A Friendly Critique of Bookchin's Politics

Usufruct Collective

September 8, 2022

Contents

What we love about Bookchin's political philosophy 3
Bookchin breaks with anarchism 5
Bookchin and electoralism 7
Bookchin on Syndicalism 9
Bookchin lacked a proper fleshed out conception of the relations of ideologically specific groups to social movements 15
Towards a reinvigorated social ecology, communalism and libertarian socialism 16
Endnotes 17

Bookchin is our favorite political philosopher. Which does not mean we think he is right about everything. Despite us agreeing with most of Bookchin's political philosophy, we also think it is important to critique it. And yet, most every critique of Bookchin's political philosophy, even when true, leads to an overall politics less coherent and liberatory than his own. Critiques of Bookchin–from those more close and distant to his views– usually straw man him or fail to properly sublate him: That is they often do not take the most liberatory parts from his philosophy, while critiquing him and synthesizing his best views with other philosophical and political dimensions in such a way that closer approximates coherence, rationality, and ethics. Our goal is to sublate Bookchin; not to straw man him, not to discard liberatory dimensions of his political philosophy and praxis, and not to treat him like he is beyond critique.

Some people will say that the big problems with Bookchin's philosophy emerge later in his life. And there is both some truth and falseness to such an evaluation. Older/Later Bookchin simultaneously includes 1. Places where Bookchin made some of his most crucial errors but also where he made 2. Some of his greatest elaborations of philosophy, ethics, and political form, and content. Additionally, from the 1960's until 2004 there are continuous features to his overall politics– continuous features that do not amount to a mere skeletal lower common denominator but arguably the most essential features of his worldview in general. Such continuous features include: social ecology, direct democracy, means and ends of communal and inter-communal self-management, the development of oppositional and reconstructive politics as part of a revolutionary process, non-hierarchy, direct action, mutual aid, and libertarian communism specifically. These features are consistent in his work from *"Post Scarcity Anarchism"* until *"The Communalist Project"* (Bookchin 2007, Bookchin 2018). And we are in agreement with the above features of Bookchin's politics. That being said, there are also ways he did change his mind overtime for better and for worse. By discarding features of Bookchin's politics that we think are errors while adding features to his political project that are not present or sufficiently present in his recorded philosophy and worldview, we would still be agreeing with the most important features of his philosophy and worldview– or at least what we consider to be as such. In this sense, our attempt at a ruthless critique will be relatively friendly.

What we love about Bookchin's political philosophy

Starting in a controversial place, Bookchin has great polemics and critiques of various worldviews. This includes his critiques of the ecological crisis, hierarchy, capitalism, the state, patriarchy, racism, nationalism, lifestyle anarchism, deep ecology, market society and culture, religion/supernaturalism, etc. Even though at times his critiques contain some errors in them or are otherwise unnecessarily divisive, the more important features of his critiques usually hold true. Additionally, his overall ecological philosophy blossomed more fully in the 1990's. Such a development can be seen in his book "*Philosophy of Social Ecology*"— where he posited a dialectical conception of nature and society and a philosophy that has branches in everything from epistemology, ontology, to ethics, and politics (Bookchin 1995). Despite some disagreements with Bookchin around the edges of dialectical naturalism, we agree with the general and most essential features of dialectical naturalism. And social ecology is to this day the best overall framework for understanding the current ecological crisis and its causes in social hierarchy– and the poten-

tial reconstructive solutions in horizontal organizations and relations (Bookchin 2007, Bookchin 2018).

Adapting and building on his own prior notions of communal self-management (such as found in his 1960's essay "Forms of Freedom"), Bookchin developed a fleshed out notion of revolutionary praxis. Bookchin's later work on what constitutes extra-parliamentary grassroots communalism is even more fecund than his earlier work on the topic. Bookchin took various organizational features from syndicalism and applied them to the community sphere (Bookchin 2018, Bookchin 1990) while building off of both communal anarchist tendencies and communal tendencies beyond the anarchist tradition (Bookchin 2005, Bookchin 2007). Such communal tendencies within anarchism are found in the works of Proudhon, Bakunin, Kropotkin, as well as in movements and revolutions influenced by anarchism such as The Morelos Commune, The Free Territory, Shinmin prefecture, and the communes in the anarchist revolution in Spain. All of the above combined span millions of people between 1900–1940 on multiple continents involved in robust communal self-management. Bookchin was influenced by all of the above except the Shinmin Prefecture (which as far as we know he never mentions– likely out of ignorance and lack of adequate translations). Bookchin was also influenced by a more transhistorical history of freedom and communal self-management that existed prior to the historically constituted anarchist movement– including everything from immediate return forager societies, to early cities, to various Indigenous democratic and confederal practices, to utopian socialists, to Athens, and the Parisian sections of 1789, and beyond (Bookchin 2005, Bookchin 2021). And in addition to the above, Bookchin was also heavily influenced by Marx. Additionally, Bookchin helped round out his own thinking with studies into anthropology, history, technology, and ecology. Bookchin's libertarian communalism is a praxis rooted in the means and ends of communal assemblies that are qualified by the features of direct democracy, non-hierarchy, confederalism, mutual aid, and direct action. According to such a praxis, communal organizations would participate in various kinds of mutual aid and direct action projects, multiply, and confederate– building the new world in the shell of the old, building popular power, while opposing hierarchical power, towards revolution and libertarian communism.

Bookchin, opposed authoritarians and to anti-organizationalists and even various organizational anarchists, advocated for notions of non-hierarchical governance and forms of organizations with bylaws and constitutions (Bookchin 1996, Bookchin 2007). Such notions are sacreligious to a significant number of historical and contemporary anarchists while essential or otherwise important to other kinds of anarchists. He also fleshed out processual features of direct democracy as rooted in deliberation, searching for agreement, and majority vote if there is not full agreement, bound by the free association and participatory activity of persons and minimal non-hierarchical rights and duties (Bookchin 2021, Bookchin 2004, Bookchin 2007, Bookchin 2018). These features satisfy various ideals of protecting freedoms of each and all, freedom of majorities and minorities (via collective decisions within free association within the bounds of horizontal rights and duties), with robust dialogue at the heart of decision making, encouraging dissent while forging agreements, complete with ways of making collective decisions when there is not consensus.

And as early as the 1960's Bookchin advanced notions of a post-scarcity economy. Looking at the potential for ecological and liberatory technology to meet human needs with less overall labor/work, he advocated for and theorized about "higher-phase communism" that would transform labor/work into a participatory and even joyous experience (Bookchin 2018). Building off

of Marx, Kropotkin, Mumford, and others, his notion of post-scarcity talked about the technological potential that has existed from the 1960's and onwards to make it so all basic needs are met in tandem with luxuries available for all– including a whole array of liberatory technology spanning everything from green energy to automation of toil. However, Bookchin was far from a technological reductionist; he advocated for a liberatory social matrix in order to actuate the means and ends of liberatory technology (Bookchin 2005, Bookchin 2018). In this sense, problems dealing with technology are societal problems with societal solutions (a kind of "social technology" theory similar to social ecology). Bookchin's notion of communalizing the means of production that communities need compliments such communist content as such communalization properly distributes means of production according to needs (Bookchin 1986). Such communal assemblies would have embedded participatory councils that self-manage various common policies and plans (Bookchin 1994).

So what do we take from Bookchin? A lot. Such as but not limited to:

1. The general theory of social ecology
2. The essential features of dialectical naturalist epistemology, ontology, and ethics
3. The means and ends of communal self-management and a communalized economy (qualified by various libertarian features and practices)
4. The ways he fleshed out and qualified notions of democratic processes, practices, and governance
5. His view of liberatory technology and a post scarcity economy
6. Many theories and facts from his various history writings
7. A lot of his critiques of other tendencies and worldviews
8. The overall strategy of reconstructive and oppositional politics through self-managed groups (especially communal assemblies as forms of popular power).

Despite the disagreements we have with Bookchin (some of which are NOT included in this essay at all), we consider ourselves to agree with most of the essential features of his prescriptive political philosophy. Of course, as Bookchin noted and was aware of, there needs to be some continuous adaptations/elaborations of his general political praxis (including adapting universal features of communalism to particular contexts and upgrading its praxis as needed and desired). Because communalism is a living praxis, we hope to add onto it for the better and not for the worse while not subtracting anything good from it. This is difficult to do. We wish Bookchin could respond directly to our arguments and evaluate his responses.

Bookchin breaks with anarchism

The goal of this section is to clarify where Bookchin diverges from anarchism and to get an understanding of Bookchin's politics through doing so which can help illuminate the substance of his politics which will be critically appraised later on in this essay. A critical assessment and

appraisal of Bookchin's history and conception of anarchism at various points in his life would be a great project, but is *distinct from a critical appraisal of the substance of his prescriptive politics*—a prescriptive politics which can be judged on its own merits in relation to good ethical criteria regardless of Bookchin's analytic and historical notions of what anarchism is or is not at different points in his life.

Bookchin ceased identifying as an anarchist later in his life. And yet, when he broke with anarchism he still considered himself a libertarian socialist/communist and was still opposed to hierarchy and still in favor of the means and ends of communalized self-management. *According to Bookchin*, the main distinction between his views and anarchism was the fact that he was in favor of governance and law of certain kinds (Bookchin 2004). For Bookchin, governance and law as such are not to be conflated with statist governance and statist law. For Bookchin, any formal organization had some kind of governance and by extension should have clear bylaws and processes in relation to such governance to protect against hierarchical power and enshrine participatory and popular power. Bookchin thought that governance and law could and should be qualified by a gestalt of various liberatory qualifiers (direct democracy, non-hierarchy, participatory activity/free association, mutual aid etc). And for Bookchin, new kinds of governance and law are needed (but insufficient) to create a horizontal and participatory world. For Bookchin, such non-hierarchical rights, duties, laws, and governance could create a realm of permissibility thoroughly rooted in freedom– as opposed to hierarchical and/or arbitrary rule (or otherwise *mere* custom). While some social anarchists would of course favor something like Bookchin's approach to law and governance– as exemplified in various constitutions/programs/bylaws/points of unity/institutions/decision making processes of both social movements and popular organizations as well as in ideologically specific groups– many other anarchists would oppose such an approach and claim it as antithetical to anarchism. It is more than common for anarchists to define the terms law and governance as inherently statist or otherwise inherently hierarchical. Some of the disagreements between Bookchin and various anarchists in regards to "government" and "law" would be merely in regards to definitions (as Bookchin defines government and law in a way that is potentially non-hierarchical), but a lot of such disagreements would be substantial as well. The use of the terms "formal organizations with some kind of non-hierarchical rules for such organizations" as a stand in for Bookchin's qualified conception of "government and law" would instantly create large substantial agreement between later Bookchin and most social anarchists in regards to the topic.

Bookchin over-exaggerates the following problem at the end of his life, but a significant number of anarchists (especially self-styled anarchists) have not fleshed out notions of non-statist and non-hierarchical governance, law, and power and how a good society could/should function. Bookchin said in his last interview that a lot of anarchists have made a fetish out of NOT fleshing out notions of what a good order/polity/economy would consist of precisely because many anarchists value such a lack of definition as creating space for freedom and creativity (Bookchin 2004). However, since the ends determine the means, what a good society consists of shapes goals and by extension strategies, and tactics, and overall processes towards such goals. This makes visions of a good society rather important. Bookchin thought we could have more knowledge about what a good society consists of than many anarchists. Similar but distinct to how many anarchist-communists (such as but not limited to Kropotkin) critique labor vouchers as keeping/reinventing some kind of wage-system, Bookchin critiques notions of self-management that exclude communal self-management as kinds of relative privatization of political economic

life compared to self-management that includes communal self-management (and requisite communalization of the economy). It is important to note, for the sake of clarity, that in a sense Bookchin exists on a continuum with anarchists who left significant parts of what a new society is "blank": Bookchin did not advocate for an absolute "blueprint" in regards to a new society and how to get there but instead some universal features to be adapted to specific contexts and relevant variables. Nonetheless, Bookchin's notions of a libertarian communist society and how to get there are more detailed than most all anarchists in regards to power, decision making, forms of organization, politics, economics, governance, law, technology, ecology, etc. This is the case even though Bookchin's "elaborated details" of politics are rather general and even vague at times with significant room for adaptation and elaboration themselves. We agree with Bookchin's notions of libertarian communist governance/constitutions/rights and duties/bylaws. And although controversial within anarchism, the above features are compatible with at least some strains of anarchism (especially after definitions are cleared up).

We think it is Bookchin's approach to local city government elections where he made one of his biggest errors. And we think Bookchin's electoral approach is where he made the biggest break from anarchism. Some social anarchists accept Bookchin's notions of non-hierarchical communal governance and law if not in name then in spirit, while Bookchin's electoral approach is far less common within self-identified anarchists. This is unsurprising as Bookchin's electoral approach is incompatible with anarchist notions of revolutionary social change.

Bookchin and electoralism

It is important to spell out what Bookchin's approach to elections was, as it is very easy to straw man and make into a weaker position than it is. First and foremost, he saw the popular organizations (community assemblies in particular) and grassroots social movements as the main/primary/essential dimensions of developing a dual power and counterpower to hierarchical forces. The above is important to bracket as many people claim his approach to elections as far more central to his overall praxis than it actually was. But in addition to his views on grassroots social movements and popular organizations, he also had a specific approach to elections within local hierarchical politics distinct from both anarchists and social democrats (Bookchin 2021). His approach to elections within local hierarchical politics, whatever one may think of it, has various nuances and qualifiers– and because such nuances and qualifiers are so idealistic, they do not mesh well with the brutal reality of electoral politics. Bookchin's approach to elections can be summarized as follows:

1. To run candidates for the most local possible elections below the state level (city or county level only)
2. With such candidates as mere delegates of grassroots groups (with no policy making power)
3. To run such a candidates to increase political education about direct democracy, anti-hierarchy, direct action, mutual aid, specific issues, and local grassroots organizations in the process of campaigning
4. With such candidates bounded by a program of sorts

5. To run such candidates to effectively abolish their positions
6. To hollow out the state of its military and police powers
7. To create gradations of binding directly democratic power
8. to be a thorn in the side of hierarchical city politics
9. To create tension between the population and the state and help contribute to a counter-force against the nation state

In the history of revolutionary socialism up until the present, Bookchin's unique approach to elections has no empirical results as a road to socialism. Various attempts thereof rarely get off the ground. Approximations thereof wind up failing, or being marginal, or compromising core features of Bookchin's approach to elections, or reproducing mere social democratic content at best because of the compromises and realpolitiks that is statecraft on the scale of a city. Rather than educating about grassroots social movements, such an approach to elections takes a lot of energy away from social movements and can confuse people in regards to means and ends of direct democracy, popular power, where the focus of organizing should go, and if not done extremely carefully can obscure the importance of opposition to the local hierarchical government. Running within the sphere of city elections to become a politician (that is in fact a delegate for some grassroots democratic formation) that opposes representative policy making can dilute the content of the message that such an educative process would try to convey. Once such a truly libertarian municipalist candidate is in office, if ever in office that is, the position of local politician itself has structural limitations that tend towards either 1. Ineffectual idealism (not getting anything done but proclaiming radical ideals and statements) and 2. Anti-idealistic pragmatism (making pragmatic sacrifices and alliance to get small reforms passed). And even if such libertarian municipalist delegate-politicians form a majority on city-council, higher state level authority can veto and go against such idealistic city level politics– and if and when such a centralized clampdown happens, it can easily be prior to people building meaningful social force in federated grassroots movements that would be needed to ward off the state. It is the development of such social force and the means thereof (including significant reconstructive politics, mutual aid, and popular organizations) that social movements should be developing and striving towards– as such popular power is what is needed to gain and secure short-term, mid-term, long-term goals, oppose specific unfreedoms, and build alternative institutions. If a communalist movement and broader social movement ecosystem has the popular support and capacity to seize and communalize the means of existence and production and divest cops and the political ruling class of their power (and of course abolish such positions), then it should strategically, tactically, and actually do so. If such capacity and support does not exist, then it should help to foster it via popular organizations and social movements through reconstructive politics and oppositional politics.

The notion of a municipalist approach to elections within and against local statecraft contributing to a libertarian socialist revolution is speculative at best and with many counterexamples in practice– that are less counterexamples against Bookchin's particular approach to elections as much as they are counterexamples to electoral approaches to revolution and socialism in general. And yet, Bookchin's approach to elections is not often tried let alone carried out in any meaningful way. We think this is the case for multiple reasons, one of which being the

disunity of means and ends within Bookchin's approach to elections. In our view, Bookchin's approach to elections tries to mix anarchism and social democracy on a local level in such a way that attempts to actuate anti-statist ideals and ends through electing delegate-politicians that are functionally effective and within the sphere of local statecraft. Additionally, the electorally minded shy away from such utopian aspirations, and idealists who favor something like the form/content of Bookchin's politics tend to avoid electoral politics (for various good reasons). It is unknown if we will ever see meaningful fruits from such an electoral approach Bookchin advocates, but until there is some significant proof of Bookchin's electoral approach as an effective way to actuate libertarian ideals (that does not eviscerate such ideals in the process) in at least some contexts, we remain in disagreement with Bookchin in regards to his electoral approach and are very skeptical of it. Be it reform or revolution: it is popular power through communal assemblies, radical unions, and various social movements more broadly that are most desirable to make radical gains and keep them.

The nature of hierarchical power is to be in self-contradiction to horizontal power (for the latter can only flourish through the destruction of the former). To the degree such positions on city council and the like continue to be hierarchical positions or are otherwise functioning within a broader context of hierarchical government on a local level, they will not be able to achieve horizontal ends. It is unknown to what extent Bookchin's municipalist approach to elections can be a potentially mobilizing and radicalizing force among a populace (let alone a transformative force), but we are yet to see a good example of it. Meanwhile, there are counterexamples where having a "movement politician" on the inside of city government inhibits direct action against city government– de facto pacifying and misdirecting rather than amplifying popular power and social force. The communal revolutions and movements we do see (both pre-1940s and post 1940s) that are ethical and effective utilize features that approximately correspond to Bookchin's non-electoral politics rather than his niche and eclectic approach to local elections.

We are libertarian communalists first and foremost in regards to revolutionary strategy and post-revolutionary society. Our libertarian communalism, rooted in the means and ends of horizontal community assemblies and federations thereof, is highly influenced by Bookchin. Yet, we would much prefer syndicalism as part of a revolutionary social movement ecosystem towards revolution compared to Bookchin's approach to local elections. And we will explain our critical support of syndicalism as part of a revolutionary strategy below.

Bookchin on Syndicalism

Syndicalism refers to a strategy to achieve revolution and socialism through self-managed labor union organizing and direct action through such unions. Syndicalism aims to achieve short term and long term goals and build capacity of popular power to seize and socialize the means of production. Syndicalism has developed various anarchistic forms of decision making and structure on mass scales. On one level Bookchin admires the organizational features of syndicalism and sees them as crucial to bring into spheres outside of workplace organizing. Bookchin rightly critiques various anarchists and anarchisms for eschewing syndicalism on the grounds that syndicalism is highly organizational. Bookchin's communalism takes the self-organizing and direct action features of syndicalism and applies them to the community sphere more broadly. Such an approach enables community assemblies to engage in a plurality of different kinds of direct

actions and direct action campaigns against local and interlocal injustices/unfreedoms and hierarchical institutions for short-term/mid-term/ and long-term goals. For Bookchin, the very parallel governance institutions he seeks to develop as a post-revolutionary political-economy can also be popular fighting forces against capitalism, the state, and hierarchy more broadly (while building gradations of communal commons in the interim to 1. meet needs 2. develop popular power 3. fuel direct action).

There are multiple kinds of syndicalists of course: anarchosyndicalists, pure syndicalists, organizational dualist syndicalists, and even reformist and Leninist (and even worse) cooptations/deviations thereof. Anarchosyndicalism mixes anarchist ideology within and as part of union organizing to make union organizing properly anarchistic. Pure syndicalists see syndicalist organizing as sufficient on its own and think that unions must be free of ideologies to be properly mass organizations. Organizational dualists make a distinction between ideologically specific groups and mass organizations and think ideologically specific anarchist groups should interface with syndicalist unions (and potentially other popular organizations depending on the strain of organizational dualism) to add anarchistic features to unions without dominating unions nor making unions only open to those with an anarchist ideology. There are also of course some important internal disagreements within such sub-categories of syndicalism. And there are disagreements among syndicalists of various kinds about the specifics of socialism, production, and distribution post revolution (for example, not all syndicalists are communists although many are).

In a post 1960's context, Bookchin saw syndicalism as a moribund revolutionary strategy. He saw this as the case for multiple reasons (Bookchin 1992), such as:

1. Increasing reformism of unions and lack of direct action by unions
2. Increasing bureaucratization of unions
3. Increasing integration of unions with capitalism and the state
4. Syndicalists at times claiming that syndicalist unions are the only legitimate organs for real class struggle or otherwise the hegemonic form class struggle and revolution must/should take
5. Syndicalism *by itself* lacks a communalist dimension when it comes to means and ends of revolution
6. That syndicalism has a narrow focus on point of production organizing which limits struggle, revolutionary subjectivity, and even visions of a good society at times
7. That more radical movements were increasingly well outside of workplace organizing and comprised a broad swath of the non-ruling class beyond "the industrial proletariat" and even those working for wages
8. That new compositions of capitalism make syndicalist organizing more difficult and less likely
9. And the failures of historical syndicalist projects

These are not the only critiques Bookchin has of syndicalism, but the above are good starting places to understand his critiques of it. And many of them simply do hold up as accurate in at least many important respects. Many relatively orthodox syndicalists of various kinds would likely even agree with a lot of them (although would disagree with Bookchin's conclusions about syndicalism). However, such critiques Bookchin made of syndicalism do not have universal application; there are unions in the past and present that practice direct action, that are not bureaucratic, that are not integrated with capitalism and the state, that contribute to a broader social movement ecosystem that goes beyond workplace organizing (for example, the defense committees of the CNT and the communes connected with the CNT), etc. Not all unions and contexts for unions are equivalent– and there is the potential for unions to have such a libertarian, revolutionary, and even extra-syndicalist character (in the sense of contributing to struggles outside of the workplace through tactical solidarity with social movement groups of various kinds). Unions are not intrinsically revolutionary nor non-revolutionary– and the same issue applies to communal assemblies as well.

As FARJ notes, "There are places and contexts in which it is worth considering syndicalism as a space for social work, there are others in which it is not, and so on." We agree thoroughly with the above sentence. And despite us being communalists who think communal assemblies are *generally* effective as *keystone* popular organizational form for direct action and mutual aid purposes that *at some point* should be prefigured in order for self-management to function on every scale: communal assemblies are not always the most fruitful organizational form for specific movement and revolutionary functions and goals in every real or possible context. From a thoroughly communalist perspective, communal assemblies are not the only forms of mass organizing people should engage with, nor necessarily the first organization one should help start or join, nor the main one every person should be primarily focusing on in every context.

Bookchin's critiques of syndicalism–even if brutally true in some, many, and even most important respects– simply do not lead to the conclusion of discarding syndicalism as A means for short-term, mid-term, and long-term gains– as part of a *revolutionary* toolkit. Bookchin's critiques of syndicalism can be best responded to through a praxis that includes and goes beyond syndicalism: that is a praxis that includes both organizing in and outside of the workplace in various ways (for example a focus on community, union, student, + rather than just union organizing), and the need (or more moderately extreme desirability) for ideologically and theoretically specific groups to interface with unions (and other mass organizations) to help actualize their most liberatory and revolutionary potential– combined with a context dependent approach to evaluating how much emphasis a person or ideologically specific libertarian group should put towards union organizing compared to other spheres of organizing.

Syndicalism has had victories such as: unions with tens and hundreds of thousands of people, creating global movement capacity that comprise millions of people, winning various reforms through direct action and directly democratic organizing (in turn meeting needs of people), connecting anarchistic practices with masses of people, invigorating other social movement action, as well as the 1936 revolution in Spain. Syndicalism has also had some failures as part of its history such as when some syndicalists took arms against the first Zapatista revolution and when the CNT made alliances with the popular front in Spain in such a way that sacrificed revolutionary goals, and when other syndicalist unions collapsed in the face of deadly cocktail of state repression, reformist tendencies, and increasing popularity of Leninism within the labor movement and the left in general. The history of syndicalism has been a positive force for socialism,

humanity and ethics, but syndicalist history is not merely one of unambiguous successes. One additional issue with syndicalism, as noted by Bookchin, is the tendency of many syndicalists to downplay non-syndicalist forms of mass organizing. However, there is nothing intrinsic to a pro-syndicalist position that must do so.

It is important to note that Bookchin does have some pro radical union dimensions to his prescriptive political philosophy at times. For example, younger Bookchin In his 1960's essay *"Forms of Freedom"*, Bookchin talks about the desirability for radical unions and self-managed workplace committees using direct action in a mode of *revolutionary* struggle against capitalism (not as the exclusive organs of struggle, but crucial ones alongside other organizations such as communal assemblies). Something closer to Bookchin's 1960's approach to syndicalism as a strategy is much more fruitful and close to our politics than later Bookchin's notion that syndicalism does not have any revolutionary potential. Yet, even at his most non-syndicalist later on in his life, Bookchin still supported unions, democratization thereof, and direct actions through unions as ways of securing various gains and achieving various goals. But later on in his life he treats syndicalism too harshly by claiming that syndicalism lacks *revolutionary* potential. Bookchin understandably grew tired of debating various kinds of syndicalists who saw syndicalism as a relatively hegemonic approach towards revolution and socialism; but his counter-response went too far and threw out some babies (syndicalist unions as revolutionary organs of oppositional politics) with the bathwater (various kinds of syndicalist reductionism).

Syndicalist-esque features of formal organization, direct democracy, bylaws, processes, mandated and recallable delegates, mandated and recallable committees are all thoroughly present within Bookchin's communalism. Community assemblies can take on a plurality of different kinds of direct actions in multiple spheres of life. Community assemblies as Bookchin argues for are both mutual aid organizations as well as direct action organizations in the mode of struggle against class and hierarchical rule. Although Bookchin's praxis sublates some syndicalist features *within* community assemblies, *his overall strategy did not properly sublate syndicalism itself as A means and at times a crucial means towards revolution alongside communal assemblies and other kinds of groups.* He was correct to go against notions of syndicalism as the *only or otherwise hegemonic* approach to class struggle and revolution (although in some contexts syndicalist unions can be the main oppositional expressions of popular power). And yet, the underemphasis on the potential for unions to be revolutionary seems to lack imagination of their potential. He also inaccurately trans-historicized his critique of unions– when depending on the various times-pace/social locations, conditions, willingness, and capacity of people, unions can be particularly radical and revolutionary forces for developing socialism and even communal forms thereof. Depending on the specific geographical and social location, post-1940's syndicalism is not a mere ghost of its former self. Depending on a variety of conditions, unions make more or less sense to be emphasized as organs of oppositional politics as part of an overall revolutionary strategy. And yet Bookchin did not disagree with syndicalism out of lack of experience– he himself being a union member and organizer in his younger years and a dues paying member of the IWW later in his life and someone who deeply studied Anarchism in Spain and syndicalism more broadly. And yet for all his throwing the baby out with the bathwater in regards to syndicalism as A mode of *revolutionary* struggle (that could/should be more or less emphasized depending on the presence and/or absence of relevant variables), many of his critiques of syndicalism are true nonetheless. And many of Bookchin's critiques of syndicalism are especially relevant to kinds of syndicalism

that 1. overly reduce mass organizations to workplace organizing and those that 2. reduce social problems to economic problems in the workplace.

Despite not ALWAYS merely being a ghost of its former self, global syndicalism is in crisis–noting the significant exceptions of course. Some places, for a variety of reasons, syndicalism is more of a fighting force or otherwise makes more strategic sense as an emphasized part of an ecosystem of social movements. Other places it truly does look relatively moribund (which is not to say there is no potential for it to become otherwise as movements eb and flow locally and globally). And there is also a crisis in organizational anarchism and the like about how to effectively develop the kinds of organizations that can be truly popular, ethical, and effective. An approach of community, union, student, and beyond can potentially encompass a plurality of forms of organizing and organs of oppositional politics while simultaneously emphasizing a significant communalist dimension as crucial ends (and means to be prefigured as part of such a development). Such a focus on community, union, student, and beyond is derived from the especifismo tendency.

Green Syndicalism combines radical ecology with syndicalist organizing (Ongerth 2010). Green Syndicalism has roots prior to the contemporary ecology movement via radical unionism against various anti-ecological industries–such as radical unionism against mining corporations, timber barons, fossil fuel companies, and the like. Capitalism and anti-ecological industries destroy the ecological world for profit and instrumentalize humans in the process–exposing workers and communities to various pollutants and hazardous conditions. Green syndicalism mixes ecological praxis with radical unionism. Such an approach can simultaneously fight for better conditions for workers and the ecological world more broadly and do so through direct organizing and direct action. When it comes to ecological direct action, it is ideal for movements to have people at the point of production and people outside of the point of production doing direct actions against various anti-ecological endeavors. Green syndicalism thus adds onto social ecological praxis for various short-term, mid-term, and long-term goals for workers, communities, and ecological flourishing. It should be noted that when it comes to unionizing inherently anti-ecological industries (such as fossil fuel industries), the goal should not be merely better conditions and even self-managed conditions within inherently anti-ecological endeavors, but the abolition of such inherently anti-ecological endeavors. The abolition of hierarchy plus the use of ecological technology in tandem with the institution of a self-managed decommodified economy (that provides everyone with a high standard and quality of life) would functionally abolish the root causes of the ecological crisis.

Concluding this section: we agree with many of Bookchin's critiques of syndicalism. We do not see syndicalist unions as the only nor hegemonic organizations for global libertarian communist revolution. We agree with Bookchin that communal forms generally make the most sense as the main kinds of mass organizations of a revolutionary libertarian process (and for a post revolutionary society). We think this for many reasons such as:

1. The potential for organized reconstructive and oppositional politics outside of workplace organizing (including against specific capitalist enterprises)

2. The need and potential to unite the broad non-ruling class for overall social force (which does not only include those working for wages at the point of production but also includes: unwaged reproductive laborers, the youth, the elderly, the unemployed, the unemployable, the homeless, tenants who might not be workers, peasants, landless peasants,

self-employed, cooperatively-employed, professionals who don't occupy exploitative positions, etc.)

3. The potential for communal assemblies to participate in direct actions against specific local and interlocal hierarchies for specific short term goals
4. The potential for communal assemblies to build power for and participate in expropriation, re-commoning, and communal self-defense
5. Communal assemblies can illustrate and model visions of a new society in the process of struggle against hierarchy.
6. The need to prefigure a communal and intercommunal self-management for self-management to exist on every scale at some point to achieve such ends
7. Communal assemblies can fil power vacuums during crises and revolutionary situations
8. Communal assemblies can engage in class struggle AND help oppose hierarchies and social problems not reducible to class
9. Communal assemblies can popularize practices and institutions of horizontality, direct democracy, direct action, and mutual aid among ordinary people
10. Communal assemblies can develop common infrastructure and resources which can help meet people's needs and reproduce daily lives of people in social movement groups and popular organizations and help provide infrastructure for direct actions (direct actions caused both by communal assemblies directly as well as other kinds of groups)
11. Communal assemblies can create a communistic content, and the more communistic content exists within the means of struggle and prior and during revolutionary processes, the more likely such communistic content is to thrive post-revolution
12. Communal assemblies can play assist roles and co-author joint-actions and joint-projects alongside other groups
13. There is a fecund relatively global and "transhistorical" history of communal self-management
14. There is also a rich history of communal self-management influenced in part by anarchism: pre-1940's period and post 1940's. Communal forms are crucial features of all the main anarchist influenced revolutions including the syndicalist revolution in Spain
15. New composition of capitalism, social movements, and labor organizing make syndicalism particularly difficult as a mass organizational strategy in many places compared to the early 1900's (this of course does not have universal applicability)

Where we differ from Bookchin is that we see syndicalist unions as important *revolutionary* building blocks that make more or less sense to be emphasized as part of a strategy depending on various conditions and contexts. We are pro syndicalist because:

1. Syndicalism can develop counterpower against bosses and capitalists within workplaces
2. Syndicalism can help popularize direct democracy and direct action and reach out to not-already politicized workers by bridging specific interests and ideals
3. Syndicalism can popularize class struggle
4. Syndicalism can enable people to organize on the job
5. Syndicalism can utilize withheld labor power
6. Syndicalism can build popular power for expropriation of the means of production
7. Is conditionally very effective
8. Syndicalism and Green syndicalism can benefit workers, communities, and ecological flourishing
9. Syndicalism can at times have an extra-syndicalist character and assist struggle outside of the workplace
10. Syndicalist means can help develop communist and even communalist ends
11. Syndicalism has a history of being able to secure radical reforms and make revolutionary headway

This viewpoint–that certainly is and leans communalist despite being thoroughly pro-syndicalist– is bound to be disagreeable to various orthodox syndicalists and communalists alike as it is *in some sense* in between both positions. Additionally, we are in favor of the *prudent use* of ecological direct action in and out of the workplace and are in favor of green syndicalism as A mode of struggle alongside others. Depending on the context, green syndicalism can be crucial (or otherwise extremely desirable) for halting ecological destruction while creating better conditions for workers and communities. We think social ecology as a living praxis should reintegrate syndicalism as part of a broader libertarain socialist and communalist strategy. This would mean syndicalism as a MEANS towards revolution– not as THE means, and not as the ends (that is not as an alternative way of carving up decision making power and economic life post-revolution through either union control of means of production or through mere workplace self-management that *excludes* communal self-management and communalized means of existence and production and politics). As opposed to communalism vs. syndicalism, we adamantly support both as part of a process towards a libertarian socialist, communist, and communalist revolution.

Bookchin lacked a proper fleshed out conception of the relations of ideologically specific groups to social movements

Bookchin did at times argue for, advocate, and practice a politics that has a distinction between ideologically specific groups and popular organizations and social movements more broadly. He saw a difference for example between his notion of "libertarian vanguard group" of sorts united

around tight ideas and popular assemblies organizing through shared democratic practices– and other kinds of social movement groups of various kinds. Bookchin saw a need/desirability for a militant active minority within social movements. He stressed how important various kinds of revolutionary leadership can be (and how leadership can be distinct from rulership).

When we consider the extent that Bookchin does flesh out different dimensions of politics (forms of freedom, post-scarcity, democracy, ecology etc), his contributions to how an ideologically specific group should function in relation to broader movements are lacking in comparison. Throughout his body of work, there is nothing approximating a fleshed out conception of how ideologically specific groups should function in relation to popular movements such as that found in various Especifismo movements and writings. And yet, 1. there are ways in which features of Bookchin's worldview can inform ideologically specific groups in some important respects (in fact his philosophy already has done so) and 2. ways ideologically specific groups can help develop structures of communal self-management with a direct action and mutual aid content (in fact some ideologically specific libertarian communist groups have already been doing this very praxis).

On one level having a praxis involving liberatory popular organizations and social movements as the main protagonists of struggle and revolution is fundamental. But the above sentence is not to downplay the necessity–or more moderately extreme desirability– of ideologically specific libertarian communist groups catalyzing such popular formations through social insertion. If we think ideologically specific libertarian communist groups are at least extremely important (and can even help make or break revolutions as Bookchin pointed out), we can critique Bookchin for not fleshing this out– similar to how Bookchin critiqued various past anarchists for not having a fleshed out conception of how democracy should function despite them believing in some kind of direct collective decision making. Communalist praxis can benefit from learning from Especifismo, Platformism, and the like.

Towards a reinvigorated social ecology, communalism and libertarian socialism

Even though this essay has been rooted in a critical appraisal of Bookchin, this essay has also been aiming to do something more: that is to sketch out how to potentially upgrade social ecological praxis through a critical appraisal of Bookchin. Social ecology and communalism should be retained because their most *essential* and *salient* features hold true. And yet, social ecology and communalism can be made more coherent. Bookchin's written and spoken philosophy is a closed book of sorts, but social ecology and communalism are living praxes that are internally differentiated and incomplete. First and foremost, the primary way that both social ecology and communalism can be made more coherent is through retaining their most essential features as part of praxis as they develop (including horizontality, direct democracy, mutual aid, direct action, communal self-governance, confederalism, oppositional politics, reconstructive politics, and an understanding of ecological problems as having their roots in social problems of hierarchy, etc.). Such a politics would keep a communalist core through the development of communal assemblies and confederations thereof as mass organizations for functions of mutual aid and direct action towards dual power and revolution. Such communal assemblies and federations thereof would be both counterpowers to capitalism and the state and help meet needs of people in self-

managed ways– while prefiguring the new world based on self-management on every scale in the shell of the old. Aside from retaining their most essential features, social ecology and communalism can be made more coherent by subtracting Bookchin's electoral approach to politics. Additionally, social ecology and communalism can use a reintegration of syndicalism as part of a revolutionary social movement ecosystem in such a way where syndicalism is viewed as a means (not as an end or as THE means)– and one of multiple means to be strategically emphasized more or less depending on conditions. Such a reintegration of syndicalism into overall social ecological praxis does not and should not overly reduce modes of oppositional politics to syndicalism (or otherwise underemphasize communalist means and ends). A fleshed out strategy involving relations of ideologically specific groups to social movements and popular organizations can further communalist goals. And communalism can further the goals of ideologically specific libertarian communist groups through creation of and social insertion within communal assemblies as direct action and mutual aid organs (in such a way that still retains an "organizational pluralism" of sorts via social insertion in community, union, student spheres and beyond). Such a sublation of libertarian communism, communalism, syndicalism, and ways ideologically specific libertarian communist groups can interface with mass movements can potentially move social ecological praxis forward.

Endnotes

1. Bookchin, Murray. *Post-Scarcity Anarchism.* AK Press, 2018.
2. Bookchin, Murray. *The Philosophy of Social Ecology: Essays on Dilectical Naturalism.* Black Rose Books, 1990.
3. Bookchin, Murray. *Social Ecology and Communalism.* Edinburgh: AK, 2007.
4. Bookchin, M. (2021). *From Urbanization to Cities: The Politics of Democratic Municipalism.* AK Press.
5. Bookchin, Murray. "Communalism, the Democratic Dimension of Anarchism." libcom.org, 1994. libcom.org;
6. Bookchin, Murray. *Anarchism, Marxism, and the Future of the Left: Interviews and Essays, 1993–1998.* Edinburgh: AK Press, 2000.
7. Bookchin, Murray. *Social Anarchism or Lifestyle Anarchism: An Unbridgeable Chasm*, 1996.
8. Bookchin, Murray, and Dave Foreman. *Defending the Earth: Debate between Murray Bookchin and Dave Foreman ; Foreword by David Levine.* Montréal: Black Rose Books, 1991.
9. Bookchin, Murray. "Municipalization: Community Ownership of the Economy." Libcom.org. 1986. libcom.org.
10. *One of Murray Bookchin's Last Interviews* . Pacific Street Films, 2004.

11. Bookchin, Murray. *Ecology of Freedom.* Ak Press, 2005.

12. Bookchin, Murray. *The next Revolution: Popular Assemblies and the Promise of Direct Democracy*. London: Verso, 2015.

13. Bookchin, Murray. "The Ghost of Anarcho-Syndicalism." Institute for Social Ecology, November 6, 1992. social-ecology.org.

14. FARJ. Social Anarchism and Organisation , 2008.

15. Ongerth, Steve. "Redwood Uprising: The Story of Judi Bari and Earth First! – IWW Local #1." Redwood Uprising: The Story of Judi Bari and Earth First! , April 1, 2010. judibari.info;

Usufruct Collective
A Friendly Critique of Bookchin's Politics
September 8, 2022

Retrieved on 9th September 2022 from usufructcollective.wordpress.com

theanarchistlibrary.org