09 2005

Libertarian Municipalism

Chaia Heller

Transcription of a video by O. Ressler, recorded in Leverett, U.S.A, 32 min., 2005

My name is Chaia Heller. I live in Leverett, Massachusetts. I have been involved with the Institute for Social Ecology, that is in Central Vermont, for over 22 years, which is about half of my life. I arrived there at the age of 21, when I was a sort of forming myself politically. To speak of myself, as I had a political life before, I went to the ISE, the Institute for Social Ecology, and I feel I was a sort of formed there politically in the last two decades of my life. I politically identify as a left libertarian, as a social ecologist and as a feminist. That identity has formed itself over the last decades as the movements around me have really changed. I have been involved with the green movement, left green movement, youth green movement, ecofeminist movement, the anarchist movement and the ecology movement in the various configurations over the last several decades. I have been an activist and educator, teaching at the institute both environmental philosophy and feminist theory. I have been a public speaker. I toured for many years as part of a speakers bureau called “Speak Out”. And, I have been a writer.

Murray Bookchin embarked on his journey of social ecology in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s towards what is really a coherent and

comprehensive body of political, philosophical and anthropological ideas. Bookchin was raised as a leftist, as what you call a red diaper baby. He was the son of communist Russian immigrants. He grew up in Brooklyn, New York City, and was very much raised in the context of Marxist-based movements, in particular communism and socialism. In the 1960s Bookchin noticed, when he looked around at the political landscape, that many Marxist categories were no longer capable of describing the kinds of new social movements that were emerging around him. First of all, the civil rights movement that was clearly not a movement that could solely be explained through the lens of class or labor or the factory. He saw questions of justice and social justice and identity politics that were emerging at the time. Also, the gay and lesbian rights movement and the feminist movement really could not explain Marxist understanding of historical necessity, or who would arise and constitute the historical subject. And, in addition, he saw the ecology movement as a really interesting historical emergence. It presented something that was rather trans-class, that the idea of being able to imagine or envision the globe, as this universal entity, that was subject to the impacts of corporations and governments around the world, and that the repercussions of those impacts could be felt on a global level. He started to see that the ecology could be the potentially to lay the groundwork for a trans-class.

But social ecology was really Bookchin's attempt, as a leftist, to take into account the new social movements that were identity based and the ecology movement, and he really wanted to create a new trans-class theory, that would incorporate the concerns of people of both social justice and ecology, and to create a New Leftist framework. He found that Marxist-based theory provided an insufficient base for creating this theory. Instead, he looked to anarchism, in particular to a form of anarchism that he calls social

anarchism. When I say social anarchism, I would say that Bookchin really saw anarchism as embodying two sets of tensions: One you might call an individualistic and romantic anarchism, that really emphasizes the liberation of the individual self, against government and all form of authority, and a social anarchism, that really emphasizes the need for new forms of non-hierarchical forms of collective governance. Bookchin has very much and firmly identified with the latter. Social ecology was an attempt to take a sort of that very loosely body of ideas called social anarchism and to really use it as a ground from which to build a New Leftist theory. Social ecology represents that attempt, and he has been working on that for the last five decades or so. He is now 84 years old and is still very much at work and developing ideas for social ecology.

Social ecology can be roughly divided into three different projects: One is developed as a leftist epistemology, or way of thinking and knowing. What that means is that Bookchin feels that in order to really get the crux of ecological struggle, it is not sufficient just to understand environmental problems on a technical level. He believes that we really have to understand, what nature is in its most ontological and physical dimensions, to develop a new organic understanding of nature, using new ways of thinking to do that. Doing that, he departs from the traditions, that he very much comes out of, the Hegelian and Marxist tradition, and tries to develop a new – what he calls – naturalistic approach to the dialectical tradition. The dialectical tradition, that in modern periods is associated with Hegel and Marx, is really an attempt to explain historical phenomena, or change over time, in the context of understanding these struggle phenomena as moving through a series of new developmental phases; one that emerges out of the other, and that previous set of faces which might have existed on one historical or dynamic dimension with each other.

What Bookchin essentially does, which I think is so amazing and creative, is to look at nature as a process of natural evolution. He would say, in social ecology, nature is that process through which nature creates itself and gives rise to what he calls a second nature, which would be the emergence of culture and human beings and all the things, that human beings say, do and think. For Bookchin nature is now this very elaborate and lush creative process, the first face is what he calls “first nature”. He did not coin the term that goes back to pre-modern philosophy. But he gives new meaning to those ideas, that nature is really a process of natural history making.

This is important, because Bookchin really wants to locate humanity within that natural evolution. This is particularly important during a time when ecologists are very confused about the role of humanity in natural evolution. People were confused by the potential relationship between humanity and nature. Bookchin believes that humanity has the potential to play a very creative and constructive laboratory role in natural history making. He believes that human beings can actually not just be constructive, but can help guide natural evolution, if they can create a rational and ecological society, rather than doing what human beings do – or he would not say human beings, he would say, the people who are in power – which is actually unraveling natural evolution.

Natural evolution, that took millions and millions of years to unfold, is now being erased at an awesome pace, as we can see species extinction, forest devastation and just general ecosystem destruction. For Bookchin human beings can not just play a destructive role, but can actually play a constructive role through creating ecological technologies, ecological forms of agriculture, ecological forms of production, ecological forms of economics, and

ecological politics. Through doing those things, humanity can play a constructive role in its own natural history.

In terms of libertarian municipalism: libertarian municipalism is the political branch of social ecology. Bookchin really comes out of the Marxian tradition, believing that philosophy needs to be alive in the world, and needs to be in the service of human kind. Libertarian municipalism is basically a philosophy that says, that everyday people, citizens, cities and towns and villages across the world are rationally capable of governing themselves. And what he tries to do is balance principles of autonomy and cooperation through the philosophy of libertarian municipalism, by saying what would happen if you had communities that had autonomy on a local level, but that that autonomy was always limited by and in dialogue with a larger collectivity, which would be the confederation. So there is a tension between the self-governing municipality, which would be a self-governing city, town or village, and the larger confederation, that the city or town or village is part of. The citizens are bound together by sharing a common constitution that is grounded on a set of ecological and social principles, and the confederation is bound together by that same exact constitution.

There is a tremendous concern among leftists about what is democracy, what ought it to look like, and what ought it to become. As a social ecologist, for me there is the sense that we have the potential to have a direct democracy; which means, that people in cities, towns and villages would gather as citizens in a local town meeting, which you could call a general assembly, or public assembly, or citizens assembly. It is that body that would be the driving force for policymaking in society in general.

The idea is that the rule would be by the general populous, on behalf of the general populous, and they would be making policy for the general populous. Libertarian municipalism is an attempt to formulize that vision of a directly democratic society without turning it into a recipe or blueprint or how do manual, which is I think a very dangerous thing and would drain all the poetry from the vision.

The vision of libertarian municipalism is intentionally a bit vague in general, because it believes that people in movements themselves have to struggle with how to particularize their general principles of non-hierarchy, cooperation, direct democracy, social justice and ecology. Those are some general principles, and I could add more, or I could take some away.

The question is, how do you create a politics, how do you draw out a politics from these general principles? The idea of libertarian municipalism is, that through the principle of direct participation or the principle of self-determination, we have this notion of people governing themselves through direct democracy. How is this different than a representative democracy that you find in a republican democracy that dominates much of the modern world? There, you have the idea that the masses are really not capable of managing themselves. What they do is they try to get together and figure out the best person to represent and articulate their hopes and dreams in a way that will come closer to the way in which they like that to happen. We do this through elections that can be at a municipal level or on the state level, and people elect officials who have policy-making power.

I cannot emphasize enough the importance that in a representative democracy, the representative, who is supposedly acting on behalf of a disempowered constituency, has policy-making power. In a

libertarian municipalist vision, there would be no representatives. There would be citizens, who gather together in the popular assemblies, who speak directly on behalf of themselves. And, it is this citizen's assembly that has policy-making power.

For administrative purposes, for particular local municipalities to coordinate with other municipalities or part of the confederation, the various groups would empower a delegate, which is very different than a representative. A delegate is very similar to a messenger, the delegate is basically giving the will of the group, the mandate of a group and goes to the confederate council and delivers that mandate. The delegate is always recallable, the delegate always has a limited term or limited engagement, and that role of a delegate is never professionalized. Within a direct democracy of libertarian municipalism, you would never have professional politicians. You would have again an active general citizenry. This would have revolutionary implications for the way democracy would work. There would not be lobbying for politicians and representatives to present us more accurately. We, as citizens, would be speaking on behalf of ourselves and would bring our own hopes and dreams and our own understandings of the way things ought to be to the popular assemblies directly ourselves.

In my book (*Ecology of Everyday Life: Rethinking the Desire for Nature*, 1999), when I am talking about social desire, I believe people have the social desire to be mutualistic, to create complex, political, creative and economic forms of consociation. People have a desire to have social lives that are rich and lush and that are not simple relationships of command and control. I think there is an argument that could say that hierarchy is a much more simple form of association than is participation and decentralized and cooperative forms of association. Those forms of association require

a tremendous degree of self-consciousness, mediation, care, empathy and ability to take other's needs and desires into consideration. It is a much more complex way of being in the world than simple relationships of command and control, that have dominated not just the modern period but much of the pre-modern period as well – and some might argue much of human history.

Leftist theories, whether it is anarchist syndicalism, socialism, or left libertarian socialism, tend to see production and the production process and economics as the central human activity, through which one mobilizes society and social change. Social ecology really takes a different approach and sees human beings not primarily as working animals, but primarily as what Aristotle called "political animals", conscious animals. Animals that actually have the ability to think and talk and speak with compassion and reason with one another. Like every aspect of society, economics would be put into the hands of the citizens in the general assembly. The municipalized economics or directly democratic economics means simply that economics would be the stuff of everyday, civic life of citizens. The citizens themselves, in their general assembly, would convene with other citizens and consider carefully what are the needs and desires of their community, and take that into consideration with considering the needs and desires of other communities, with which they are confederated. That means, in a very concrete way, that economics is not in the hands of the worker or the factory, but in the hands of the everyday citizen.

For Bookchin this is a much more democratic way to organize economics. There will always be sectors in the society, for various reasons of age or ability or interest, that are going to be central to or marginal to various forms of occupational activity. But even more important, on a more philosophical level, it is the most

democratic way to handle economics, to put it into the hands and to the general interest of the citizens. That does not mean that every citizen would work at every job and would have authority over determining the specifics about how every workplace would operate. I think in a good society, the general citizens and the general citizenry and the general body will contour the general principles and contours for shaping that economy. Groups of workers would have a limited autonomy in determining the production process that they are engaged with.

For instance, if a given society decided, we are going to make bicycles, the society would, according to ecological principles and according to principles of cooperation, organize bicycle production in a cooperative, decentralized and ecological way. But I think the people who are in charge of making the bicycles would have limited autonomy and limited authority to determine the sensibility, the shape, the flavor and the sort of the rhythm of their workplace. They wouldn't have the autonomy to say, we are going to dump the grease that gets accumulated in this factory into the river. That would go against the principle of ecology that is guiding the city, town or village. But they would have the autonomy to determine their own kinds of schedules and to determine the workplace culture that they are working in.

Within libertarian municipalism, there is always a tension between the local and the confederal. There are two moments that make it pretty distinct as a philosophy or as a reconstructive vision, that the idea of a direct democracy as an empowered locality is relatively meaningless if it is not complemented with the idea of confederation. Otherwise you could just have a bunch of self-interested local communities that exist in an antagonistic or at best tolerant relationship with one another. It is again the dialectic between the individual and the community, the individual

community and the larger confederation, that is so unique to libertarian municipalism. While the general assembly is the structure that guides the politics of the local community, the confederal council is the political structure, that links together all the local self-governing bodies or cities, towns and villages. What would happen is that empowered delegates would go to the confederal councils and the confederal councils would be charged with perhaps regional confederations, continental confederations and intercontinental confederations for instance. I am intentionally not using words such as “national” or “international”, because I think politics and boundaries will be configured in completely different ways. But you would have confederal councils, whose purpose would be very different from the state.

People often ask, “But wouldn’t that just be a state?” And the answer is, “Absolutely not!” A) There are no representatives that have decision-making power. B) The confederal councils have no decision-making power unto themselves. They are meetings in the sense of town meetings of delegates that have to be recallable back to their municipalities or local cities, towns and villages. They have a purely administrative function, and I think this is really unique to this idea. They are to administrate questions of education, maybe you have a regional university systems or regional school programs, or maybe you have continental school or education programs. Questions of transportation would be administrated through confederal councils. Questions of communications technologies might be coordinated through confederal councils. These questions of coordination and administration are very important to figure out how various localities and municipalities would exist in a dynamic cooperative relationship with one another.

Libertarian municipalism is still very much in its experimental and embryonic phase. It is still very much an idea in the making that

has had a degree of praxis in so-called political experiments, one of which I was involved in many years back. There have been some key experiments that have happened. One in Uruguay, where there was a group of social ecologists that very much engaged with libertarian municipal politics within the late 1980s and early 1990s. There is a group of social ecologists in Montreal, who are still engaging with libertarian municipal politics. There was a group, that I was part in Vermont in the late 1980s and early 1990s. And there is a group in Sweden and Norway called "Democratic Alternative", that is at this point probably the most active and focused group, who is in the underground trying to bring into practice libertarian municipal politics and vision.

I have learned so many different contradictory things. First of all: What looks like underground, how do you start a libertarian municipal movement? It has a sort of three general phases. Again, this is not a blueprint, it could be different for a different group, but this seems to be how groups tend to go about doing it. There tends to be sort of a group formation phases, where groups get together, identify people, who might be interested, and try to learn about libertarian municipalism, of how, in the future, to engage into practice.

The first phase is primarily educational. People engage in self-directed study groups, in which people try to reflect on a set of literature, often writings about direct democracy from various groups, from various areas. Often people read works by Murray Bookchin or other libertarian municipalists. The attempt there is to allow the group to gain a sense of solidarity and also to gain a sense of empowerment from the education process.

The next phase has often been an attempt towards movement building. At that phase, the group develops an identity in the sites

of self-organization. In the case of the group in which I was part, we called ourselves the Burlington Greens; we were in Burlington, Vermont. We identified a set of principles that were very much part of a broader left green network of the time in the 1980s and 1990s. I cannot remember all the principles; but generally, they were social justice, ecology, direct democracy, and municipalized economics. The idea is that you form an organization, an organizational identity; you have your set of principles; and, then, the next idea is to start to assume positions on various situations within the community.

The third phase in libertarian municipalized organizing is the phase in which people consider the idea of actually running a candidate for election. For most anarchists and left libertarians, the idea seems completely antithetic. And it is, unless you consider the fact that you are only using the electoral process as an educational mechanism for engaging attention as a minority with the majority within a city, town or village. First of all, the election in which we participate would never go above the municipal level; because, within the philosophy of libertarian municipalism, the only legitimate entity, when we are talking in the sense of a democracy, is the city, town or village. Once you go above that level, you are entering the level of the state, which is to be considered an illegitimate political entity. In the case of Burlington, we ran candidates for ward. (Various cities and towns in the U.S. divide themselves into various sub-areas and one of the terms is a ward.)

What is very interesting about this process, is that it has two sets of contradictions:

a) The electoral process is not used in order to win. That is not the main goal.

b) If we ever did win a candidate, the goal would not be for the candidate to win and become a representative. But if the candidate won, what would actually win would be the agenda or the program, which happens to be libertarian municipalism. That is the ultimate paradox of this process; that is just very confusing to people, but quite simple, actually. If I was in power to be the delegate, not the representative, the delegate for the group; so if I would be the person, who ran in the campaign, I would be promoting this program of direct democracy, municipalized economics, ecology and social justice. If people ever voted me in, which we are assuming would take a very long time to get to the point where we could actually win a majority, but if I did, what would be voted in would not be me as an individual but the process of libertarian municipalism. And the city or town would then actually shift to adopting the popular-assembly-model, direct democracy.

I think libertarian municipalism would function best absolutely when coming into existence in the context of broader struggles. I think this can happen in a variety of ways. First, I think a lot of social ecologists have been active in a variety of different social movements, the anarchist movement, the feminist movement and the ecology movement. The social movement can actually be a forum, like your city, town or village, for education. So for instance in Seattle – I was there – some of the key actors who organized Seattle were students of mine, people who went through the ISE. There were a lot of teach-ins and workshops in Seattle. For example, social ecologists were teaching about questions of free trade and we were giving a social ecologist or libertarian municipalist perspective. So, I think one of the sites for libertarian municipalism or social ecology to take hold is within the social movements.

The text has been edited by Harald Otto in the course of the project transform *(http://transform.eipcp.net)*.