone." "Freedom" is not being coerced.

"Freedom" is not being told what to do. In a certain sense, that's a male adolescent conception of freedom. The human conception of freedom is the freedom to develop as human beings, the freedom of all species to develop as life forms, the freedom of the Earth itself to develop and unfold according to its potentialities.

So freedom and care are inseparable. We don't think of the anarchist movement as a group of people out in the streets with signs saying : "Care!" "We are for care!" "More care!" "Give us care!" "We want to give care !" Many people would think this would be stupid. You know, it's not militant enough, or something like that. But, in effect, it's the most radical claim, because one thing that capitalism cannot do, and the state cannot do, is to give human beings, and other beings, the kind of care that they need. As a result, we live in an era of nihilism. The most fundamental values of human beings, that is, to value our own kind, [and] to value other beings, has been lost and other kinds of value (exchange value, even use value) have replaced the value of things in themselves and the care for things in themselves. This is a critique even of the Marxist idea [that] is often, "We have to replace exchange value with use value." In a certain sense, we need a critique of civilization itself, which has said that using things is our relationship to things. We have to go beyond use.

What do you mean ?

To use is to see a thing as an instrument. To use is to see a human being as an instrument. One of the most insidious aspects of late capitalism is that we collect experiences as a kind of accumulation. So we see our relationship to other human beings (even if we don't necessarily value just having a certain amount of money in the bank like in early capitalism) people look at their own experience as a kind of accumulation, accumulation of status, accumulation of prestige, accumulation of hipness, accumulation of coolness. It's a kind of accumulation in which we're still using the other being. This is so central to our psychology. This is the whole psychology of civilisation. So we have to be very careful that we don't fall into another transformation of, we might say, the ontology of things as things to be used.

Okay. And how would you see the world today, do you see any movements, which seem to you very significant, that can give us lessons on how we should proceed to change ?

A very good question. In other words, why don't I really answer your [earlier] question? [Laughs] I started with Papua, but the rest of it is important. I think we have to look everywhere in the world that we can, to find inspiration. I find some inspiration in European societies, in North America, but I find much more inspiration in the rest of the world. I find a lot of inspiration in the Zapatistas, in Chiapas.

Well, first, they have liberated municipalities, which I think is very important: that the community itself be reorganized according to a different vision of reality, a different vision of human life, and that each community has a school in which all kinds of activities take place. So there's a center of the community in which people focus on development of the human being. I would like to see, for instance, if there's an anarchist movement (in New Orleans, for instance, there are hundreds of anarchists who identify [as such], maybe more than that), I wish that we had many schools in neighborhoods, where neighborhoods would be transforming themselves.

Another part of the Zapatista movement that I think is really important is that there's a lot of poetry involved. There is myth, in fact. If you read the documents of the Zapatistas [you find that] they create stories which give people a new vision of who they are, or not necessarily a new vision, but [which] bring out a certainaspect of the vision they have, of who they are, where they come from, what the world is about, what life is about. So the sort of poetic, mythic, narrative dimension of a movement, I think, is very important. It's very much related to the possibility of hope. You know, tying together our history, our present activity, and our hope for the future.

I'm very much inspired by Rojava and Kobane in Syria, and as everybody who's interested knows, some of the practice in Rojava has been inspired by Bookchin's idea of libertarian municipalism. I've been very critical of using libertarian municipalism as a political program, in making municipal assemblies the priviledged form of social organization, but I agree absolutely that it's a central part of social reorganization. I think that the liberated municipality and municipal assembly have to be part of an entire cultural and social transformation. For instance, in Rojava this is part of it: there are schools

set up to trainpeople, to educate people, for a new society. And also, one of the amazing things about Rojava is that patriarchy has been confronted directly, much more than it was when I knew social ecology through Bookchin's version. A lot of people are inspired by the role of women in the militias and also in the community in general. So I think it's a great advance, a great inspiration.

I've also been inspired very much by traditions in India. Maybe I should mention just one more [example]. The Gandhian Movement is very important to me. Westerners know a little bit about the "Gandhian Movement," which is actually not called "the Gandhian Movement." It's not named after one person. It's called "Sarvodaya," and means "the welfare of all." It was called a "movement for the common good," basically. And it was an all-encompassing vision of the transformation of society in which there would be a village assembly, a village council in every village of India. Land would be owned collectively. There would be cooperative production. There would be a so-called "Shanti Sena," a Peace Army, people would be trained to mediate disputes so that non-coercive alternatives would be created, alternatives to the state. There would be a vast corps of Sarvodaya workers, who would be trained to work in each village. And, perhaps most important, there was the institution of the ashram, which most people think of as a religious community, but in the Gandhian sense meant a kind of ecovillage that would be established in every village in India, so that those who have been socialized into the movement would begin to practice a new way of life at the center of the village or the town or the neighborhood, so that people could learn about what it means in practice and could copy it, and the movement would proliferate in a kind of organic way. And this is very inspiring to me.

In fact, it is the Sarvodaya Movement that inspired a movement by the same name in Sri Lanka [Sarvodaya Shramadana] which has had five million people active in it. It has been a major force in the peace movement in a very war-torn society, has created most of the pre-schools in the country, and has done innumerable water projects and road-building projects in villages that had a need for these kinds of projects. I take inspiration from all of these kinds of movements. The Sarvodaya Movement in Sri Lanka was started by one teacher and five of his students fifty years ago, and has grown to a movement that has incorporated five million people over the years. I'm also inspired by the self-management movement, Mondragon in Spain particularly, which has created the largest worker cooperative, as many people know, with almost a hundred-thousand workers in a federation of co-ops. And that was started by one person, a Basque priest with five young people also, who started a training organization for work in co-ops. The thing that inspires me is that in both cases it was about six people who started movements that have become significant on the global level, and have also been very transformative in the local area, in one case, in Sri Lanka, in the other case in the Basque country in Spain. So these are some of the inspirations of my own view of what community means and social transformation means.

Thank you. I'd like to ask a last question and we have perhaps a small minute for it. What do you think about immigration today which is a big issue in Europe Why is there such an immigration in your opinion and what are your suggestions, if you have any?

The first thing I think of in relation to migration is that my daughter-in-law migrated from El Salvador to New Orleans and when she first tried to do it she ended up in prison and she had to return to El Salvador and come back. She ultimately marriedmy son but she still had to go back to El Salvador again, and he had to go and visit her for months before she could come to New Orleans. And I have a grandchild who's from El Salvador and I have two grandchildren who are half Salvadoran, so it's a very personal question to me. Thirty percent of the people from El Salvador are in the United States. One-third of the country is in the United States now. And the reason why they are in the United States rather than El Salvador, is because the United States government and military supported a brutal dictatorship and death squads that killed innumerable people, and devastated the economy. And, of course, even going back beyond that, the reason why that existed is because a few landowners were able to take over all the land in the country and create a vast number of poor people, and social conflicts emerged in which dictatorship and repression were the obvious response on the part of the powerful.

To understand migration, you have to understand the reason why there is migration. After the country was devastated by war and death squads, a large percentage of young people ended up in

Southern California (also from Honduras, a large percentage of young people were in Southern California) who were very poor, displaced, got involved in gangs, brought gang activity back to Central America. Now, Central America has some of the highest murder rates in the world (I think Honduras has the highest), and there are gangs with as many as twenty thousand members. So these are highly disrupted societies in which unemployment is extremely high, so that there are refugees from this disruption and ultimately, this injustice, and they need to find jobs. So many of them come to North America. I talked about North America. We could talk about the Near East. We could talk about other areas. Central American migration is closest to me.

There's a great irony. I mean there's a political lesson that's related to this, which is [about] global trade policy. So capitalism promotes "free trade." But what does "free trade" mean? "Free trade" means that commodities have the right to cross borders without restriction, but human beings and their labor do not have the right to cross borders without restriction. Ifcapitalists really believed in "free trade," they would allow all migration, which, of course, they don't. It's complex, because some of the capitalists would like to have a cheap labor supply, which they can exploit, while other capitalists would like to keep out labor. Nationalist capitalists want to defend the national economy in certain ways. So it's a complex issue.

To conclude, what do you think of the situation in France ? What suggestions would you make to French anarchists today ?

[Laughs] Well, I have spent a whole week here, recently! My suggestion to French anarchists is to immerse themselves in their own community, their own community as it really is. Who do they live with? Who lives a block away? Who lives in the next street? What's going on in the neighborhood ? I find that the more immersed you become in the local, the more you can deal with the global problems. So what are the relationships between, say, North African migrants or Sub-Saharan African migrants and anarchists in Montpellier? How many anarchist groups are there among Sub-Saharan Africans or North Africans? Have the movements communicated anything? Of course, this is the problem also. There's no way of "taking the truth" to someone, because the person already has a truth. So there have to be modes of communication in which people share their truths with one another and find out what they can learn from others. The real question is, "What do the anarchists have to offer in Montpellier?" What do they have to offer?

The Lesser of Evils Versus the Common Good: On the Poverty of Ideology in the Washington Post

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Several days ago, an article appeared in the *Washington Post* purporting to demonstrate that citizens have a moral obligation to vote for the "lesser of two evils" in elections in which they consider the major candidates to be unacceptable[1]. Given that the article was written by an "an associate professor of political theory" and published by the *Washington Post*, "one of the greatest newspapers" in the United States[2], one might expect that it would represent the best thinking of those who defend such an electoral strategy, which we will here call "Lesser-Evilism."

image by Steve Duplantier

However, as the following analysis will demonstrate, in this article the defense of Lesser-Evilism is not formulated carefully; the position of critics of Lesser-Evilism is not presented fairly, but is instead parodied; most of the arguments presented in favor of Lesser-Evilism are either unfounded or fallacious; and no real-world, empirical evidence on behalf of the efficacy of Lesser-Evilist practice is presented. In the end, the article fails to demonstrate the existence of any obligation to vote for the lesser of evils. Indeed, it fails to demonstrate the existence of any obligation to vote at all, and gives the reader no reason to conclude that voting should be chosen over other strategies for social change, such as mass direct action or the creation of a system of dual power.

The author begins by defining the parameters of the debate. Such an initial step is always a crucial point in the development of an argument, as it is in this case. She begins by asking:

Do we have a duty to vote for the lesser evil when election choices are equally unappealing? Alternatively, do we act rightly if we vote for a third-party candidate whom we prefer on principled grounds even if he or she stands no chance of winning?

As will become increasingly clear as this analysis progresses, the author's consistent strategy is to represent the opponent's position as a narrow, subjectivist one, rather than recognizing its basis in a concern for the common good. Thus, she begins by associating her opponents' position with the "appeal" of candidates, as if elections were popularity contests, and with "principles," which, as we will later see, she interprets as abstractions or inflexible dogmas that are out of touch with real-world conditions and consequences. Thus, she presents her opponents as rejecting Lesser-Evilism, not because an examination of historical evidence shows it to be a disaster in the real world, but because it "would compromise their moral principles."

This line of argument continues, as when she asks:

Considered in the abstract, what should a moral voter do? Does she have an obligation to vote according to her conscience — i.e., for the candidate who most closely embodies her beliefs?

Once again, we see a strategy of subjectivization at work. Throughout her discussion, the author assumes without evidence that opponents of Lesser-Evilism make decisions without considering real-world consequences. We are led to believe that these opponents focus narrowly on their own beliefs

[1] Julia Maskivker, "Yes, you do have an obligation to vote for the lesser of two evils. Here's why." (Washington Post, June 1, 2016). This response was written shortly after the article's publication (revised, June 4).

[2] Encyclopedia Britannica.

about what might abstractly be best, even if it is not in reality possible, and then choose candidates according to the degree to which these candidates are committed to the same abstract ideals. A similar analysis is applied to the role of "conscience," a topic that returns later in the article, and which will be analyzed there. At this point, I will merely point out what is being systematically ignored through the author's rhetorical strategy. She presents her opponents as being locked into an abstract deontological (that is, a duty-based) ethics, while, in fact, their arguments against Lesser-Evilism are overwhelmingly consequentialist, that is, concerning the noxious effects of Lesser-Evilism in the real world.

In pursuit of this strategy, the author is obliged to ignore crucial elements of her opponents' case. We might even say she suppresses these elements, since as a professor of political theory she would normally be expected to have some knowledge of them (though this cannot be verified from the article itself). In reality, there is a vast spectrum of consequentialist arguments that have been used against voting for the (more or less evil) candidates who are most likely to win in a given election. One is to demonstrate openly the strength of a political movement, so that those in power will be motivated to compromise with it or to form a coalition with it. A second is to represent the voice of a permanent social, political or ethnic minority that will never be represented fairly by the dominant factions. A third is to act as the parliamentary wing of a basically non-parliamentary movement, such as in the case of many revolutionary and secessionist movements. A fourth is use voting as means of combatting both evils as part of a strategy of eliminating an unjust and destructive system. A fifth (correlative) reason is to use elections for both organizational and education purposes to build a movement that will become capable of replacing such an unjust and destructive system with a just and humane one. The author must ignore these and other consequentialist arguments in order to construct her straw-person image of her opponents.

At this point, the author spells out her defense of Lesser-Evilism. She asks whether the moral voter should not forsake the kind of abstract moral perfectionism that she attributes to her opponents, and conclude that she has instead

an obligation to vote for ... the one of the two major-party nominees who is more likely to enact policies she believes healthy for society

One must wonder if even readers who have some sympathy for Lesser-Evilism will not begin at this point to suspect that the game is rigged in a rather outrageous manner. For doesn't the very idea of two candidates both being "evil" imply that *neither* of them is "likely to enact policies" that are "healthy for society?" It seems that the argument has reached a "caught with one's hand in the candy-jar" moment. But the author assures us that it all makes sense. She urges us to bear with her: "Let's reason this through."

She continues with the contention that all moral agents have what she calls a "good Samaritan" obligation" (or at least that a lot of people think so, and that what they think seems reasonable). She says that

Society commonly believes that we are all bound by duties of easy rescue

so that

If you are driving in a desolate area and see a pedestrian in distress by the side of the road — say, having an epileptic attack — most of us believe you are obligated to stop and call in for help.

She adds, reasonably, that this duty can be overridden by a greater one. If by continuing on without stopping one could thereby produce a greater good (anything from the author's example of saving oneself from a sudden heart attack that hits while one was driving through the desolate area to saving Tokyo from Godzilla) then it would be morally permissible to continue on. The author suggests that we

could think of voting as a duty of good Samaritan assistance — circumstances that make intervention expected.

However, this excursion into American academia's much-beloved fantasy-land of hypothetical cases does nothing to help the argument. It begs the question of how to interpret the analogous political meaning for "helping" a person with the "medical emergency." Perhaps "helping the person" translates into making a special effort to go out and vote *against* the lesser of evils and thereby to combat a certain

kind of dangerous sickness. Maybe it translates into cancelling a useless trip to the polls to engage in some kind of direct action that might have a more meaningful and transformative effect in the real world. In other words, it might translate into what Henry David Thoreau called "casting your *whole* vote."

Should we wish to apply this interpretation to the fantasyland game, let's imagine instead that we're passing through a desolate area in which two thugs are each mercilessly beating up a victim. The victims are understandably "in distress." Should we stop and take action to prevent one of the thugs from beating up a victim (maybe the thug who seems a bit more brutal) and then leave, allowing the other thug to continue the attack? Or should do whatever is in our power to disable both of the thugs? Perhaps morality sometimes requires us to be more than a minimally-involved Samaritan.

We might reflect a little more on the implications of the author's Samaritanism itself. She goes on to conclude that "Voting thoughtfully and responsibly is the civic version of our good Samaritan obligation," and suggests:

Let's posit that the machinery of elections enables citizens to choose governments whose policies and decisions can affect society significantly.

The fact that governments have a significant effect on society is a fact that is hardly controversial and is therefore not something that requires "positing." So, to make this statement coherent and meaningful in relation to the author's argument, what must be "posited" is the more controversial idea that citizens have the ability to *choose* governments that have a significant effect on society *that is desired by those citizens*. But why, if the argument under discussion is supposed to apply to the real world, should she follow a highly questionable analogy with a merely "posited" possibility, in effect, heaping hypothesis on hypothesis, adding epicycle to epicycle. There are a real-world empirical questions concerning how electoral systems are structured and the actual degree to which they "enable" citizens to make such a choice, or "disable" them from making it. If the Lesser-Evilist ideology is part of a *disablement* process (as it is, which explains why so many are now rebelling, in either rational or grossly irrational ways, against conventional politics), then "positing" this disablement out of existence is a good way to destroy any real-world truth value that the argument might have had. The author's next statement only compounds the problem:

If that's true, then a duty to promote the common good imposes a duty to vote with care — in other words, armed with information and a sense of responsibility.

So a positing of a possibility is now followed by a hypothetical statement. We seem to be retreating future and further away from empirical reality.

Next, however, the author makes a reasonable assertion about the real world, one that would not be rejected by her opponent:

Societies need to be rescued from unaccountable, corrupt, ineffective or indifferent leaders.

But this is immediately followed by more irrelevant argumentation and question-begging.

One salient way to do that, while not the only way, is to put more of the good ones in power and more of the bad ones out of a job. Elections are the mechanisms that enable this change.

This statement has a rather ironic ring to it. The third-party position that the author attacks argues precisely that good leaders should be elected and bad ones defeated. That's why it rejects *bad* ones, whether they are more or less bad than one another. On the other hand, it is *her own* Lesser-Evilist position that argues that the greater good is achieved by putting more bad leaders in power, as long as there are other major-party candidates who happen to be even worse. Obviously, critics of the Lesser-Evilist ideology do not believe that elections guided by such fallacious reasoning are a "salient" way to "rescue" society. Rather, they see this as a reliable way to assure that the same inequities and injustices that prevail in society today will continue or even get worse. They claim that this is, in fact, what has been happening empirically in the political system over a long period of time.

Furthermore, the presuppositions behind the author's phrase "put more of the good ones in power" must be investigated. The phrase is not only self-contradictory, given the Lesser-Evilist position that she is defending, but it also suppresses key issues. One that is suppressed is the crucial issue of the

nature of political power and systems of social domination. It can (and should) be argued that there is abundant evidence that the question of whether systems of power are hierarchical, techno-bureaucratic, oligarchical, elitist, authoritarian, plutocratic (or irresponsible and undemocratic in other ways) is more important than the qualities of the individuals who occupy positions within those systems. Also suppressed is the related question of whether political action should be focused more on putting certain individuals into positions within such existing systems of power (ordinarily, individuals who have a stake in perpetuating these systems) or whether it should aim at fundamentally changing the nature of that system.

The author's next statement appears to be a digression from the main line of argumentation (one might wonder if a passing reference to a figure such as Aristotle is a pro forma gesture for professors of political theory). However, this reference is quite valuable for the light it sheds on the nature of her presuppositions.

Voting with a sense of responsibility for society is not the same as submerging one's life in politics, becoming a *homo politicus*. Unlike Aristotle, I believe that one can have a life away from politics most of the time and still be a virtuous, happy human being.

These statements reveal that the author ignores the ways in which, whether we recognize it or not, much of our activity and a great many of our choices in everyday life must be seen as inherently politicized. The women's liberation movement forty years ago popularized the slogan "the personal is the political." It was right. This means that patriarchy is political, the market is political, wage labor is political, education is political, racism is political, sexuality is political, gender is political, child care is political, consumption is political, and everything in everyday life that relates to these is political. Breathing is political. All of our interactions that relate to various forms of hierarchy and domination and to the struggle between justice and injustice, between life and death, are highly politicized. Indeed, as Aristotle himself, as blinded as he was by forms of domination, was wise enough to recognize, everything that relates to the pursuit of the common good is political. To limit the political to the electoral is a highly ideological form of depoliticization, which is, in fact, the implicit goal of this article.

So it is not terribly surprising that we are next encouraged to "get involved," not by the way we live our whole lives, but rather "at certain points." These, we find, are *electoral* points, and our involvement is to take the most conventionally *electoral* form. As the author states it:

But at certain points we ought to get involved. When? When elections afford us the opportunity to assist society by choosing governments that we expect to rule fairly — or more fairly than all the other realistic alternatives.

But this is just another reformulation of the position that is being defended, though it tells us a little more about how this position functions ideologically. We are told that even if we can be certain that neither of two major-party candidates will "rule fairly," we are still obligated to vote for the one who will rule *less unfairly*. We are also expected to engage in something bordering on Orwellian double-think. We are advised that even if we know that neither of the major candidates will rule *fairly*, we ought to vote for one of them, knowing that the candidate will rule *the other way,* which is correctly called *unfairly*. However, the author acts as a good role-model and shows us that we can avoid focusing on this unfairness by utilizing concepts like "more fairly than all the other realistic alternatives" ("realistic alternatives" that in a two-party plutocratic oligarchy consist precisely of one).

The author next moves in a slightly different direction. First, she takes aim at those who would vote "carelessly." This seems like another digression from her main line of argument, which targets "idealists" who are motivated by moral scrupulousness. However, her discussion of these electoral slackers also reveals a great deal about her mode of analysis:

Some may argue that we are under no duty to cast a ballot, because in a nation as vast as the United States, each single vote is too inconsequential to affect the outcome... Consider that most of us believe it would be wrong to vote carelessly, without information and with prejudices, as philosopher Jason Brennan argues in his book "The Ethics of Voting." Going to the ballot box utterly unprepared and making a minimally informed decision makes a mockery of democracy. If others were to do that

as well — and we have an obligation to behave as if our own behavior were the model for everyone's behavior — then cumulatively, those uninformed votes would elect bad governments. And that would harm society, abandoning our duty of care.

There are several flaws in this part of the argument. First, there is a possible contradiction. The author invokes Jason Brennan[3] to attack those who would argue that there is no duty to vote at all because voting is "inconsequential." But the argument quickly jumps to those who do vote, but vote carelessly. If those who vote carelessly are a subset of those who think voting is inconsequential, then the argument that voting "makes a mockery" out of democracy, cannot be used against them before empirical evidence is presented against their position, since if they are right, then there is really no electoral "non-mockery" out of which to "make a mockery." But there are more serious problems with the analysis of careless voting.

There is a claim that "most of us," which presumably includes most Americans, think it is wrong to vote carelessly. This may or may not be true, but it is certainly questionable, and perhaps unlikely. Almost half of the citizenry do not vote at all in presidential elections, and even fewer do so in other elections. We might assume that many who vote do so carelessly by the author's standards. It is not unusual to hear voters saying that they vote because it is "their duty as an American," or because it makes them feel that they live in a "free country." I suspect that research would show that many of these habitual voters are not well informed. It is possible that most voters may think that it is wrong to vote carelessly in the same sense that they think it is wrong to exceed the speed limit on interstate highways. That is, they might say it is wrong when answering a survey question, but they have no intention to stop voting carelessly or skipping elections completely, and they do not feel guilty about such minor peccadilloes. The problems just pointed out are certainly not central to the argument, but they would seem to be an example of "theorizing carelessly."

Furthermore, this section of the article contains a quasi-Kantian universalization argument that is incoherently confounded in the same sentence with a consequentialist argument. A universalization argument says basically "Do what you *would hypothetically* want everyone to do," while a consequentialist argument says, basically, "Do what *will actually* produce the most good." The quasi-Kantian argument thus holds that we should make our behavior a model for others. But this argument doesn't work against the person who holds that voting is inconsequential. If such a person thinks that voting is a waste of time he or she could show quasi-Kantian benevolence by wishing that others should also not waste their time voting. As ethical theory texts often point out, this kind of argument doesn't work against people who would recommend their own behavior to others (like universalistic ethical egoists, to take a more serious case).

A more significant part of this argument is the claim that uninformed voters harm society by the fact of their voting without being informed. This may or may not be true, but in any case, it begs the question. It is likely that minimally informed voters, were they more than minimally informed, would vote much as they already do. If the typical voter obtained more information[4], it would probably be from the same general range of sources of information that he or she typically accesses. Thus, voting patterns would not be likely to change significantly. Furthermore, if voters use the political system, for example, to pursue their economic self-interest or their desire to oppress and exploit others (from an Aristotelian perspective, for purposes that do not exhibit "civic virtue"), being more informed about how to do this would hardly serve the common good.

The issue of voting "with prejudice" is an extremely crucial one, and differs fundamentally from that of merely being "informed." The author shows no sign of facing this issue's far-reaching implications concerning the need for the critique of ideology and an understanding of the manner in which systems of social domination operate. Instead, she takes the existing political order at its word, and assumes it to be (as it is conventionally stated) "free" and "democratic" enough to be considered legitimate, so that

[3] Whom I discovered to be, among other things, a Professor of "Strategy" at Georgetown.

[4] Since the author uses the neutral term "information," with no qualification, this could range from engaging in a careful critical-historical analysis of politics to spending more hours at conspiracy-theory sites on the internet.

political processes that assure its perpetuation need not be challenged. She is thus able to move on to another reiteration of her basic position:

Just as we have an obligation not to vote carelessly, we have an obligation not to fail to vote responsibly, as long as it is not too costly to us personally. Our own vote may be just one vote, but we must behave as we wish everyone to behave. Cumulatively, many informed votes will make a difference, even if one single vote will not. If we have a duty of easy help, voting with care is one of those duties.

Again, we see a vacillation between quasi-Kantian universalization and consequentialism. However, the major problem is that the entire course of the argument (or series of assertions) continues to beg the question. We are most of the way through the article and no real evidence has been given that voting for the lesser of evils is really a form of "help" at all.

At this point, the author once again changes the direction of the argument, this time to repeat the point that the consequences of voting make it worth the trouble. Almost unbelievably, she does this by repeating the same analogy of stopping to help a person in distress and explaining how this fits into her abstract model of justified action. All we gain from this digression is the idea that "informed and responsible" voting is worth the trouble if engaging in it actually produces a significant good for society. And, of course, we can accept this purely hypothetical idea just as easily as we might accept the purely hypothetical idea that if "informed and responsible" voting caused a meteor to crash into the earth and destroy it, we should probably not vote. Unfortunately, the argument for Lesser-Evilism has not come down to earth any more than this hypothetical meteor has. However, the section that follows is perhaps the most enlightening one in the article, particularly if one is interested in the nature and critique of ideology.

As was noted earlier, the important role of "conscience" in this discussion needs to be explored further. Near the end of the article, the author returns to this theme. She begins by informing the reader that "Sometimes the desire for a clean conscience leads to immoral behavior." This must hardly strike the reader as a revelation. It has long been a commonplace that superego injunctions, known popularly as the urgings of "conscience," are the internalization of forces such as paternal authority, repressive morality, religious taboos, coercive law, public opinion, and so forth. No one who has given any thought to ethical issues would advocate uncritical capitulation to socially conditioned guilt feelings. But what is significant in this discussion of conscience is the central role it plays in the author's strategy of distorting her opponents' position. She asks:

What about the option to vote for an ideologically *attractive* but electorally marginal candidate? This option may be *attractive* for someone who desires to *keep his hands clean* by not lending support to candidates he *finds morally reprehensible*.[5]

This brings us back to the fundamental misrepresentation in the article, which is the idea that those who reject the lesser of evils ideology do so because they are afflicted with that classical and indeed stereotypical symptom of neurosis, an obsession with "clean hands." More literally, this means that they are allegedly obsessed by their desire to achieve a kind of moral purity and to escape from feelings of guilt.

But the search *for a clean conscience* may result in immoral behavior. If our vote is part of a set of votes that will contribute to the defeat of the realistically electable "lesser evil," therefore electing the "more evil" candidate, then we force society to pay a high price for *our clean conscience*. Sometimes, our *concern for feeling morally impeccable* should give way to a concern for what type of society we can help to create for the sake of all, including ourselves.

This is simply a false depiction of most of those who oppose Lesser-Evilism. Anyone who has first-hand knowledge of oppositional politics, or even anyone who has second-hand familiarity through the literature of oppositional politics, knows that those who reject the Lesser-Evilist ideology base their opposition overwhelmingly, not on a self-regarding consideration of guilt and conscience, but on the other-regarding grounds that it inflicts great harm on society and causes untold suffering for the victims

[5] Emphasis added in this and the next citation of text to indicate subjectivizing and psychologizing language.

of a system of global injustice. Unless the author has successfully psychoanalyzed a representative sample of the opponents of Lesser-Evilism and can demonstrate that she has more insight into their motivations and goals than they do themselves, we must conclude that her depiction was simply concocted for the sake of argument. However, even if (as may certainly be the case) some of her opponents do exhibit the bad character traits that she attributes to the entire group, this is nevertheless an example of the fallacy of hasty generalization, and still constitutes a case of unjustified stereotyping. Furthermore, to whatever extent some of her opponents may exhibit such character flaws, this has nothing to do with the validity of the many arguments and analyses that they present, so she also commits the fallacy of ad hominem argument.

image by Steve Duplantier

After falsely reducing her opponents' position to their desire to avoid guilt-feelings and their quest for moral purity, the author remarks, "That's a noble reason for action." However, this motivation does not in fact seem very noble and one must wonder how honest the author is in claiming that she thinks that it is. It seems that such motivation, rather than being "noble" is tainted by egocentrism and is ultimately irresponsible. The effort to pin this serious charge on her opponents is, in reality, a means of morally discrediting them. We live in a world in which the biosphere is being pushed toward collapse, millions of species are being driven to extinction, a billion people suffer needlessly in absolute poverty, more human beings are enslaved and trafficked than ever before in history, billions are faced with displacement by social and ecological crisis (need I go on?). In the midst of such vast suffering and devastation, to focus on one's own subjective feelings such as "desire for a clean conscience" would be morally outrageous. Various traditions have called this deluded view "Phariseeism," "spiritual materialism," and "spiritual narcissism." Ethically, our foremost concerns must be, not our own moral purity, but rather the fate of the Earth, our fellow human beings, and all other living beings on the planet. And such concerns for social and ecological justice, in various forms, are what motivates the vast majority of those who not only reject, but fight actively against Lesser-Evilism. They do so on behalf of the greater common good.

At the conclusion of the article, the quite specific agenda behind this weak attempt to disguise rationalization as rational argument becomes clear:

If we have a duty of aid toward society, our duty becomes even more stringent when there are real prospects that a scarily unpredictable leader would take power, a candidate who, if elected, could harm society.

It's all about scaring us into accepting the Trump vs. Hillary double-bind.

What is striking about this article is that it purports to demonstrate an obligation to vote for the lesser of evils based on a supposed concern for conditions in the real world, yet it becomes lost in a tangle of assumptions and abstractions and fails to engage with that real world[6]. It never begins to undertake the kind of systemic analysis of existing political and electoral systems and of the actual state of the planet that leads many to see an alternative to both greater and lesser evils as an urgent necessity.

We must certainly learn how to use our moral imaginations. But rather than fantasizing about hypothetical events on hypothetical desolate roads one might use one's moral imagination to consider, for example, the following real-world, historically-based scenario. Imagine you live in a country with two major political parties, both of which support slavery. Some will advise you to vote for the better (or rather, the *less evil*) of the leading candidates, while others will urge you to put your efforts into creating an alternative that is a radical break with an unjust social order. Should one, in this situation, pin ones hopes on voting for the lesser of the evil, pro-slavery parties, or should one devote one's efforts (perhaps one's life) to creating a third, anti-slavery party, or, even better, into creating a militant direct-

[6] Indeed, this article is an almost shockingly perfect example of the way that ideological thinking demonstrates the dialectical principle that "It is what it isn't." It begins with an attack on opponents of Lesser-Evilism as abstract idealists who are out of touch with the real world and detached from the practical implications of political choices. As the argument proceeds, it becomes clear that the author's Lesser-Evilism is itself a form of abstract idealism (masquerading as realism) that is sadly out of touch with the real world and oblivious to the practical implications of political choices.

action movement aimed at immediately freeing every slave possible, and at doing all in its power to wipe slavery off the face of the earth as rapidly as possible?

Of course, human beings have faced precisely such a choice, not on any hypothetical deserted roads, but rather on those real historical roads on which the real agents of history have walked. Everything in this Lesser-Evilist article implies that, at a crucial fork in that road, voting for the less evil of the pro-slavery parties would have been the moral course of action. It implies that only "noble" but misguided idiots would have failed to recognize their obligation to do so. It thus exemplifies perfectly the kind of abject failure of both moral reasoning and moral imagination that is so typical of Lesser-Evilist thinking.

Reflections on Appamāda

Date: April 7, 2016

(*This is an expanded version of a presentation for the Spring Equinox Celebration at La Terre Institute for Community and Ecology. Participants were asked to bring selections to read and thoughts to share during the reflection period. This was my contribution.*)

I've been thinking a lot about a concept that is expressed in Pali as appamāda and in Sanskrit as *apramāda*. It's a very challenging and thought-provoking concept. I'd like to offer some quotations that I found explaining the concept and a few further thoughts about its significance. As I explored the concept of *appamāda*, I began to think that it might, in fact, be one of the best means of expressing the ethos that we hope to create for our project here at Bayou La Terre.

Appamāda is a very prominent term in Asian philosophy, religion and spirituality, above all because it was part of the last phrase that was, according to legend, spoken by Shakyamuni Buddha. The original Pali reads:

> vayadhammā saṅkhārā
> appamādena sampādethā

These words are often translated as "All conditioned things are impermanent. Work out your own salvation with diligence," in which appamāda is translated as "diligence." It is thus literally "Buddha's last word" in the translations. But the final phrase can also be translated as "Live a life of care." Or in a great many other ways. I looked up a variety of translations of these "famous last words" and found that appamāda has been taken to mean "alertness," "attentiveness," "awareness," "care," "carefulness," "concentration," "concern." "conscientiousness," "conviction," "diligence," "discernment," "earnestness," "heedfulness," "mindfulness" "non-laxity," "perseverance," "persistence," "tirelessness," "thoughtfulness," "vigilance," "watchfulness," and "zeal."

The terms for what is usually translated as "mindfulness" is *smrti* in Sanskrit and *sati* in Pali. However, the power of the term *appamāda* comes from its fusion, or dialectical synthesis, of concepts related to both mindfulness and care. We often think of mindfulness as being intensive and focused on what is immediately present and care as being extensive and reaching out to what is around us. The concept of appamāda directs us to the inseparable interconnection between the two.

Stephen Batchelor, in his article "The Buddha's Last Word: Care,"[1] says that he translates appamāda as "care" because it is a "more embracing term" than many other possibilities and because it refers to "something that holds the whole thing together." This is an appealing idea. In an era in which, to use Achebe's famous concept, "Things fall apart," and in which, as someone else described it, "All that is solid melts into air," it seems worthwhile to think about what might "hold the whole thing together." "Holding" is, by the way, one of the most important terms in contemporary feminist care ethics, and especially eco-feminist care ethics, the tendency in moral philosophy that focuses most directly on concern for the good of all beings.

Batchelor explains that "appamāda is not just the occasional mindful thought or attentive state of mind, it's actually a commitment to being attentive. It's more than just a meditative state of mind, it's more than just being mindful. It has to do with that primary ethical or moral orientation we have in life, with which we bring into being whatever activity we're engaged in. Whether in formal meditation,

[1] Stephen Batchelor, "The Buddha's Last Word: Care" in Insight Journal (Spring 2005).

in our interactions with other people, in our social concerns, or in our political choices, it's the energetic cherishing of what we regard as good."

This is where the implications of the concept become really interesting, I think, in a very practical way. It shows the close interconnection between mindfulness, or awakened consciousness, and care for what we discover to be intrinsically good and valuable when we have an awakened mind and are truly mindful of beings in the world. Awakened consciousness is not only intentional consciousness but engaged consciousness. We can truly vow to save the infinite multitude of sentient beings to the extent that we are truly aware of and truly care for their mode of being, unfolding, and flourishing.

I was surprised and pleased to discover recently that there is a Zen group in Austin that adopted the term appamāda as its name. It quotes Stephen Batchelor's explanation of the term on its blogs. On one of these blogs, Resident Teacher Peg Syverson reflects on the connection between mindfulness and care[2]. She notes that the kanji over the altar in the group's Zendo is the term "nen," and observes that this is "the Japanese representation of appamāda."

The kanji, she says, has two characters. The top one "looks like a peaked roof, or a mountain" and means "now, today, this present era, this moment." The bottom one (which I imagine as looking like a river delta) means "heart, mind, intelligence, soul." She concludes that "this whole kanji actually represents bringing your whole heart, mind, intelligence, and soul into this very moment, into right now, and into this modern era. Being in present moment awareness is a protection (a roof) or a stable foundation (a mountain) for our heart, mind, intelligence, and soul. In turn, this liberates us to be a benefit in the world, through our energetic, mindful, care."

Appamāda means being both now-minded and now-hearted. I think of it as being closely related to what my friend scott crow calls "emergency heart"[3]. I would only add that the Zen or Daoist mountain also symbolizes the primal and the wild as opposed to the tamed and civilized, and a more expansive perspective that is liberated from the biases and limitations that result from our domestication[4]. The mountain frees us from the need for the firm foundations of ideology. It shows us that the only foundation we need is the Earth, which is founded in nothing other than its own and our own foundationless nature.

[2] Peg Syverson, "Mindfulness" on Peg Syverson's Blog.
[3] scott crow, Black Flags and Windmills (Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2014).
[4] See Gary Snyder, "The Etiquette of Freedom" in The Practice of the Wild (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1990).

The Summit of Ambition: COP21 Adopts Higher Ambitions Standards

Date: December 18, 2015

Now we know what kind of summit it was. COP21 was the Summit of Ambition. During the negotiations a source reported tantalizingly that there was a "Huge, Secret Coalition That Could Deliver a Climate Win in Paris."[1] But by the middle of the proceedings, the secret was, to say the least, out. The "parties" that were conferring were quite vocally and repetitively proclaiming themselves the "High Ambition Coalition." "Ambition" had become the new climate buzzword.

We also discovered that "ratcheting" was the *de rigeur* method of deploying this ambition. In one interview, a climate pundit managed to mention "ratcheting up ambition" three times in about three minutes. The precise meaning of this term has not usually been pinned down, but Fred Krupp, President of the Environmental Defense Fund enlightens us a bit. He says that "the agreement provides a framework to ratchet up ambition over time: a transparent system for reporting and review, regular assessments of progress, and strengthening of commitments every five years beginning in 2020."[2]

So the "ratcheting" process includes reporting and review, reporting and review in slightly different words, and "strengthening of commitments." Though there is definitely an assumption that a lot of reports will be written, we can only assume that the idea of a "framework" to "strengthen commitments" means that there is an *opportunity* to strengthen commitments if *par hazard* a country decides to a make any real commitments or to strengthen them. According to the agreement, no particular force is exerted. I would hate to try to loosen a bolt with this kind of ratchet.

It's like immense

Yet, much of the media seemed convinced of the world-historical nature of the agreement. Though the *Guardian* is usually somewhat more perceptive than most of the mainstream press, its article "How US negotiators ensured landmark Paris climate deal was Republican-proof" exemplifies the vacuous kind of claims made for the "pact," and the sort of breathless media boosterism that accompanied its announcement.

We are told, rather dramatically, that "White House officials needed to "craft a deal congressional Republicans would not be able to stop," that this deal had to be "bullet-proof,"[3] and that such an achievement "required major political capital." Even more breathtakingly, we find that "The US needed a very particular kind of deal – and it required immense political capital to achieve it." Exactly how immense this capital was, why this particular degree of immensity was needed, and how precisely all this immensity was employed are not explained, though we are told that the whole effort was "an immensely complicated challenge."

In spite of all these theatrics, the article quickly bursts its own bubble of puffery by giving away the big secret. The way that the Obama Administration planned to "outsmart" the Republicans was

[1] Ben Jervey, "The Huge, Secret Coalition That Could Deliver a Climate Win in Paris" in GOOD: A Magazine for the Global Citizen

[2] "Statement on Paris final text from Environmental Defense Fund President Fred Krupp,"on Environmental Defense Fund website

[3] Suzanne Goldenberg, "How US negotiators ensured landmark Paris climate deal was Republican-proof" in The Guardian (Dec. 13, 2015)

simply to give up on anything that the Republicans would object to very strongly. In short, if the agreement contained nothing that was of real consequence or was binding, there would be nothing for the Republican Congress to veto. One could almost say that it was a strategy of being immensely under-ambitious.

And this brilliantly defeatist strategy for success is exactly what was utilized. As the article recounts, "under US insistence" the agreement "was explicitly crafted" to EXCLUDE: 1) any binding agreement to emissions reductions; 2) any binding agreement to financing of emissions reductions; 3) any binding agreement to fines or penalties of any kind for failure to reduce emissions. Only one thing was agreed to legally: writing reports every five years. So Paris now gives us our stirring slogan for the climate revolution: *Vive la paperasse!*[4]

Faux pas

Even the normally sober Global Footprint Network[5] exuded fervent optimism in articles non-ironically entitled "World leaders unanimously agree to end the fossil fuel age within a few decades" and "Paris: The Mother of All COPs." In the former, it proclaimed that the climate agreement "represents a huge historic step in re-imagining a fossil-free future for our planet" and musing that it was "nothing short of amazing that 195 countries around the world—including oil-exporting nations—agreed to keep global temperature rise well below 2 degrees Celsius *and*, to the surprise of many, went even further by agreeing to pursue efforts to limit the increase to 1.5 degrees above pre-industrial levels."

Despite such initial appearances, the GFN had not, in fact, gone entire crazy, since a few paragraphs down it admits that "science tells us that the pledges submitted by each nation are projected to result in a temperature rise of between 3 and 7 degrees Celsius, exceeding the 2-degree limit or 'global handrail' acknowledged by the agreement," adding that "the final agreement requires countries to return every five years with new emission reduction targets," and noting that "whether this essential requirement will be sufficient to catalyze more action remains to be seen."

In other words, the GFN recognizes that the nations had *not*, in reality, made any real agreement to do what was celebrated just a few sentences earlier. What is true is that these nations had made a big step in *re-imagining* a carbon-emissions free future, even as they remained practically committed to a future that is disastrously dependent on such emissions. This gap between pleasant fantasy and brutal reality provides an excellent example of bad faith in action.

The turning point

Fortunately, *Democracy Now!* offered its usual challenge to the conventional wisdom by presenting a very illuminating debate between Michael Brune, executive director of the Sierra Club, and journalist and writer George Monbiot.[6] Though Monbiot is far from radical, he is highly intelligent and perceptive, so he had no trouble politely demolishing the naïve and uncritical optimism of mainstream environmentalism.

Brune joined the rest of the environmental establishment in proclaiming COP21 to be a highly significant "turning point." He said that "what we saw in the last two weeks was that every country around the world agreed that we have to do much, much more to fight climate change effectively, and to begin to set up a dialogue and a mechanism for rich countries to aid the poor countries, and to make room for continuous ambition moving forward."

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[4] "Long live the Paperwork!" Which it will.

[5] Matthis Wackernagel, "World leaders unanimously agree to end the fossil fuel age within a few decades" and Sebastian Winkler, "Paris: The Mother of All COPs"

[6] "A Turning Point for the Climate or a Disaster? Michael Brune vs. George Monbiot on the Paris Accord"

But the very wording of his claim belies the existence of any real "turning point." If there were such a change we must assume that these countries previously didn't agree that we have to "do more," "set up dialogues," or create "mechanisms to aid poor countries." And this is absurd. However, we can grant Brune one thing: he said that the countries agreed that we "have to" do these things, not that we "will" do them. So the big (non-)deal seems to be that a lot of countries agreed that such things are really, really important. And, of course, that they will be sure to develop a lot more ambition. One can only hope that peak ambition doesn't coincide with the collapse of the biosphere.

Monbiot should be congratulated for maintaining a positively shocking level of clear-sightedness in the midst of the post-COP orgy of self-congratulation by the global political class and mainstream environmentalists. He remarks that "what I see is an agreement with no timetables, no targets, with vague, wild aspirations. I mean, it's almost as if it's now safe to adopt 1.5 degrees centigrade as their aspirational target now that it is pretty well impossible to reach." Which is exactly the point. Aspiration and ambition are cheap, and these are the goods that have been bought and sold at COP21.

Feet, don't fail me

COP21 perpetuated the tendency among environmentalists and the politicians who want to appease them to substitute spectacle for substantive action. They continue to put far too much effort into the politics of gestures and far to little into massive direct action on behalf of a rapid end to carbon emissions.

Last year's People's Climate March exemplifies the same kind of spectacularism that the Paris Summit does. The March was planned to be "so large and diverse that it cannot be ignored," and since then has been continually hailed as "the largest climate march in history." But that's exactly the problem. It was a very pleasant and upbeat way to spend the day but with its three to four hundred-thousand well-behaved attendees, it wasn't nearly monstrous enough or scary enough to convince anyone that there are enormous masses of righteously indignant people who are ready to say no to ecocide in a very decisive way.

The March had absolutely no traumatic, transformational effect. On the way to the March, I heard people on the subway ask where everybody was going, so even a lot of New Yorkers were unaware of the event. And the attendance was only 1.5 to 2% of the metro New York City population, so this isn't really all that surprising. Several months later, the Pope's turnout of six million (at just one of a series of events) in the Philippines was *forty-eight times greater* per capita than the much-heralded U.S. event. The size of the Pope's event was noted in the media, but there was no particular gloating about it being "the biggest" anything in history.

The Climate March mentality reminds me of the Woodstock Festival and the "we are the wave of the future" delusion that was typical of the counterculture at that time. The word on the street, and certainly the word out in the fields of Yasgur's farm, was that the Festival was the largest gathering in all of human history. But there had already been many gatherings vastly larger than its 400,000 attendance. The largest gathering of human beings on the planet has for a very long time been the periodical Kumbh Mela in India, which has attracted as many as 120 million people, including thirty million on a single day.

So if the climate movement wants to experiment further with the tactic of marches and mass gatherings, it should get to work on convening thirty million people on single day in Paris, New York, New Delhi, or other centers of power and pollution, capital and contamination. The crowd wouldn't even have to do much marching, since it would already be everywhere. Its very presence would shake the foundations of the system of domination. However, to do this would require that thirty million people would have to think that saving the planet from climate catastrophe is as important as what thirty million people go to the Kumbh Mela for.

All aboard the train, all aboard the train

And finally, let's return briefly to the recent spectacle in Paris for a parting thought. It seems to me that a fitting *au revoir* to the Summit of Ambition would have brought all the Chief Negotiators or Negatiators on stage to belt out the following Anthem of Ambition:

> We are the world, we are the Parties
> Ambitious ones who make a cooler day
> So let's have ambition
> That's the choice we're making
> We're saving our own lives
> It's true we'll make a cooler day
> Ambitious you and me

Power to the Community: The Black Panthers' Living Legacy of Grassroots Organization

Date: November 25, 2015

There was a historical moment in the late 1960s when the movement for "community control" seemed to promise hope for the creation a new direction for the left in North America. The movement focused heavily on grassroots control of schools and the police, but hinted at a more all-encompassing vision of "power to the people" in the concrete, meaningful sense of effective power from below. What might have been was envisioned in David Morris and Karl Hess's almost-forgotten small classic *Neighborhood Power: The New Localism*[1], which was published just as the practical hopes of the movement for grassroots power were in the process of fading away. Hess, who also wrote the complementary work *Community Technology*[2], credited the Black Panthers very explicitly for their central role in inspiring these hopes. He praises the Panthers for being "neighborhood-oriented" and "for demanding freedom where they lived, freedom to have communities rather than colonies."[3] Yet, today, the Panthers are hardly known in the popular mind as prophets of the neighborhood as the new liberatory *polis*.

If the right and political mainstream have dismissed the Panthers by branding them as violent extremists and criminals, much of the left has highlighted the Black nationalist and vanguardist aspects of the party while giving only glancing attention to grassroots initiatives like the free breakfast and health programs. There has been a general neglect for the radically decentralist and anarchistic dimensions of the movement that are expressed in the call for community control. But these aspects were the vital core of the movement and remain an invaluable resource for the creation of a deeply transformative social movement with a broad base of support and participation. They reveal that the Panthers were an effective radical and revolutionary force to the extent that they were in touch with the radical needs of the community.

I know the importance of this tradition in part through the work of my friend scott crow, whose exposure to the Panthers began early in his life. In *Black Flags and Windmills*, Scott's indispensible book on the Common Ground Collective, he explains some of this history and illustrates how the Panther heritage, combined with anarchist ideas, was at the core of the extensive relief work of Common Ground after Hurricane Katrina.[4] And I know the vitality of the tradition above all through the work of my friend and fellow local activist Malik Rahim, who was a Panther leader in New Orleans in the late 1960's and early 1970's, who has been a tireless community organizer in the Bay Area and in New Orleans over the decades since, and who was the major inspiration of Common Ground.

While I was in the process of rereading the history of the Black Panther Party, I came across a video of a talk that Malik had recently done on the importance of the Panther legacy in the disaster recovery work of Common Ground. In it, he says that "the teachings that I learned in the party were carried out in Katrina." He points out that 19,000 volunteers worked with Common Ground and served 200,000 disaster survivors in southeast Louisiana and the Mississippi Gulf Coast. Referring to the long-time movement to free the framed former Panthers known as the Angola 3, he says that Common Ground's

[1] Boston: Beacon Press, 1975.
[2] New York: Harper & Row, 1979.
[3] Karl Hess, *Dear America* (New York: William Morrow and Co., 1975), p. 146.
[4] Oakland, CA: PM Press, second ed., 2014.

work "wouldn't have happened if it hadn't been for the Angola 3. And there wouldn't have been an Angola 3 if there hadn't been a Black Panther Party."[5]

So what is the connection between the Black Panther Party of the 1960's and tens of thousands of volunteers devoting days, months, or even years of their lives to saving devastated local communities forty years later? Philip Foner, in the introduction to his collection *The Black Panthers Speak*, quotes Vice-President Spiro Agnew as labeling the Black Panthers a "completely irresponsible, anarchist group of criminals."[6] If you look at the early Panther program, you find much of it to be a radically decentralist, libertarian, and communitarian in nature.[7] It wouldn't be too much of a stretch to call this neglected dimension of the Panther legacy "a completely responsible anarchist plan to replace a criminal system." It is a part of American radical history that is usually ignored in mainstream and even many left accounts, but which has already had an enduring influence and can still offer tremendous inspiration today.

The Black Panther Party Platform and Principles," its famous "Ten Point Program,"[8] starts with an unambiguous communal libertarian statement. "*We want freedom. We want power to determine the destiny of our Black Community.*" "Freedom" is thus defined as the self-determination of the community. Much of the Program is an effort to spell out this concept of communal freedom, showing that it means the ability of the self-reliant community to provide for its own authentic needs.

The Panthers' Program states that "if the white American business will not give full employment,"—something they knew wouldn't happen—"then the means of production should be taken from the businessmen and placed in the community so that the people of the community can organize and employ all of its people and give a high standard of living." This is a proposal for worker self-management of workplaces that is at the same time community self-management of the local economy as a whole. It goes on to state further that "if the white landlords will not give decent housing to our black community,"—something they also knew wouldn't happen—"then the housing and the land should be made into cooperatives so that our community, with government aid, can build and make decent housing for its people." This is a proposal for resident self-management of homes that is at the same time community self-management of local housing as a whole. The Panthers also aimed at creating a community-based system of medical care. Despite their limited resources, they were able to establish a People's Medical Care Center that had ten doctors, twelve nurses, two medical technicians plus volunteer interns from local medical schools. It treated over one-hundred patients per week.[9]

The Panthers also envisioned a revolutionized form of education, one that emphasized critical thinking that unmasked the nature of the dominant ideology and the system of domination itself, and that educated young people to become free and collectively self-determining beings. They demanded "education for our people that exposes the true nature of this decadent American society," and "that teaches us our true history and our role in the present-day society." Most strikingly, they called for "an educational system that will give to our people a knowledge of self." How many political movements have recognized that the basic problems of society are rooted in the kind of selfhood that has been imposed on people and that a basic political task is to carry a revolution at the level of self and subjectivity?[10] An article on "Liberation Schools" sketches some of the details of a curriculum in pursuit of such goals.

[5] On the Angola 3, see the powerful film *In the Land of the Free* (2011), written and directed by Vadim Jean.

[6] Philip S. Foner, *The Black Panthers Speak* (Philadelphia and New York: J.B. Lippincott Co., 1970), p. x.

[7] For the almost completely neglected communitarian dimension of the Black Panthers, see "Communalism and the Black Panther Party in Oakland, California" by Robyn C. Spencer in the excellent collection *West of Eden: Communes and Utopia in Northern California*, edited by Iaian Boal, et al (Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2012), pp. 92–121. This analysis discusses many of the deeper issues of values and personal life, including sexism and gender roles, that are not addressed extensively in the official statements of the party.

[8] "Black Panther Party Platform and Program: What We Want What We Believe" (October, 1966) in *The Black Panthers Speak*, pp. 2–4.

[9] Lincoln Webster Sheffield, "People's Medical Care Center" in *Daily World* (May 16, 1970); reprinted in *The Black Panthers Speak*, pp. 173–175.

[10] The radicalizing nature of the movement on the personal level can be gauged by the distance between certain notorious sexist and heterosexist statements that are still cited by critics of the Panthers, and the appearance, within a short period of time,

The well-known Panther programs of free breakfasts and lunches are included (in this, they were far ahead of most public school programs at that time). Schools were to have three days of classes each week, in addition to two days dedicated to films and field trips "throughout the community," so that the split between the educational process and the real life of the community could be eliminated. Finally, education was recognized as a life-long process so there would be adult political education classes in the evenings.[11]

One of the other core demands of the Program was direct democratic community control of not only the police but the legal system. Fifty years ago, the Panthers were already proclaiming, "*We want an immediate end to POLICE BRUTALITY and MURDER of black people.*" One must wonder what would have happened if millions had followed the strategies they proposed rather than the path of slogans, street protests and the lobbying of politicians that has prevailed. The immediate Panther response to police oppression and brutality was a combination of self-education and direct action. They thought it essential for all members of the community to "know their rights," but their position was that the whole community also had to *act directly* to enforce those rights. Foner notes that "the Party established a system of armed patrol cars, completely legal, carrying both guns and lawbooks," so that "whenever black men or women were stopped by the police, armed Panthers would be on the scene, making sure that their constitutional rights were not violated."[12]

A more long-term goal involved developing a political movement and detailed plan for community control of police. The plan is outlined in a "Petition Statement for Community Control of Police."[13] It would involve "establishing police departments for the major communities of any city." This was to include all local communities, though the particular focus was obviously on enabling major oppressed ethnic (or class) communities to control their own affairs. Control of the police would be in the hands of neighborhood councils elected by the citizens of the neighborhoods. The councils would determine policies for the community police departments. The administration of these departments would be carried out by police commissions whose members would be "selected by a Neighborhood Police Control Council," which would have fifteen members elected by the community. Councils would have disciplinary power over the police and set policies for the commissions and departments to carry out. The council would have the power to recall the commissioners and the community would have the power to recall the council members. All police officers would come from the communities they serve. The result of all these proposals would be effective power of the community over the police and policing.

The Panther Program goes beyond the issue of law *enforcement* to that of community control of the *legal system* itself. The Program says that "We want all black people when brought to trial to be tried in court by a jury of their peer group or people from their black communities, as defined by the Constitution of the United States." The Panthers noted that a "peer" in a real sense means "a person from a similar economic, social, religious, geographical, environmental, historical and racial background." They realized that the jury system is one of the most radically democratic aspects of the existing political system, one small remnant of a less bureaucratic and statist historical era. In a jury trial, ordinary citizens get to vote on questions that directly and often powerfully affect the members of their community—namely, the disposition of their lives, liberties and possessions. A radically democratic jury system provides a means for the community to avoid not only the injustices typical of the travesty of a jury system that we know today, but also to fight against the injustices of a larger undemocratic political and legal system. I think we can assume that jury nullification is implied in the Panthers' proposal. A community-based jury can not only demand that the law be applied justly, but it can also in effect nullify unjust laws that

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of statements such as Huey Newton's highly advanced and self-critical text, "A Letter from Huey Newton to the Revolutionary Brothers and Sisters about the Women's Liberation and Gay Liberation Movements"

[11] "Liberation Schools" in *The Black Panther* (July 5, 1969), pp.170–171; reprinted in The *Black Panthers Speak*, pp. 170–171.

[12] *The Black Panthers Speak*, pp. xvii-xviii.

[13] "Petition Statement for Community Control of Police. Summary of Police Control Amendment that Must Be Established in the Cities and Communities of America to End Fascism," in *The Black Panther* (June 14, 1969); reprinted in *The Black Panthers Speak*, p. 179.

are imposed on members of local community. The Panthers' demand for a jury of true peers is thus a very radical one. The Program states that "all black people should be released from the many jails and prisons because they have not received a fair and impartial trial." The Panthers were demanding that the whole system be reset—get out of jail and return to go, we might say—so that the community can assure that laws are applied justly and that unjust laws will not be applied at all.

The vision of community power in the original Black Panther Program and the actual initiatives put into effect by the Panthers thus constitute an inspiring example for our practice today. Among those who have done most to put this legacy into practice is Lorenzo Kom'boa Ervin. Ervin is a former member of the Black Panthers and SNCC, and a founder of the Black Autonomy Federation. He is well-known as the author of *Anarchism and the Black Revolution.* In a very instructive interview about his ideas on organizing, he points out the weakness of tactics like "lobbying politicians" and depending on "celebrity so-called leaders," dead-end tactics that do nothing "to build a grassroots movement from the bottom up."[14] Ervin sees the crucial question as the radical communitarian one: "How do we turn neighborhoods and communities into self governing communes?" For him, this implies very concrete creative efforts in which people can see before their eyes the growing power of community and feel this power through their participation in the communal creative process. So, "on the local level people would start to build their own neighborhood institutions," and this would include "some kind of economic base where people can be given jobs and can build housing and infrastructure for themselves." He sees urban farming as playing a key role in this process, as it has recently in many impoverished and marginalized urban areas, perhaps most notably in Detroit. But Ervin points out that even projects like community-based urban farms are of limited value unless they are part of what he calls "building a whole synthesis." He notes problems such as high rates of infant mortality, high cancer rates among women, economic segregation, and police terrorism, and stresses that all these issues have to be linked together, since underlying them all is "the problem of people being disempowered by institutions that exist now."

So the challenge is to take on all these institutions simultaneously at the local level. Ironically it is only by becoming more radically local that a movement spreads far beyond its boundaries. Ervin argues that "when people see that you've got a sustainable movement wherever you started at, it can spread. People will emulate it. And that's essentially what happened with the Black Panther Party." He explains that he is "not saying that we won't help someone start up somewhere else, but our objective right now is to worry about Memphis." The point is that "worrying about Memphis" means at the same time worrying about the world. This is what "building a whole synthesis" means. Ervin explains that even in the most local of actions "it has to be understood that we're trying to dismantle this entire society. This entire capitalist system and the whole system of white supremacy worldwide." This systemic focus is something that was always central to the Panther ethos. An area in which both Ervin and Rahim extend this Panther outlook in their awareness of the ecological dimensions of the necessary synthesis. They recognize that social revolution also means defying capitalism's and the state's definition of reality on behalf of a more bioregional, land- and Earth-centered approach. As Ervin says, we must move "to the question of a bioregional area as opposed to just a city: We cannot be limited to what the state says is the territorial limitation of an area."

So the "synthesis" means taking on capitalism, the state, racism, and the entire system of domination. The old slogan about thinking globally and acting locally never really made sense in a world that is radically local and global at the same time. The system of domination knows how to think and act both locally and globally at the same time, and movements for liberation have to learn how to do this also. This is what the struggle between domination and liberation, the historical dialectic, is all about.

And this is how the Panther legacy fits into the total picture. The struggle for an Oakland Commune as a commune of communes, or a Memphis Commune as a commune of communes, is inseparable from the struggle for Commune Earth, the commune of all communes.

[14] "'Racism has to be challenged': An Interview with Lorenzo Kom'boa Ervin".

In Defense of Isisntism

Date: September 22, 2015

The following text is an introduction to the Changing Suns Press blog "It Is What It Isn't." It may seem to introduce far too much for something called a "blog entry." I also write a column for the journal Capitalism Nature Socialism. *My friend and former* CNS *editor Joel Kovel once commented, in a joke that only leftist intellectuals could appreciate, that my columns had "burst the integument of the column-form." Despite such tendencies, I plan to make a real effort to make future bog entries something like blog entries, though they may still turn out to be something else.*

For years I've been intrigued by the increasing "is" contamination of the English language. More and more, you hear strange constructions like "the idea is, is that" and "the problem was, is that." Occasionally you even hear three is's in a row. "The thing is, is, is that." But, above all, there's the ubiquitous "It is what it is." This phrase became so common that it was once officially named "cliché of the year."

As a defender of dialectic, I found this trend rather disturbing. From the viewpoint of dialectical thinking, the crucial challenge is to see the ways in which things are *not* what they are. It always *is what it isn't* and *isn't what it is*! Getting trapped in the world of "it is what it is"—what I call Isisism—is the royal road to delusion, disaster and domination. The right road, the road to illumination and liberation, is what I call Isisntism. It seemed to me that we desperately needed a forthright defense of Isisntism against the rising tide of Isisism. So, in late 2013 I wrote an article called "It Is What It Isn't! A Defense of Dialectic" to defend dialectic against rampant misinterpretations (such as the ridiculous idea that it means "thesis-antithesis-synthesis"), and to champion the cause of Isisntism.

A few months after the article appeared, news stories began to appear about a fanatical fundamentalist organization that was rather unbelievably called "Isis." *Is is*! Sometimes it was even called simply "*IS*." Never before had the roots of dogmatism been expressed quite so clearly. For some time I had been attacking "Isismic Fundamentalism" in a general sense. Impossible reality soon supplied the most extreme example of Isisism imaginable and gave it the name I would have picked if I had made it up. It went so far as to murder anyone who had the slightest doubt about what is. This group was Isisism incarnate! So we finally had the perfect expression of the nature of Isisism. However, we should not allow this convenient paradigm case to lead us astray. For Isisism is, in fact, all around us, and the real challenge is to uncover it in its less flagrant but still insidious guises.

We don't notice these Isismic phenomena because they are enshrined in the dominant ideology, which is so pervasive that it becomes no more noticeable than the air we breathe. So a key dimension of dialectical thinking is the critique of ideology. This is identical to the critique of Isisism, since ideology is basically a set of ideas that purports to tell you how the world *is*, but which really tells you what some system of power and domination requires you to *believe* about the world. This is why we need what has been called "a ruthless critique of all that exists"—all that *is*— arising out of a resolute spirit of negation. Dialectic extols the virtues of negative thinking—the *isn't* side of Isisntism. One might respond: "Negative thinking? Don't we have too much of that already?" Of course, we do, but we have too much of it precisely because garden variety negative thinking is *not negative enough.* We need to put a lot more negation and a lot more thought into our negative thinking.

For example, when narrow analytical thinking negates the ego, it gets molecules, atoms, or maybe nothing at all. It's no wonder that those who reason in this way usually have little interest in thinking the matter through. One-sided analytical thinking murders to dissect, rather than scattering to collect (as Heraclitus put it). When dialectical thinking negates the ego, it gets to the larger dimensions of "selfhood"

and "personhood." It gets to the human community, the community of nature, and communities of communities of communities. It gets to what Gary Snyder in his essay "Good, Wild, Sacred" calls "the whole mountains-and-rivers mandala universe."

It might seem rather insane to say this, but the only thing that can save the world is dialectical thinking. It seems insane not only because dialectic is usually misinterpreted immediately as its opposite (such as some dogmatic nonsense about triads), but also because it really *is* rather insane from the viewpoint of conventional normality. However, something needs to be added for it to begin to make sense. This "thing" that we need is not just one thing. It is not some kind of free-floating "thinking," but a certain kind of *world*. A world of dialectical thinkers who also *live* and *act* dialectically. Non-dialectical thinking means dogmatic, alienated, obsessive, automatic thinking. Non-dialectical action means zombie-like, machine-like, puppet-like activity. Dialectical thinking means thinking relations, connections, contexts, wholes, changes, novelties, emergences, and transformations. Dialectical action means fully experiencing and living all of these realities. Basically it's The Walking Dead vs. The Walking Alive. To quote Gary Snyder again, it's "domesticated mind" vs. "wild mind." Disordered and domesticated mind vs. orderly and free mind.

Nietzsche, one of the great dialectical thinkers, was a bit like a Zen master in that he disguised his dialectic by attacking dialectic. But no one depicted dialectical reversal better than he did: "When you fight monsters be careful that you do not become a monster. When you look into an abyss the abyss looks back into you." This could be a good mantra (mnemonic device) to repeat at least a few times a day. How many who have fought totalitarianism or authoritarianism have taken on all the qualities of what they were fighting? This was the history of the cold war. The cold warriors became what they most vehemently "were not" and what they most intensely hated. Fundamentalist religion does the same thing when it fights against Satan, heathen and infidels. But this history is also repeated on the everyday micro level when our obsessive reactions to the pettiness and meanness of others turn us into mean and petty people. Mark Twain was right in his brilliant injunction, "Never argue with a fool, onlookers may not be able to tell the difference." But we should also consider the fact that after a while there may not even be much of a difference.

The popular culture is so pervaded by Isismic thinking that we hardly notice it. I recently happened to overhear about thirty seconds of a program on the History Channel about the Great Depression and even within those few seconds I stumbled on a typical case of Isisism. Commenting on the life of the famous outlaw John Dillinger, the narrator remarked that he was sent to prison for ten years, but that it obviously didn't work, since when he got out he immediately started robbing banks again. This is certainly true, if we abide by the rules of conventional Isismic thinking. It teaches us to believe, or to pretend to believe, that prison is designed to make people into honest, upstanding citizens. Prisons are "reformatories" to help them reform, "penitentiaries" to help them repent, and "correctional institutions" to help them correct their wayward path. So prison obviously didn't work.

But obviously prison *did* work for Mr. Dillinger, as in millions of other cases. It worked exactly like prison works. Prisons help inmates make contacts that facilitate getting into, or back into, the crime business. They are ideal places to get pointers on how to improve techniques of crime. They fuel anger and rage that often lead to violent and illegal behavior. But all this is a bit beside the point. Prisons are designed above all to create a class of people called "criminals," and to put them on the crime-police-court-prison treadmill. If prisons were really designed to turn criminals into obedient, law-abiding citizens, they would have been universally judged a failure long ago and abolished. As early as 1793 William Godwin could in his *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice* conclude that they were "seminaries of vice," and that only a person of "sublime virtue" could fail to come out a much worse person than the one who entered.

This is a case of Isismic thinking that is fairly easy to see through. Most are a bit more challenging. For example, prison doesn't work by working in the same way that so many of today's medications for supposed psychiatric disorders don't work through working. They continue not working precisely because they do work. The crucial Isisntist question concerns the end for which they work. According

to an obsolete mythology, these medications correct a "chemical imbalance" in the brain. But this contention has been conclusively proven false. Here's the real message to the consumer: "Dear Patient: We have some bad news from your physician and the pharmaceutical companies. You have a variety of psychiatric disorders. Careful research has proven that they are a direct result of a severe financial imbalance. The good news is that you, your insurance company and the taxpayers can go a long way to rectifying this financial imbalance. Unfortunately, you will have to stay heavily medicated for the rest of your life, but this will make a healthy contribution to correcting the financial imbalance." So it turned out that there "is" an imbalance, but it also that this imbalance "is what it is not" (corporate, not chemical; in the balance-sheet, not in the brain).

Electoral politics is another area in which flagrant Isismic thinking proliferates. Probably the most famous quote about American electoral politics is the old cliché that "all politics is local." Doesn't anybody think that it is at least slightly strange that the powerful politician who said this was famous for the thirty-four years he spent, not in his local neighborhood, but in *Washington, D.C.*? But let's not dwell on that absurdity, since there are much bigger contradictions to consider.

According to conventional wisdom, the whole point in electoral politics is to win. However, such a strategy is obviously a ridiculously self-defeating approach. In the sham democracy of the two-party system, winning often leads to disaster. Win at the wrong time and you're in real trouble, as Herbert Hoover found out. In national politics, it would be much wiser for the parties to concentrate on analyzing the business cycle and being sure to lose (and especially, to lose the presidency) immediately before a severe recession sets in. The unfortunate winners always get the blame for the economic disaster, even if it is a global phenomenon. They are then thrown out of office, after which the lucky losers come back with a considerable majority, and when the inevitable recovery comes, the latter get completely undeserved credit for it. Why all this absurdity? Because what is today called "politics" is not what it "is," that is, political. It is not of the polis.

The phenomenon of losing by winning has in fact been pointed out long ago by astute observers. Immediately after the Spanish-American War, the classical liberal sociologist William Graham Sumner wrote "The Conquest of the United States by Spain." He argued that as a result of the war with Spain the United States had become an imperial power with colonies and global interests that would drag it into a morass of international entanglements and undercut freedom at home. In other words, by fighting against Spain it was itself turned into Spain. It suddenly discovered that it is what it isn't. We are back to Nietzsche's dialectic of monsters.

Heraclitus was the founder of Western dialectic ("Western" because he was from the Far West of Asia). He famously said that you can't step into the same river twice. You can't do this because it isn't what it is—the same river. He also said "Always expect the unexpected, or you will never find it." Dialectical thinking defies the expected (that which we are told "is"). It patiently waits for the appearance of the unexpected (what isn't and might even be thought to be impossible) and is able to notice it when it appears. The dialectical sensibility is a form of negative capability. It accepts the possibility that the impossible will become possible, which is only to say that it accepts the possibility of a world of true emergence and true creativity. Heraclitus also said that "the path up and the path down are one and the same." This is true because each path isn't what it is—a separate path. This idea of unity-in-plurality and the identity of opposing forces is basic to both ecological and dialectical thinking.

The ancient Daoist sage Laozi taught a similarly dialectical view of reality. He said that one opposite can't win out over another opposite—because each one isn't what it is—a separate, independent, entirely opposed reality. In Western culture, the famous concepts of yin and yang are often translated into innocuous New Age ideology at best and into cunning tactics for business success at worst. But they are in fact radical concepts that challenge conventional views of reality and indeed conventional reality itself. They place in question the entire hierarchical and dualistic view on which the dominant order has been based for millennia, in the teaching that the polarities are on one plane of reality, are mutually determining, have no rigid boundaries, flow into one another, are dependent on one another for their existence, and are contained within one another.

Laozi challenged his highly patriarchal society in which the males ruled over females and elders ruled over the young, teaching that our ideal models for virtue and goodness are the female and the young child. He observed that the greater the use of force and coercion to maintain order, the greater the resulting disorder. He said that one can never achieve victory through becoming as strong as possible—because strength isn't what it is—pure power with no weakness. String a bow too tightly and it loses it efficacy. Sharpen a sword too much and it loses its edge.

Hegel, in his Master-Slave Dialectic, showed how a seemingly independent and all-powerful being can turn into a being that is dependent on a seemingly subordinated being. The master begins with power of life and death over the slave. However, by becoming a passive consumer who relies on the slave for the necessities of life, the master becomes a dependent being whose power finally depends on preventing the slave becoming conscious of the real conditions of life and the real power relations. The more that power becomes what it is (powerful) the more it becomes what it isn't (powerless). We are now seeing such a reversal on a world-historical level. The World System was seemingly founded on Euro-American societies as the center of capital accumulation and Asian societies as the primary locus for maximum exploitation of labor-power. However, as production has shifted to Asian societies there is a reversal of global power-relations that will ultimately eclipse European hegemony. Or consider the long-term results of the project called "the control of nature." In my own bioregion, the project of mastery, of *exploitation of nature* and *holding back the sea*, will probably result in our complete disappearance in the course of the present century.

Marx's most dialectical dimension is expressed in his question "What do we produce through our labor?" The usual non-dialectical and rather uninformative answer is that we produce things, such as "products," or "goods and services." We produce something that "is." The dialectical answer is that we produce many things, along with their opposites, including social relations, and modes of being and non-being, or lack. We produce wealth, along with poverty, power, along with powerlessness, dominance, along with subordination, happiness, along with misery, pride, along with humiliation, intelligence, along with stupidity, strength, along with weakness. We produce production itself, along with distribution and consumption. We produce a class system and a state system. In sum, we produce a certain kind of self-contradictory world, and we produce ourselves as a certain kind of self-contradictory being.

We might also touch briefly on the ideas of Nagarjuna, since he is the most radical dialectician and Isisntist in history. Nagarjuna introduced the Tetralemma of Isisisntism. He says that whenever we consider whether something *is* a certain way, we must also consider the way in which it is*not*, the way in which it *both is and is not*, and the way in which it *neither is nor is not*. To which, he adds, we must consider the way in which choosing any of these alternatives still leads to contradictions and the need for further investigation. It might be helpful to look at an example of how the Tetralemma applies.

Human beings are intelligent beings. They have minds that have evolved in ways that have helped them not only to survive, but to grow and flourish. However, these minds have also evolved in ways that lead them to ignore and to systematically misinterpret basic aspects of reality. So let's say I'm a human being. I should ask in what ways I am intelligent. There are probably quite a few, and I would do well to find out what they are and put them to good use. But I also have to ask in what ways I am not intelligent. One of my own core beliefs I call "respect for my own stupidity." I can be stupid in a lot a ways and it might not make much difference. But there are some really important forms of stupidity that I need to pay careful attention to, and do something about, since the cost of ignoring them may be disaster. (On the personal level this might mean wrecking my own life, on the collective level it might mean wrecking the biosphere). Next, I need to ask in what ways I am both intelligent and stupid, which means simply exploring the interrelations between the first two questions. And, finally, I must ask in what ways am I neither intelligent nor stupid. This question might not seem to make much sense, but it is in fact the deepest and most challenging one of all. It leads me to the realization that ultimately, it's not all about "me" (or "the egoic I"). Not only is it not all about me, but, on a certain level, none of it is about me. "I" is but the stream in which the "Not-I" goes a-fishing.

Nagarjuna's ideas are based on the premise that the fully awakened mind is the only path to the deepest truths and most ultimate realities. One of the most important of these realities is the Big Story about which our little egocentric minds are usually oblivious, so immersed we are in our own little, disjointed stories. As Hegel said, the truth is the whole (though dialectic also explores the untruth and limits of any whole). The Big Story encompasses the Earth Story and the ways that we fit into it. The awakened mind comprehends the Earth Story as the epochal history of both the emergence and flourishing of human and natural communities and the progressive destruction and dissolution of these communities. It is awakened to the ominous truths of the present world crisis: that we live in an age of mass society and mass extinction. The nihilism and despair of the world today arises out of an implicit recognition that we live in a culture of death in an epoch of death. Shall we call our era the *Thanatocene*? The fact that no one does is a measure of the depth of our world's denial and disavowal. It shows its lack of awakened consciousness that, as Hakuin said, "this very Earth on which we walk is the Pure Lotus Land," or as the dialectical and mystical poet William Blake stated it, that "if the doors of perception were cleansed, everything would appear to man as it is, Infinite."

It's worth returning to Hegel's insight that "the life of Spirit" is not a "life that shrinks from death and keeps itself untouched by devastation, but rather the life that endures it and maintains itself in it." It reaches truth "only by looking the negative in the face, and tarrying with it." If we are willing to face history with open eyes, we need to go through the Dark Night of the Soul. Spirit needs to pass through being-toward-death to reach being-toward-life, and more importantly, being-toward-birth. This is the apocalyptic vision. Perhaps we should be anti-catastrophists, but only in the sense that we are apocalypticists. Catastrophe is of this world, the dying one, and it is real. Apocalypse is of another world, the world of death and rebirth. Apocalypse is a turning, a revolutionizing. It means finding "new suns." Dialectic reveals that every apocalyptic moment is "a time to change suns." Every mundane moment is "a time to move on."

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