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Bookchin Breaks with Anarchism

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For much of his adult life Murray Bookchin was known as a major anarchist theorist, perhaps the most wide-ranging and innovative of the twentieth century. When he died in July 2006, the Times (London) Online called him “the most important anarchist thinker in North America for more than a quarter of a century.”¹ But the fact is that by the time of his death Murray no longer identified himself as an anarchist.

As early as 1995 he was telling the people closest to him that he no longer considered himself part of that movement. At a conference in 1999 in Plainfield Vermont he made the rupture public; and he put it in writing in 2002, in an article published online.

The break, however, was fairly easy to miss. After he died, I noticed that many of his admirers did not realize that he had parted ways with anarchism, or if they did, they did not understand the reasons for it. The story therefore needs telling. As his companion and collaborator for almost two decades (our relationship began in March 1987 and continued to his death), I had a front-row seat to watch the events unfold. I am writing this article to tell what I know and saw about Murray Bookchin’s break with anarchism.

Ecology

Murray always said that to understand a thing, you have to know its history. So to understand what happened with him and anarchism, we must first go back to the 1950s, when he was undergoing his transition from Marxism to anarchism.

In 1948, as a member of the United Auto Workers and a shop steward, Murray participated in a large United Auto Workers strike against General Motors that resulted in the workers winning quarterly cost-of-living increases, company-paid health insurance and pension funds, and extended paid vacations — in exchange for abjuring walkouts for two years. That outcome convinced him that the working class, as such, was not going to be the primary revolutionary agent. Contrary to Marxist predictions, capitalism was not going to so “immiserate” the working class that it rose up in rebellion against it. Rather, workers were going to try to make improvements in their working conditions within capitalism.

This realization must have been highly distressing to Murray. He was, after all, a committed anticapitalist revolutionary. If workers were not going to overthrow capitalism, then who would, and under what circumstances? What, if any, were the limits to capitalism? In those years he was developing an interest in environmental issues such as chemicals — pesticides and herbicides — commonly

¹ Times Online, August 10, 2006.

used in and agriculture and in food preservation; he thought they might have deleterious health effects, even causing cancer. He wrote about the subject in 1952 in a long essay called “The Problem of Chemicals in Food.”² Perhaps the limits of capitalism, he thought, were environmental or ecological in nature. But those problems affected everyone, regardless of class. The revolutionary agent, in an ecological rebellion against capitalism, would then be not the working class but the community as a whole. Opposition to capitalism could become a general, transclass interest. This assumption — that citizens, not workers, were the revolutionary agent of greatest significance — remained foundational for the rest of his life.

Where had Murray’s ideas about ecology come from? Surprisingly, considering some of his later writings, they came from Marxism itself. “I wrote my earliest, almost book-length work on the ecological dislocations produced by capitalism, ‘The Problems of Chemicals in Food,’ in 1952,” he recalled forty years later, “while I was a neo-Marxist and had in no way been influenced by anarchist thinkers.”³ He would in later years bitterly criticize Marxism for its anti-ecological premises (in, for example, the 1979 “Marxism as Bourgeois Sociology”). But in the early 1950s, while he was still a Marxist, he had come upon passages in Engels that got him thinking about nonhuman nature and about ecology as a social phenomenon. “My basic ideas on an ecological society really came from my decades-long studies of the Athenian polis, Hegel, and even Marx. Specifically, my thinking on ecology was instigated not by the works of any anarchist thinker but *by Marx and Engels’s remarks on the need to reconcile town and country.*”⁴ A passage in Friedrich Engels’s *Anti-Dühring* was particularly fascinating:

Abolition of the antithesis between town and country is not merely possible. It has become a direct necessity. . . . the present poisoning of the air, water and land can be put to an end only by the fusion of town and country.”⁵

Another passage from Engels was also thought provoking, this one from the 1872 *The Housing Question*:

² Bookchin, *The Problem of Chemicals in Food*. This article, like many others cited in these notes, may be found online at the Anarchy Archive, dwardmac.pitzer.edu.

³ Bookchin, “Deep Ecology, Anarchosyndicalism, and the Future of Anarchist Thought,” in Bookchin, Graham Purchase, Brian Morris, and Rodney Aitchtey, contributors, *Deep Ecology and Anarchism* (London: Freedom Press, 1993), p. 54.

⁴ Emphasis added. Bookchin, *Anarchism, Marxism, and the Future of the Left: Interviews and Essays, 1993–1998* (Edinburgh and San Francisco: A.K. Press, 1999), p. 57.

⁵ Frederick Engels, *Herr Eugen Dühring’s Revolution in Science (Anti-Dühring)* (New York: International Publishers, 1939), p. 323, quoted in Bookchin, “Listen, Marxist!” in *Post-Scarcity Anarchism* (Berkeley, Calif.: Ramparts Press, 1971), p. 209.

The housing question can be solved only when society has been sufficiently transformed for a start to be made towards abolishing the contrast between town and country, which has been brought to its extreme point by present-day society. Far from being able to abolish this antithesis, capitalist society on the contrary is compelled to intensify it day by day.⁶

Such passages led Murray to the insight that our present social order is on a collision course with the natural world (“town and country”) and that we must have an anticapitalist revolution in favor of an ecological society. That being the case, he realized, he had to define the nature of the postrevolutionary society. What would an ecological society look like? An observation from Engels was striking: because it required a “uniform distribution of the population over the whole country” it would necessitate “the physical decentralization of the cities.”⁷

Accordingly, Murray wrote in 1962 that decentralization was essential for an ecological society:

Some kind of decentralization will be necessary to achieve a lasting equilibrium between society and nature. Urban decentralization underlies any hope of achieving ecological control of pest infestations in agriculture. Only a community well integrated with the resources of the surrounding region can promote agricultural and biological diversity. . . . a decentralized community holds the greatest promise for conserving natural resources, particularly as it would promote the use of local sources of energy [and use] wind power, solar energy, and hydroelectric power.⁸

Anarchism

Given the importance of decentralization, Marxism (despite Engels’s remark) was not the most congenial ideological home for Murray’s new ecological ideas. In the late 1950s he had been attending meetings of the Libertarian League in New York and learning about anarchism. As he later recalled, what led him to

⁶ Friedrich Engels, *The Housing Question* (Moscow: Progressive Publishers, 1970), p. 49. Murray quotes this passage in *The Limits of the City* (Montreal: Black Rose Books, 1986), p. 138n.

⁷ Bookchin, “Listen, Marxist!” p. 209. In this essay Murray thought of decentralism as a common goal of both anarchism and Marxism: “Both Marxism and anarchism have always agreed that a liberated, communist society entails sweeping decentralization, the dissolution of bureaucracy, the abolition of the state, and the breakup of the large cities”(p. 209).

⁸ Bookchin, *Our Synthetic Environment* (1962; reprinted by New York: Harper, & Row, 1974), pp. 242–43.

turn from Marxism to that alternative revolutionary tradition was “not any extensive readings into the works of early anarchists” like Proudhon, Bakunin, and Kropotkin. Rather it was “my reaction against Marx and Engels’s critiques of anarchism, my readings into the Athenian polis, George Woodcock’s informative history of anarchism, my own avocation as a biologist, and my studies in technology that gave rise to the views in my early essays.”⁹ The first anarchist work that Murray read was Herbert Read’s brief essay “The Philosophy of Anarchism,” Read being “one of the few anarchists whose writings I could find” in the late 1950s and early 1960s.¹⁰

An anarchist society, existing without the state, would by definition be a decentralized society. “An anarchist society,” Murray wrote, “should be a decentralized society, not only to establish a lasting basis for the harmonization of man and nature, but also to add new dimensions to the harmonization of man and man.”¹¹ Other anarchist principles as well seemed to converge with his ecological ideas, so much so that in his eyes anarchism and ecology seemed tailor made for each other. One example is the principle of differentiation (which Read mentions in his essay). To Murray (whose lifelong philosophical grounding was in the Hegelian dialectic), differentiation — a Hegelian concept — seemed to have an affinity to the organic, the organismic, and the ecological: “Progress is measured by the degree of differentiation within a society. . . . Both the ecologist and the anarchist view differentiation as a measure of progress. . . . to both the ecologist and the anarchist, an ever-increasing unity is achieved by growing differentiations.”¹²

Another key concept in the convergence was diversity, considering “the ecological principle of wholeness and balance as a product of diversity.” “An expanding whole is created by the diversification and enrichment of its parts,” he wrote; and “I submit that an anarchist community would approximate a clearly definable ecosystem: it would be diversified, balanced and harmonious.” And: “To sum up the reconstructive message of ecology: if we wish to advance the unity and stability of the natural world, if we wish to harmonize it, we must conserve and promote variety.”¹³

Murray articulated these points of convergence between anarchism and ecology in his path-breaking 1964 article “Ecology and Revolutionary Thought.” As he put them all together, they led him to affirm that “an anarchist society, far from being a remote ideal, has become a precondition for the practice of ecological principles.”¹⁴

⁹ Bookchin, “Deep Ecology, Anarchosyndicalism,” pp. 53–54.

¹⁰ Bookchin, *Anarchism, Marxism*, p. 57.

¹¹ Bookchin, “Ecology and Revolutionary Thought,” in *Post Scarcity Anarchism*, p. 79.

¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 77, 78.

¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 78, 80, 76.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 76.

Anarchism had further appeal for him, in what he saw as its rich revolutionary antecedents: in the German Peasant Wars of the 1500s; in the Diggers of 1640s England; in the Enragés of French Revolution; in the Paris Communards of 1871; and above all in the Spanish Revolution.

Perhaps in retrospect it seems opportunistic to try to marry one's preexisting ideas to an existing ideology. But in the early 1960s anarchism seemed like a historical relic, more or less up for grabs. Few people in Europe and North America were interested in it as an ideology. In 1962 (the year Murray published *Our Synthetic Environment*, with the passages about decentralization) the historian George Woodcock pronounced anarchism all but dead, after its last flowering in Spain in 1936–39.

Today there are still thousands of anarchists scattered thinly over many countries of the world. There are still anarchist groups and anarchist periodicals, anarchist schools and anarchist communities. But they form only the ghost of the historical anarchist movement, a ghost that inspired neither fear among governments nor hope among peoples nor even interest among newspapermen. Clearly, as a movement, anarchism has failed. . . . During the past forty years the influence it once established has dwindled, by defeat after defeat and by the slow draining of hope, almost to nothing.¹⁵

Just as Murray was engaging with anarchism, then, anarchism was on life support. By infusing it with parallel concepts from what he would call “social ecology,” he did more than anyone else in the 1960s to resuscitate anarchism. And indeed by promoting this refurbished anarchism, by indefatigably writing and lecturing about it to the counterculture and the New Left in the United States and Europe, he gave rise to a revival of interest in anarchism itself.

As Murray would later point out, anarchism seems to have always been most functional when merged with another ideology or set of ideas. For example, synthesized with syndicalism, or trade unionism, it became anarcho-syndicalism, one of its more significant tendencies and the banner under which the greatest anarchist experiment of all was conducted, the Spanish Revolution. Synthesized with communism, the idea of the abolition of private property and distribution according to need, it became anarcho-communism, a libertarian form of communism. In some sense anarchism functions best as part of a duality.

The marriage of ecology and anarchism appeared to be no exception, and Murray dedicated himself passionately to advancing the ideas. He felt confident

¹⁵ George Woodcock, *Anarchism: A history of Libertarian Ideas and Movements*. (Cleveland: World, 1962), p. 468.

and even militant about his choice: his 1969 essay “Listen, Marxist!” represented, not simply a warning to the SDS to avoid a takeover by Maoists of the Progressive Labor Party, but also his definitive personal break with Marxism as the ideology by which he defined himself. He took pride when, a few years later, Victor Ferkiss identified him with a tendency that he called “eco-anarchist.”¹⁶

Post-scarcity, hierarchy, and spontaneity

In the following decade Murray went on to elaborate his anarchist ideas, developing them into a social theory of great richness and depth. Anarchist history and ideas seemed to stir his extraordinarily fecund theoretical imagination. One idea after another struck him as relevant to the ecology-anarchist project, and he enthusiastically incorporated into it a number of innovative ideas.

One was post-scarcity, the idea that the leisure time potentially afforded to all in present-day Western societies need not necessarily lead to complacency or embourgeoisement but could provide the freedom to create a cooperative society. A high level of technological achievement promised to eliminate the toil and drudgery and thereby to open the doors to political participation to people of all classes. The working class itself could even be its way out demographically: thanks to automation technologies, jobs performed by people were increasingly performed by machines. Murray saw this development as potentially positive, as it could give people the free time to function as political beings in their communities. Having worked as a foundryman and autoworker as a young man, he personally experienced the drudgery of factory work and understood well the difficulty of political activity while forced to work under such circumstances. Post-scarcity, he concluded, was potentially liberatory.

Another major innovation that he brought to anarchism was the critique of hierarchy and domination, which he came to consider the authentic “social question.”¹⁷ Social hierarchies, he came to believe, were more fundamental than economic classes, existing as they did long before capitalism. It was through hierarchies that social strata dominated one another. Indeed, social hierarchies gave rise to the

¹⁶ Victor Ferkiss, *The Future of Technological Civilization* (New York: George Braziller, 1974), p. 75. Murray wrote in 1999, “I regard Kropotkin as the real pioneer in the eco-anarchist tradition, as well as anarchist communism.” *Anarchism, Marxism*, p. 58. In 2002 he rejected eco-anarchism as primitivistic. See Bookchin, “The Communalist Project,” in *Communalism: Journal for a Rational Society* (2002), originally published online at www.communalism.net; republished in Bookchin, *Social Ecology and Communalism* (Oakland and Edinburgh: A.K. Press, 2007).

¹⁷ Bookchin, introduction to *Towards an Ecological Society* (Montreal: Black Rose Books, 1980), p. 29.

idea of dominating nature. The concept of hierarchy was thus of great relevance to Murray's still-developing "social ecology."¹⁸

Murray may not have been the first libertarian social theorist to write about hierarchy, but he towered above all others in elaborating it as a significant social-political concept. In his elaborate dialectical exposition of hierarchy, *The Ecology of Freedom*, he tried to do what Marx had done with capital: show its emergence, its inner tensions, its limits, its downfall. He turned to anthropology to trace its origins; to history to trace its development; and to ethics and philosophy to foresee possibilities for its downfall.¹⁹ Published in 1982, *The Ecology of Freedom* became an anarchist classic and a cornerstone of social ecology, while the critique of hierarchy has become conventional in anarchist thinking.²⁰

Still another point of convergence between anarchism and ecology was the emphasis on spontaneity: "Every development must be free to find its own equilibrium. Spontaneity, far from inviting chaos, involves releasing the inner forces of a development to find their authentic order and stability. . . . Spontaneity in social life converges with spontaneity in nature to provide the basis for an ecological society."²¹ The concept had its social parallel not only in previous anarchist writing but in revolutionary history and theory itself. Historically, Murray observed, the initial stage of revolutions tended to be spontaneous; revolutionary peoples created revolutionary institutions spontaneously, as the Parisians of 1793 did with their sectional assemblies, and the Russians of St. Petersburg and Moscow in 1905 with their soviets, and as the Spanish anarchists did in 1936 with their collectives. Its convergence with the ecological concept of spontaneity made it newly relevant.

¹⁸ Murray first mentioned the phrase "social ecology" in "Ecology and Revolutionary Thought." He co-founded the Institute for Social Ecology in 1974. He did not write his first article defining social ecology, "What Is Radical Social Ecology?", until 1983.

¹⁹ In the essay "Post Scarcity Anarchism" Murray quoted Raoul Vaneigem's "Totality for Kids." See *Post-Scarcity Anarchism* (Berkeley, Calif.: Ramparts Press, 1971), p. 39. Vaneigem, in this two-part essay (published in 1962 and 1963), referred several times to "hierarchical power." Originally titled "Banalités de base," the essay has more recently been retranslated as "Basic Banalities" and published (parts 1 and 2) in Ken Knabb, ed., *Situationist International Anthology*, rev. and updated ed. (Berkeley: Bureau of Public Secrets, 2006). To my knowledge, Murray first wrote about "hierarchical society" in the 1967 essay "Desire and Need," then at greater length in the 1969 "Listen, Marxist!" and finally in his magisterial 1982 *The Ecology of Freedom*. "Ecology and Revolutionary Thought," as reprinted in *Post-Scarcity Anarchism*, contains a discussion of hierarchy, but it was a revision added to the 1971 book and did not appear in the original article.

²⁰ *The Ecology of Freedom* (Palo Alto, Calif.: Cheshire Books, 1982) opens with an epigraph from Kropotkin's *Ethics*. Murray's acknowledgements say: "Peter Kropotkin's writings on mutual aid and anarchism remain an abiding tradition to which I am committed."

²¹ Bookchin, introduction, *Post-Scarcity Anarchism*, p. 21.

Murray went on in the 1970s to make further contributions to both eco-anarchism and to anarchism as such. He pioneered exploration of alternative energy sources and eco-technics in his 1965 essay “Towards a Liberatory Technology.” In the 1970s he developed a distinction between ecology (inherently radical) and environmentalism (reformist). He explored the history of Spanish anarchism in *The Spanish Anarchists* (1977). He nuanced his ideas by finding intellectual affinities with the libertarian socialism of Western Marxism (the Frankfurt School). He often wrote under the rubric of social ecology but sometimes seemed to consider social ecology and anarchism to be more or less the same thing. He once summarized his own contribution to anarchism this way:

Social ecology is a fairly integrated and coherent view point that encompasses a philosophy of natural evolution and of humanity’s place in that evolutionary process; a reformulation of dialectics along ecological lines; an account of the emergence of hierarchy; a historical examination of the dialectic between legacies and epistemologies of domination and freedom; an evaluation of technology from an historical, ethical, and philosophical standpoint; a wide-ranging critique of Marxism, the Frankfurt School, justice, rationalism, scientism, and instrumentalism; and finally an education of a vision of a utopian, decentralized, confederal, and aesthetically grounded future society based on an objective ethics of complementarity. . . . Whether adequately or not, this holistic body of ideas endeavors to place “eco-anarchism” on a theoretical and intellectual par with the best systematic works in radical social theory.²²

Face-to-face Democracy

Dating back to the days of his 1930s disillusionment with Stalinism, Murray had a lifelong fascination with revolutionary institutions — the various committees, councils, assemblies, soviets, and so on that were historically created during the revolutionary process. There must be no more Robespierres, he resolved, no more Stalins, no more Maos. There must be no more guillotines or gulags. Revolutionaries must learn the lessons of history. If a new revolution were to succeed in creating a liberatory, ecological society, and not devolve into just another brutal power grab, revolutionary institutions would have to be in place that would control and the selfish desires of some individuals for domination. The only kind of institutions that could both liberate people and at the same time keep

²² Bookchin, “Deep Ecology, Anarcho-syndicalism,” pp. 52–53.

the power-hungry in check, he believed, were democratic ones that could hold revolutionary leaders accountable. Indeed the sine qua non of any revolutionary institution must be its ability to facilitate democracy. And by “democracy” Murray did not mean the system practiced by nation-states today, with representatives and legislatures and parliaments, which he considered to be republicanism, a form of statism. He meant, rather, face-to-face democracy.

In his musings about the origins of his interest in anarchism, as we have seen, Murray mentioned, among other things, “my readings into the Athenian polis” — that is, Athenian democracy. In “Ecology and Revolutionary Thought” Murray had referred to “the anarchist concept of . . . a face-to-face democracy,” calling it a “rich libertarian concept,” as if democracy had a long lineage in anarchist history and theory.²³ Face-to-face democracy seemed to him to be not only the ideal revolutionary institution but the perfect political institution for a decentralized, differentiated, diverse, eco-anarchist society.

To my knowledge Murray’s first discussion of democracy appeared in the remarkable essay “Forms of Freedom,” an inquiry into revolutionary institutions written in the annus mirabilis 1968. “Let us turn to the popular assembly for an insight into unmediated forms of social relations,” he urges — that is, unmediated by legislators and parliamentarians. In ancient Athens, he says, “the trend toward popular democracy . . . achieved a form that has never quite been equaled elsewhere. By Periclean times the Athenians had perfected their polis to a point where it represented a triumph of rationality within the material limitations of the ancient world.” Not that Athenian society itself was ideal, far from it, marred as it was by slavery, social classes, and the exclusion of women. But “Athens, despite the slave, patriarchal and class features it shared with classical society, as a whole developed into a working democracy in the literal sense of the term.” As a political institution, he noted, the popular assembly later “reappeared in the medieval and Renaissance towns of Europe.”²⁴

Among the most extraordinary of popular assemblies were the sectional assemblies of 1793, Murray wrote, which “emerged as the insurgent bodies in Paris during the Great Revolution.” The sectional assemblies “by degrees . . . turned into neighborhood assemblies of all ‘active’ citizens, varying in form, scope and power from one district to another.” Here was an ultra-democratic institution right in the heart of revolutionary Europe: the sections “represented genuine forms of self-management.” Some might argue that a city like Paris was too large to handle

²³ Bookchin, “Ecology and Revolutionary Thought,” p. 69.

²⁴ Quotes in this paragraph are from Bookchin, “Forms of Freedom,” in *Post-Scarcity Anarchism*, pp. 155–58.

face-to-face democracy, but “the sections provide us with a rough model of assembly organization in a large city and during a period of revolutionary transition from a centralized political state to a potentially decentralized society.” Just so, the Athenian “ecclesia provides us with a rough model of assembly organization in a decentralized society.”²⁵

Murray’s intention, then, was to place face-to-face democracy on the eco-anarchist program.

“Spring Offensives, Summer Vacations”

In 1969 Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), the primary political organization of the American New Left, collapsed, its leadership having been taken over by ultraleft guerrilla groups like Weatherman. The Maoist guerrilla campaigns that had seemed to be the path ahead ended up destroying the organization. The student movement had always suffered from the endemic problem of fast turnover — no sooner do students organize a demonstration than summer vacation begins; no sooner do students develop political experience than they graduate. In April 1970 National Guards killed four student demonstrators at Kent State in Ohio. Among the New Left’s rank and file the National Mobilization Committee to End the War in Vietnam continued to pull together intermittent demonstrations in Washington. The 1972 presidential campaign of George McGovern channeled the energy of many antiwar activists. Amid the once-vibrant American radical movement confusion reigned.

In these years Murray was involved with the East Side Anarchists in New York as well as a libertarian collective that published the periodical *Anarchos*. What the American radical movement needed, he realized, in order to function as a real social and political alternative, was a set of institutions that would have at least some permanence. But no such institutions remained from the detritus of SDS or emerged from the antiwar demonstrations. Marches were “ephemeral spectacles,” he wrote in “Spring Offensives and Summer Vacations,” published in *Anarchos* in June 1972. “After each demonstration, street action, or confrontation, this hollow cone [of organizational leadership] all but collapsed, only to be recreated again with varying degrees of success for another demonstration, street action, or confrontation.”²⁶

²⁵ “Forms of Freedom,” pp. 155–65. In his preface to the 1985 Black Rose edition of *Post-Scarcity* Murray wrote: “‘The Forms of Freedom,’ written seventeen years ago, still constitutes the basis for my views on libertarian municipalism: the assembly as the authentic basis for democracy and my criticism of syndicalism.”

Something more lasting had to be built: “The hollow cone that we call a movement must acquire a more solid geometry. It must be filled in by an authentic popular movement based on the self-activity of the American people, not the theatrical eruptions of a dedicated minority.” Antiwar activists, he urged, should build stable institutions — somewhat like the ones he had written about four years earlier, in “Forms of Freedom”:

Our effort must now be directed throughout the entire year to catalyzing popular antiwar groups: popular assemblies and local action committees, if you like, each rooted in a community, campus, school, professional arena, . . . factory, office, and research establishment. A real movement must be built out of these formations for the immediate purpose of antiwar activity and perhaps in the long run as popular modes of self-activity to achieve a society based on self-management. . . . each popular institution is free to make its own local decisions, free to act or not act as it feels necessary.

Those popular assemblies and local action committees, he wrote, should themselves form confederations over larger regions:

We propose a qualitatively different level of political activity: the confederal or, if you like, the “communard” concept of institutional organization that also found expression in the Paris communes of 1793–94 and 1871. This “communard” approach . . . essentially called for a confederation of the municipalities as opposed to the development of a centralized state . . . For American radicals to raise this approach today and restore its revolutionary content based on a post-scarcity technology would mark a decisive, indeed a historical advance in the development of an authentic left in the United States.

The article was signed by the *Anarchos* Group but was clearly written by Murray, containing many of his idiosyncratic phrasings. It has not been republished (to my knowledge) and so its key parts are worth transcribing here at some length, especially its list of proposals:

²⁶ The article was signed “The *Anarchos* Group.” In many respects this remarkable article foreshadows the 1994 polemic “Social Anarchism vs. Lifestyle Anarchism.” Murray’s 1972 complaints about the transience and theatricality of the antiwar movement anticipate his later criticisms of lifestyle “ad hoc adventurers.” This article was also his first exposition of ideas that, ten years later, he would call “libertarian municipalism.”

1. The formation of local coalitions of non-party groups — the best of the urban and rural communes, independent student groups, radical professional, working class, and women’s groups . . . independent antiwar groups — to act concertedly in choosing and presenting candidates for city councils in the municipalities of this country. These coalitions, we believe, must be free and non-hierarchical; they must try to be rooted in their local communities and act openly with each other in a consistently democratic manner, eschewing any form of bureaucratic or manipulatory behavior . . .

Anarchos, that is, was calling upon anarchists to elect candidates to city councils. On what platform? The answer: they could write programs on many topics but

could also demand a radical restructuring of municipal institutions along directly democratic lines, involving above all the right by popular constituencies and assemblies to recall representatives who do not reflect their will, the replacement of the police by a popular guard organized on a roster basis from neighborhoods and factories, and open defiance against the central government’s parasitization of the municipality’s fiscal and economic resources.

That is, the anarchist programs would call for a democratization of city government, abolishing city councils and replacing them with popular assemblies. They would thus use the power of the municipality — the level of the state closest to the people — to create popular and potentially antistatist institutions, “unmediated” by representatives.

Thus the next proposal was:

2. The dissolution of the gigantic megalopolitan “city” governments into local town halls and city councils with direct neighborhood control over civic life.

And the next:

3. Lastly, a demand for a confederation of the city councils to resist the encroachment by State governments and by the Federal government on local and municipal autonomy.

The group issued a caveat against the use of these proposals for statist purposes:

If the proposals we advance are to be more than mere liberal or Social Democratic pap, if they are to acquire a truly radical thrust, the coalitions which advance them must themselves be alliances of authentic popular groups such

as the grass-roots antiwar movement we have proposed, not cadre organizations . . . Should the local coalitions and municipal confederal movement we propose go beyond a municipal and confederal level, should it grasp for institutional control or influence on the State and Federal level, it would become nothing more than another treacherous Social Democracy — another betrayal of the popular movement and the principles of freedom and revolution.

The group emphasized the confrontational nature of the approach:

The issue of local control versus the centralized state is being joined today whether we like it or not. A long-range historical dialectic toward state capitalism pits the neighborhood against the megalopolis, the village, town, and small city against the State governments and Federal government, the municipality against the national state.

Anarchist objections

The essay “Spring Offensives and Summer Vacations” did not go unchallenged — not even at its very moment of publication. Some members of the *Anarchos* collective strongly disagreed with its calls for participation in municipal electoral campaigns. As these members were in charge of printing the periodical, they were able to enclose an insert in that June 1972 issue, expressing their objections. Judith Malina (yes, she of the Living Theater) wrote the dissenting article:

What is voting? Voting is an agreement by all that the will of the most shall be carried out. When there is unanimous agreement the decision of the people is self-evident. But when there is no unanimity the vote becomes the tyranny of the many over the reluctant few. This tyranny is the expression of a principle inherent in the democratic ethic: a tacit understanding that the few will not fight the many because the many would win by virtue of their superior numbers. . . . The myth is that justice consists of a few “bowing down to the will of the majority”; whereas, the tyranny of the majority is injustice like any other form of tyranny.²⁷

That is, democracy, even face-to-face democracy, based as it is on the will of the majority, is inherently tyrannical. Malina offered an anarchist alternative:

²⁷ Judith Malina, “Anarchists and the Pro-Hierarchical Left,” *Anarchos* (June 1972), insert.

Yes, the people should take over local control at the community level — but not through the municipal governments which, through party lines, are always closely bound to state and federal governmental structures. Instead, the people should take over control by creating community structures from below. Such structures will not exist parallel to the governmental municipal structures — but will in fact — wrest the power from them. . . . The criticism here is not of the forms of local organization that the Anarchos group proposes, but only of the submission to the jurisdiction of the local constitutional government.²⁸

Murray surely responded in some way to Malina, but to my knowledge no written record of it survives. He did recall the incident in 1985:

Someone wrote a reply to me stating that anarchists should never participate in any elections of any kind . . . I'm saying that city government, as you call it, has to be restructured at the grassroots level. . . . what anarchists should be doing is not hesitating to get involved in local politics to create forms of organization in which they may run once they've established these forms or, alternatively, running on a platform to establish these forms.²⁹

Malina's objection would recur frequently in the following decades, but few expressed it as clearly and thoroughly as she did, at the outset. Murray, in turn, would frequently respond to Malina's type of argument about parallel institutions. Alternative community groups that exist parallel to the municipality have no real power, he argued. Citizens might be motivated to attend one or two meetings, out of concern over a specific issue, but they would have no real reason to continue to participate in them over time, or to maintain their existence for its own sake. For a group of people to actively work to keep an institution alive, it must have some form of structural power.

Murray would later conclude that anarchists misunderstand the nature of power and were therefore unprepared to address it.

Anarchists conceive of power as an essentially malignant evil that must be destroyed. Proudhon, for example, once stated that he would divide and subdivide power until it, in effect, ceased to exist . . . a notion as absurd as the idea that gravity can be abolished . . . The truly pertinent issue . . . is not whether power will exist but whether it will rest in the hands of an elite

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ "Democratizing the Republic and Radicalizing the Democracy: An Interview with Murray Bookchin" (part 2), *Kick It Over* (Winter 1985–86), p. 9.

or in the hands of the people . . . Social revolutionaries . . . must address the problem of how to give power a concrete institutional emancipatory form.³⁰

Still, Malina's objection exemplified an important point: anarchism had not historically been particularly friendly to democracy. George Woodcock had pointed this out back in 1962:

The extreme concern for the sovereignty of the individual . . . explains the anarchist rejection of democracy as well as autocracy. No conception of anarchism is farther from the truth than that which regards it as an extreme form of democracy. Democracy advocates the sovereignty of the people. Anarchism advocates the sovereignty of the person. This means that automatically the anarchists deny many of the forms and viewpoints of democracy.³¹

Murray had read Woodcock's book, but if he noticed this caveat, he must have responded with skepticism. After all, anarchism in the past had not been ecological, either, or concerned with post-scarcity or hierarchy. Yet he had injected those concepts into anarchism. Why not democracy too? It must have seemed obvious to him: if he called anarchists' attention to face-to-face democracy, surely they would agree that it was the best model of self-management for a decentralized and ecological society.

Anarchism is after all potentially dynamic:

Anarchism could be the most creative and innovative movement in radicalism today . . . [With] our ideals of self-management, decentralization, confederalism, and mutual aid . . . we have long been the progenitors of an organic, naturalist, and mutualistic sensibility that the ecology movement has appropriated with few references to their source — the naturalism of Kropotkin.³²

Libertarian municipalism

In the early 1980s Murray developed his ideas about face-to-face democracy into a specific approach that, for purposes of easy identification, he gave a name. Libertarian municipalism was his strategy for achieving democratic revolutionary

³⁰ Bookchin, "Communist Project."

³¹ Woodcock, *Anarchism*, pp. 28, 30.

³² Bookchin, "Anarchism: 1984 and Beyond," address to the international anarchist gathering, Venice, Sept. 24–30, 1984 (unpublished).

institutions, as well as the political infrastructure of a rational ecological society. He had sketched the rudiments of this approach in “Spring Offensives,” but did not write much about it after 1972. Then in 1983 he returned to the subject, developing it in a mature and detailed form. I will summarize it very briefly here.³³

We need a “new politics,” Murray argued, one based, not in a national capital, but at the community level. “Here, in the most immediate environment of the individual — the community, the neighborhood, the town, or the village — where private life slowly begins to phase into public life, the authentic locus for functioning on a base level exists insofar as urbanization has not totally destroyed it.”³⁴ Here a “new politics” of citizenship may be instituted, one in which people take charge of their own political life, through participation in popular assemblies. Murray distinguished between politics (which is practiced by citizens in assemblies) and statecraft (which is practiced by officeholders in the institutions of the nation-state). He believed that politics must be “a school for genuine citizenship.

Ultimately there is no civic “curriculum,” as it were, that can be a substitute for a living and creative political realm. But what we must clearly do in an era of commodification, rivalry, anomie, and egoism is formulate and consciously inculcate the values of humanism, cooperation, community, and public service in the everyday practice of civic life. . . . Grass-roots citizenship must go hand in hand with grass-roots politics.³⁵

Libertarian municipalist activists would therefore create groups to run candidates in municipal elections, on platforms calling for the creation of face-to-face democracy in popular assemblies. When the citizenry elected enough such candidates to office, the new city councilors would fulfill the one purpose for which they had been elected: they would alter city and town charters to create popular assemblies. Thus the assemblies would come about as a result of a conscious devolution of power from existing statist municipal institutions: The assemblies, so empowered, would take over the functions of municipal governments. They would municipalize the economy, taking over the ownership and management of

³³ Murray’s major book on libertarian municipalism is *The Rise of Urbanization and Decline of Citizenship* (Sierra Club, 1987), republished as *Urbanization Against Cities* (Montreal: Black Rose Books, 1992) and as *From Urbanization to Cities* (London: Cassell, 1995). From the early 1980s he wrote numerous articles on the subject as well. For a list of those works, as well as a brief summary of the ideas, see my *The Politics of Social Ecology: Libertarian Municipalism* (Montreal: Black Rose Books, 1998).

³⁴ Bookchin, “Theses on Libertarian Municipalism” (1984), in *The Limits of the City*, rev. ed. (Montreal: Black Rose Books, 1986), p. 172.

³⁵ Bookchin, *Rise of Urbanization*, p. 258.

local economic life, allowing the people of community to make decisions about economic activity in their area.

The township should have control over the land; it should have control over the industries. Collectivization itself can lead many different directions . . . Municipalization means the municipality controls it through neighborhood organizations or through town meetings.³⁶

Over larger regions the democratized municipalities would interlink by confederating with one another:

What, then, is confederalism? It is above all a network of administrative councils whose members or delegates are elected from popular face-to-face democratic assemblies, . . . The members of these confederal councils are strictly mandated, recallable, and responsible to the assemblies that chose them for the purpose of coordinating and administering the policies formed by the assemblies themselves. Their function is thus a purely administrative and practical one, not a policy-making one like the function of representatives in republican systems of government.³⁷

The confederated municipalities, in which power flowed from the bottom up, would form a dual power, a counterpower, against the nation-state.

I'm concerned with developing local institutions — neighborhood assemblies, neighborhood councils that will be thrown into dynamic opposition to the centralized state. My most important concern is to stop the centralization of economic and political power . . . to see that the municipal level acts as a brake upon the centralization of the state and ultimately leads to the abolition of the centralized state in a free municipal confederation of town and cities and villages structured in a libertarian form.³⁸

Libertarian municipalism is that it is grounded in historical reality and local traditions “to legitimate its claims,

traditions which, however fragmentary and tattered, still offer the potentiality for a participatory politics of challenging dimensions to the State. The Commune still lies buried in the city council; the sections still lie buried in

³⁶ “Democratizing the Republic,” p. 9.

³⁷ Bookchin, “The Meaning of Confederalism,” in *From Urbanization to Cities*, pp. 252–53.

³⁸ “Democratizing the Republic,” p. 9.

the neighborhood; the town meeting still lies buried in the township; confederal forms of municipal association still lie buried in regional networks of towns and cities.³⁹

This approach also had roots in revolutionary history. Many radical workers' movements, Murray wrote,

were largely civic phenomena, grounded in specific neighborhoods in Paris, Petrograd, and Barcelona, and in small towns and villages that formed the arenas not only of class unrest but of civic or communal unrest. In such milieus oppressed and discontented people acted in response to the problems they faced not only as economic beings but as communal beings.⁴⁰

Through these democratic institutions a revolutionary people would be enabled to replace the nation-state and exercise its power through popular self-government.

Nineteenth-century anarchist communalism

Starting in the early 1980s Murray mounted a veritable campaign to try to persuade anarchists to adopt libertarian municipalism. He delved into anarchist history to find support for it there, for organic, community-level politics, and for confederated municipalities. In fact the nineteenth-century originators of anarchist thought, he found, had had a lot to say about such ideas.

Proudhon, for one, had written favorably about federalism (also known as confederalism or confederation) as a libertarian alternative to the nation-state. In *The Federal Principle* (1863), written toward the end of his life, he advocated a decentralized theory of federal (confederal) government. Public administration, he argued, should be organized most basically at the local level, with communes and associations. These communes would group together regionally, and a confederation of regions would replace the nation-state. Power would rise from below. Delegates would be recallable, ensuring the implementation of the popular will. Proudhon's was the first exposition of the idea that a confederation could be an alternative to the nation-state.⁴¹

³⁹ Bookchin, "Theses," p. 178.

⁴⁰ Bookchin, "The Ghost of Anarcho-syndicalism," *Anarchist Studies* 1 (1993), p. 7.

⁴¹ Murray had some major disagreements with Proudhon, such as his "commitment to a contractual form of economic relationships, as distinguished from the communistic maxim of 'from each

“Due honor should certainly be given to Proudhon,” Murray argued, “for developing federalistic notions of social organization against the nation-state and defending the rights of crafts people and peasants who were under the assault of industrial capitalism.”⁴² Indeed,

What I find most worth emphasizing in Proudhon is his highly communal notion of confederalism. He was at his best, allowing for certain reservations, when he declared that “the federal system is the contrary of hierarchy or administrative and governmental centralization”; that the “essence” of federal contracts is “always to reserve more powers of the citizen than for the state, and for municipal and provincial authorities than for the central power”; that “the central power” must be ‘imperceptibly subordinated it . . . to the representatives of departments or provinces, provincial authority to the delegates of townships, and municipal authority to its inhabitants.’⁴³

Very popular among nineteenth-century libertarians was the idea of what in French and other European languages was called the commune — the unit of local government closest to the people; that is, the municipality. The word “commune” also had overtones of the revolutionary Paris Commune of 1793–94. “The importance of the commune in traditional anarchist thought,” wrote Murray, “has not received the full attention it deserves.”⁴⁴ Libertarian thinkers, in the wake of Proudhon, commonly thought of the confederation to replace the nation-state as constituting a network of communes. Wrote Murray: “The anarchic ideal of decentralized, stateless, collectively managed, and directly democratic communities — of confederated municipalities or ‘communes’ — speaks almost intuitively . . . to the transforming role of libertarian municipalism into the framework of a liberatory society.”⁴⁵

The commune was also an important idea to Bakunin. In his “Revolutionary Catechism” of 1865–66 the Russian saw the commune as a revolutionary institution, close to the people and responsive to their needs, and functioning in a confederation:

according to his or her abilities, to each according to his or her needs,’ a commitment that . . . can scarcely be distinguished from bourgeois conceptions of ‘right.’“ See Bookchin, “Deep Ecology, Anarcho-syndicalism.” He also objected to “the proprietarian mentality that appears in so many of Proudhon’s writings,” which he says is “dispensable.” See Bookchin, “Ghost,” p. 7.

⁴² Bookchin, “Deep Ecology, Anarcho-syndicalism,” p. 54.

⁴³ Bookchin, “Ghost,” p. 6; he is citing Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, *The Principle of Federation* (1863), trans. Richard Vernon (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1969), pp. 41, 45, 48.

⁴⁴ Bookchin, “Ghost,” p. 6.

⁴⁵ Bookchin, “Theses on Libertarian Municipalism,” p. 166.

Immediately after government has been overthrown, communes will have to reorganize themselves along revolutionary lines . . . No commune can defend itself in isolation. So it will be necessary for each of them to radiate revolution outward, to raise all of its neighboring communes in revolt to the extent that they will rise up, and to federate with them for common defense. Between themselves they will of necessity enter into a federal pact founded simultaneously upon solidarity of all and autonomy of each. . . . The same revolutionary requirements induce the autonomous provinces to federate into regions, regions into national federations, nations into international federations.⁴⁶

Later in the same document he wrote:

First: all organizations must proceed by way of federation from the base to the summit, from the commune to the coordinating association of the country or nation. Second: there must be at least one autonomous intermediate body between the commune and the country, the department, the region, or the province . . . The basic unit of all political organization in each country must be the completely autonomous commune, constituted by the majority vote of all adults of both sexes . . . the province must be nothing but a free federation of autonomous communes.⁴⁷

In 1871 the Paris Commune, despite its brief existence, excited many libertarians. Murray once noted that it “provided Marxism and anarchism with its earliest models of a liberated society” and “was precisely a revolutionary municipal movement whose goal of a ‘social republic’ had been developed within a confederalist framework of free municipalities or ‘communes.’”⁴⁸ It gave the already-interesting concept of the “commune” even more electricity.

The commune loomed large on the horizon of Peter Kropotkin, the anarchist theorist closely identified with anarcho-communism.⁴⁹ In 1879 Kropotkin wrote:

⁴⁶ Michael Bakunin, “Revolutionary Catechism of the International Revolutionary Society or Brotherhood” (1865), in Daniel Guerin, ed., *No Gods No Masters: An Anthology of Anarchism*, trans. Paul Sharkey (Edinburgh and San Francisco: A. K. Press, 1998), book 1, p. 142.

⁴⁷ Michael Bakunin, “Revolutionary Catechism” (1866) in *Bakunin on Anarchy*, ed. Sam Dolgoff (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1972), pp. 82–83; quoted in Bookchin, “Ghost,” p. 7.

⁴⁸ Bookchin, “Toward a Vision of the Urban Future,” in *Towards an Ecological Society*, p. 183.

⁴⁹ Murray was careful to define his differences with Kropotkin’s thought, objecting to Kropotkin’s notion of a “social instinct” to validate his mutualism. That idea was “troubling, not only because it is based on a highly selective study of animals, but because it tends to ignore a host of solitary animals, including highly advanced mammals. Even more troubling is that he tends to confuse animal troops, herds, packs, and transient communities with societies — that is, with highly mutable institutions,

Once expropriation has been carried through, and the capitalists' power to resist been smashed, the . . . there will necessarily arise a new system of organizing production and exchange . . . the foundations of the new organization will be the free federation of producers' groups and the free federation of Communes and groups of independent Communes.⁵⁰

And a year later: "The communes of the next revolution will proclaim and establish their independence by direct socialist revolutionary action, abolishing private property. When the revolutionary movement happens . . . the people themselves will abolish property by a violent expropriation."⁵¹

The communes of the next revolution will not only break down the state and substitute free federation for parliamentary rule; they will part with parliamentary rule within the commune itself. They will trust the free organization of food supply and production to free groups of workers — which will federate with like groups in other cities and villages not through the medium of a communal parliament but directly, to accomplish their aim.⁵²

And Kropotkin wrote in 1913 that "the form that the social revolution must take [is] the independent commune."⁵³

We notice in these countries the evident tendency to form into groups of entirely independent communes, towns, and villages, which would combine by means of free federation, in order to satisfy innumerable needs and attain certain immediate ends . . . The future revolutions in France and Spain will be communalist — not centralist.⁵⁴

In sum, the commune in confederation ("the Commune of communes") was crucial to these major nineteenth-century anarchists as well as others. Together their writings, said Murray in the 1980s, constituted a "communalist" tendency within anarchism, a tendency that had been largely overlooked amid the more conspicuous tendencies of anarcho-individualism and anarcho syndicalism. He now campaigned to call attention to it: "It would be well to remember that there

alterable as they are by virtue of the distinctly human ability to form, develop, subvert, and overthrow them according to their interests and will." See Bookchin, "Deep Ecology, Anarcho-syndicalism."

⁵⁰ Peter Kropotkin, "The Anarchist Idea," November 1, 1879; reprinted in Daniel Guerin, *No Gods No Masters*, book 1, p. 232.

⁵¹ Kropotkin, "The Commune of Paris," March 20, 1880; reprinted in P. A. Kropotkin, *Selected Writings on Anarchism and Revolution*, ed. Martin A. Miller (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT, 1970), pp. 128–29.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 132.

⁵³ Kropotkin, "Modern Science and Anarchism" (1913), in *Kropotkin's Revolutionary Pamphlets*, ed. Roger Baldwin (1927; reprinted New York: Dover, 1970), p. 163; quoted in Bookchin, "Ghost," p. 8.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

has always been a *communalist* tendency in anarchism, not only a syndicalist and an individualist one. Moreover, this communalist tendency has always had a strong municipalist orientation.”⁵⁵ He told *Kick It Over* in 1985:

Long before syndicalism emerged in the anarchist tradition, there was a *communalist* tradition which dates back to Proudhon and which appears in Kropotkin and I don’t know why that’s been so completely neglected. So if I’m to take that seriously and update it up into our own time and explore its logic completely, then I have to ask myself: what can I do to recover the neighborhood and the community? How can I empower the citizens to take control of their community at the base grassroots level, . . . and not to develop the bad habits of parliamentarism, but to try to create neighborhood assemblies such as we have in Burlington — town meeting type forms — councils in neighborhoods — confederate them, and confederate the communities into a dual power against the centralized state on the basis of a libertarian tradition.⁵⁶

To be sure, in Murray’s hands the communalist tendency underwent transformation. The nineteenth-century theorists had seen the communes as mainly administrative in function, providing “public services,” and had given actual decision-making power over to workers’ associations that comprised the communal federations. The communes themselves would be kind of mini-confederations at the municipal level, made up of smaller components like producers’ groups, collectives, cooperatives, and the like. Murray instead envisioned the commune as a direct democracy, made up of popular assemblies, that controls the economy.

But then, how would the forebears’ workers’ associations and communes make decisions? As bodies for policymaking as well as administration, they would have to make decisions. Perhaps they would comprise councils, or committees. These councils or committees might consist of councilors who were delegates — recallable delegates, empowered to carry out the will of the people. As Bakunin wrote in 1868: “As regards organization of the Commune, there will be a federation of standing barricades and a Revolutionary Communal Council will operate on the basis of one or two delegates from each barricade, one per street or per district, these deputies being invested with binding mandates and accountable and revocable at all times.”⁵⁷

⁵⁵ Bookchin, “Theses,” p. 177.

⁵⁶ “Democratizing the Republic,” p. 9, emphasis added.

⁵⁷ Michael Bakunin, “Program and Object of the Secret Revolutionary Organization of the International Brethren,” in Guerin, *No Gods No Masters*, book 1, p. 155.

But how would the deputies be chosen? Bakunin does not say; nor does Kropotkin or any of the other forebears. Perhaps the deputies would be hand-picked by revolutionary leaders, but that does not seem particularly enlightened. Or perhaps the delegates would be elected democratically. By the people. Perhaps by the people in assemblies. The forebears do not say.

The fact is that, if I may generalize wildly, the European Left of the nineteenth century tended not to think of democracy as a desideratum in its own right. Even democratic grassroots self-government held little appeal. Democracy, as a concept, seemed the politics of compromise, requiring tolerance and moderation, unsuited for violent revolutionary goals of expropriation. Statist democracy (what Murray would call republicanism) was a means for the acquisition power by the working class rather than a goal in its own right. For European leftists the revolutionary institutions par excellence were factory committees and workers' councils, institutions whose origins lay in economic thought. Perhaps it required an American radical to insist that democracy was exciting in its own right, to give it priority, to make it a goal worth fighting for.

And it became his job to try to persuade anarchists that democracy was worth fighting for, to be valued in its own right. Libertarian municipalism, he believed, as a translation and update of anarchist-communalism, could become the basis for a new anarchism dedicated to face-to-face democracy.

“The revolutionary era is over”

Before I go on, I would like to look at another notable fact about the “commune” formations described by the nineteenth-century forebears: these communes were intended to come into existence after the workers' revolution. That is, once the workers had expropriated private property and forced the collapse of the state, they would spontaneously form communes. Note that one of the Bakunin quotes above begins “Immediately after government has been overthrown . . . ” And that one of the Kropotkin quotes begins “Once expropriation has been carried through . . . ” For both thinkers, the workers' revolution would come first.

As we have seen, Murray had argued that revolutionary institutions are formed spontaneously by the people during the course of a revolution. (Spontaneity was one of his principles of convergence between anarchism and ecology.) But in the early 1980s something happened that permanently changed his thinking: he came to the realization that he was not going to see a revolution would happen in his lifetime. The way he put it to me was: he realized that the revolutionary era is over.

He had been working with the Clamshell Alliance, the group that prevented the Seabrook nuclear reactor from going on line. Was it something about that experience that led to this realization? He was frustrated by the decision-making processes used in that group: consensus, he found, was a process very prone to manipulation. Or was it the changes happening in North America and Europe in the 1970s? Certainly the United States was entering a period of right-wing backlash against the 1960s (a backlash that continues to this day). Onetime radicals were now pursuing careers, getting “a piece of the pie” for themselves. The new social movements were emerging, which offered hope but also fragmentation of any broad movement; they moved radical thinking increasingly toward identity politics. Ecology was emerging as an issue of general concern, but as Washington adopted a few environment-friendly laws, radical ecologists were becoming reformist environmentalists. Finally the alternative (non-Western and noncredal) spiritualities that made up the New Age were ever more popular, luring former political activists into private life and promising to replace extroverted demands to change society with inner quests for serenity and enlightenment.

The revolutionary era, Murray realized in the early 1980s, was over. The era of proletarian revolutions had begun on the barricades of June 1848 and had continued through the Paris Commune, the Russian Revolution, and beyond. But it had come to an end in May 1937, on the barricades of Barcelona. That was the last time workers had risen up in pursuit of a new, utopian society.⁵⁸ He said in a 1985 speech: “I believe that the revolutionary era in the classical sense is over. . . . I lived through the era of the barricades. The glamour of them has always enchanted me, but I’ve learned when an epic has come to an end.”⁵⁹ He later told me that he came to that realization after Clamshell. “Hardly any authentic revolutionary opposition exists in North American and Europe,” he wrote in 1979.⁶⁰

This realization must have been wrenching, as much so as his 1948 realization that the workers would not be revolutionary agents. After all, capitalism and the nation-state still had to be overthrown, even more urgently now with the ecological crisis, and Murray himself, as well as other revolutionaries, had no intention of giving up their fight. He could have settled back and adjusted his views to the tenor of the times, but it was not in his personality to do so — he had always been a revolutionary, and would remain one. But now that revolution was no

⁵⁸ Murray considered the revolutions in China and Cuba and Vietnam to be nationalist in nature, not authentically socialist. See, for example, Bookchin, *Modern Crisis*, p. 129.

⁵⁹ Bookchin, Keynote Address to Waterloo-PIRG, Waterloo, Ontario, 1985, videotape, Bookchin Papers, Tamiment Institute Library, New York.

⁶⁰ Bookchin, introduction to *Towards an Ecological Society*, p. 11.

longer on the horizon, how was he to continue? How should any revolutionaries function, given that history was no longer on their side?

His thinking shifted, and one hallmark of the shift, in my view, was his virtual abandonment of the concept of spontaneity. Revolutionaries had to stop supposing that revolutionary institutions would be formed after the revolution, or even during the course of an uprising. Instead, revolutionaries had to start creating revolutionary institutions now. That way the institutions would not simply be a product of revolution; they could help foment a revolution. Revolutionaries had to create these institutions consciously and deliberately. Certainly events might erupt that would fuel social change; a growing awareness of the ecological crisis could lead to a broad social movement; global warming, wreaking havoc, could threaten survival and lead to a major social and political upheaval. But for now, in the absence of such broad popular unrest, revolution had to be worked for consciously. And to perform that conscious work, an organized, coherent, and purposive libertarian movement was needed.

The strategy of that movement, of course, was libertarian municipalism. The institutions of face-to-face democracy were the ones that could be created before the revolution and that would be in place if and when the revolution finally came. After all, in the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the rest of the world seemed to be embracing democracy, in the form of the republican nation-state. Municipalist revolutionaries could do no less, but in their case the democracy they embraced would be direct and face-to-face.

The anarchist response

As we have seen, Murray mounted a campaign to convince his fellow anarchists that this was the path they should take. He passionately advocated libertarian municipalism at a major international anarchist conference held in Venice in 1984. He wrote *The Rise of Urbanization and the Decline of Citizenship* (a cumbersome and academic-sounding title for a brilliant book shot through with political engagement), published in 1985, tracing the democratic tradition and exploring the age-old conflict between the municipality and the state. From 1983 to the early 1990s he produced a series of articles on various aspects of libertarian municipalism, many of them published in *Green Perspectives* (later renamed *Left Green Perspectives*). He formed a libertarian municipalist political group in Burlington, Vermont. (By this time I was in his life and became a member of that group, the Burlington Greens; I coedited *Green Perspectives* with him.)

How did anarchists respond to this campaign? For the most part, the response I heard, both in my presence and in writings that crossed our desks, it was univocal: anarchists will never participate in elections. Municipalism is statism, it is parliamentarism, they said, just as Judith Malina had in 1972.

But at the local level, Murray replied, politics is not statism; it is something qualitatively different. The state, in his definition, was the institution that involves a surrender of sovereignty to legislators; politics, by contrast, takes place at the community level, where communal self-management is possible; it involves people actively managing their own communities, not surrendering power to legislators but exercising it themselves. That fact made all the difference. “Civic politics is not intrinsically parliamentary politics,” he wrote in 1984.⁶¹ And: “If this kind of assembly brings anarchists into city councils, 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.”⁶²

He frequently quoted Bakunin on the qualitative difference between local politics and the national state. In 1870 Bakunin had drawn an implicit distinction between them:

Due to their economic hardships the people are ignorant and indifferent and are aware only of things closely affecting them. They understand and know how to conduct their daily affairs. Away from their familiar concerns they become confused, uncertain, and politically baffled. They [the people] have a healthy practical common sense when it comes to communal affairs. They are fairly well informed and know how to select from their midst the most capable officials. Under such circumstances, effective control is quite possible, because the public business is conducted under the watchful eyes of the citizens and vitally and directly concerns their daily lives. This is why municipal elections always best reflect the real attitude and will of the people. Provincial and county governments, even when the latter are directly elected, are already less representative of the people.⁶³

“I would want to restate his formulation to mean that municipal elections *can* more accurately reflect the popular will than parliamentary ones,” Murray wrote.⁶⁴

Moreover, the municipality and the state have long been in tension if not conflict.

⁶¹ Bookchin, “Theses,” p. 178.

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 179.

⁶³ Michael Bakunin, “Representative Government and Universal Suffrage” (1870), in Dolgoff, ed., *Bakunin on Anarchy*, pp. 218–24; quoted, e.g., in “Ghost,” pp. 7–8.

⁶⁴ Bookchin, “Deep Ecology, Anarcho-syndicalism,” p. 55.

The state, until comparatively recent times, has never been able to fully claim the municipality as its own . . . Almost every major revolution has involved — indeed, has often been — a conflict between the local community and the centralized state . . . The municipality may well be the one arena in which traditional institutional forms can be reworked to replace the nation-state itself . . . The municipality’s capacity to play a historic role in changing society depends on the extent to which it can shake off the state institutions that have infiltrated it: its mayoralty structure, civic bureaucracy, and its own professionalized monopoly on violence. Rescued from these institutions, however, it retains the historical materials and political culture that can pit it against the nation-state and the cancerous corporate world.⁶⁵

But still the objections continued. In 1996 the periodical *Organise!* suggested that Murray was advocating a process wherein “libertarians’ capture the local state and end up captured by it.”⁶⁶ His response:

My views on libertarian municipalism are entirely oriented toward creating a dual power composed of directly democratic assemblies of the people in revolutionary opposition to the state. The idea that libertarian municipalism should try to capture the local state and operate within a statist framework is alien to my views. My hope is that a movement can be created that seeks to enlarge whatever local democracy still remains in a community — particularly a direct face-to-face democracy — in the hope that it can be thrown against the state on all levels, from the municipality to the central government.⁶⁷

But already in 1992 he was becoming discouraged. “The extreme resistance I have encountered from anarchist traditionalists and ‘purists’ on this issue has virtually foreclosed any possibility of developing a libertarian, participatory, municipalist, and confederal politics today as part of the anarchist tradition.”⁶⁸

Most discouragingly, many anarchists objected to the basic principle of democratic decision-making, majority rule. “Majority rule is still rule,” he was told. As he described the difficulty:

Libertarians commonly consider democracy, even in this [face-to-face] sense, as a form of “rule” — since in making decisions, a majority view prevails and

⁶⁵ Quotations in this paragraph are from *Modern Crisis*, pp. 39–41.

⁶⁶ *Organise!*, no. 43 (Summer 1996).

⁶⁷ *Organise!*, no. 44 (Autumn 1996).

⁶⁸ Bookchin, “Deep Ecology, Anarcho-syndicalism,” p. 55.

thus “rules” over a minority. As such, democracy is said to be inconsistent with a truly libertarian ideal. Even so knowledgeable a historian of anarchism as Peter Marshall observes that, for anarchists, “the majority has no more right to dictate to the minority, even a minority of one, than the minority to the majority.”⁶⁹

Such thinking dates back to Kropotkin, who asserted that “majority rule is as defective as any other kind of rule.”⁷⁰

As an alternative to majority rule, some anarchists argued that consensus was preferable; by seeking unanimous or near-unanimous consent, it seemed to eliminate the problem of overruled minorities.

But Murray did not agree. Consensus decision-making, he thought, was suitable for small groups of people who know each other but was entirely impracticable for large assemblies of strangers. Moreover, it tended to turn citizens into manipulators, working behind the scenes to get full support for their proposal, rather than openly articulating valid disagreements. And by insisting on unanimous or near-unanimous support for a decision, consensus tended to suppress dissent, subtly coercing those who disagreed with the majority to “step aside” — that is, to negate themselves as citizens and participants. As a fourteen-year-old member of the Young Communist League, Murray had defied the Stalinists’ ban on talking — even talking! — to Trotskyists. He had never been one to agree to the suppression of dissent — on the contrary, he would always champion dissent, not simply for allowing it but for encouraging it, because “dissensus” brought creativity. A democracy did indeed insist that the outvoted minority had to abide by the decisions of the majority, but it always left open the possibility that a dissenting minority could express its views freely and thereby hope one day to reverse the noxious decision.⁷¹

Yes, anarchists are rightly concerned about statism, Murray said, and their “concern over parliamentarism and statism” has been “amply justified by history.” But “it can also lead to a siege mentality that is no less dogmatic in theory than an electoral radicalism is corrupt in practice.”⁷² Murray felt passionately that anarchists should not let their justified opposition to parliamentarism lead them to oppose elections and face-to-face democracy.

⁶⁹ Bookchin, “What Is Communalism? The Democratic Dimension of Anarchism,” *Green Perspectives* no. 31 (October 1994), p. 3, quoting Peter Marshall, *Demanding the Impossible: A History of Anarchism* (London: HarperCollins, 1992), p. 22.

⁷⁰ Peter Kropotkin, “Anarchist Communism: Its Basis and Principles,” in *Kropotkin’s Revolutionary Pamphlets*, ed. Roger Baldwin (1927; reprinted by New York: Dover, 1970), p. 68.

⁷¹ For Murray’s objections to consensus decision-making, see “What Is Communalism?”

⁷² Bookchin, “Theses,” p. 178.

Today, so great is the fear of a localist politics of any sort — of crossing the mystical line between nonvoting and voting — that the rejection of electoral activity, even if based on the locality in which one lives, has become a paralyzing dogma.⁷³

Anarchism, Murray insisted over and over again, has to be able to move forward; it shouldn't allow itself to be ossified.

We can certainly build on views advanced by the great anarchist thinkers of the past. But must we ignore the need for more sophisticated notions of confederalism, anti-statism, decentralism, definitions of freedom, a sensitivity to the natural world than those that they advance? . . . If anarchist theory and practice cannot keep pace with — let alone go beyond — historic changes that have altered the entire social, cultural, and moral landscape . . . the entire movement will indeed become what Adorno called it — a “ghost.”⁷⁴

“You know,” he said to me and to others several times in these years, “the Spanish anarchists back in the 1890s wanted to drop the name ‘anarchist’ in favor of ‘libertarian communism.’ Maybe I’ll do the same thing.”

Individualism and lifestyle anarchism

As it turned out, anarchism was indeed changing with the times — but not in the way that Murray had been urging. On the contrary, during all those years when he had been trying to revive anarcho-communalism, much of anarchist thinking had actually been going in the opposite direction, toward individualism. Murray became alarmed by this tendency in the early 1990s. Anarchism, he warned, was moving away from a “collectivist commitment to socialist freedom” and toward “a personalistic commitment to individual autonomy.” These tendencies had once “simply coexisted within anarchism as a minimalist credo of opposition to the State.” But during the 1980s and 1990s,

as the entire social and political spectrum has shifted ideologically to the right, “anarchism” itself has not been immune to redefinition. In the Anglo-American sphere, anarchism is being divested of its social ideal by an emphasis on personal autonomy, an emphasis that is draining it of its historic

⁷³ Bookchin, letter to the editor, *A: Rivista Anarchica* [Milan] 185 (Sept.-Oct. 1991), pp. 40–41; written Aug. 14, 1991.

⁷⁴ Bookchin, “Deep Ecology, Anarcho-syndicalism,” pp. 57–58.

vitality. A Stirnerite individualism . . . has become increasingly prominent. This personalistic “lifestyle anarchism” is steadily eroding the socialistic core of anarchist concepts of freedom.⁷⁵

Such individualism lay at the root of a complex that Bookchin called “lifestyle anarchism,” which he criticized in the essay “Social Anarchism or Lifestyle Anarchism: An Unbridgeable Chasm.”⁷⁶ As Murray described lifestyle anarchism:

Invertebrate protests, directionless escapades, self-assertions, and a very personal “recolonization” of everyday life parallel the psychotherapeutic, New Age, self-oriented lifestyles of bored baby boomers and members of Generation X. Today what passes for anarchism in America and increasingly in Europe is little more than an introspective personalism that denigrates responsible social commitment; an encounter group variously renamed a collective or an affinity group; a state of mind that arrogantly derides structure, organization, and public involvement; and a playground for juvenile antics.⁷⁷

Personalistic or lifestyle anarchism was preoccupied with the ego, Murray thought, typified by a narcissistic inwardness and seeking self-enchantment. Its very forms of rebellion were petulant and egoistic, episodes of “ad hoc adventurism” marked by personal bravura. Lifestyle anarchists were stridently antipolitical and anti-organizational.

Perhaps most grievously, lifestyle anarchism rejected the core values of the Enlightenment, to which Murray had always been committed and that he had always presupposed, never imagining that they would one day be challenged. Attracted to mysticism, desire, ecstasy, imagination, paganism, and the New Age, lifestyle anarchism was hostile to reason as such and harbored an aversion to theory, even celebrating theoretical incoherence; and when it was not engaged in bravura, it receded into Taoist quietism and Buddhist self-effacement. It condemned modern technology as well as science, even though Kropotkin, for one, significantly emphasized “the progress of modern technics, which wonderfully simplifies the production of all the necessaries of life.”⁷⁸

Lifestyle anarchism furthermore was anti-civilizational, offering “a glorification of prehistory and the desire to somehow return to its putative innocence,” Lifestyle

⁷⁵ Bookchin, “What Is Communalism?” p. 1.

⁷⁶ Bookchin, “Social Anarchism or Lifestyle Anarchism: An Unbridgeable Chasm,” in *Social Anarchism or Lifestyle Anarchism: An Unbridgeable Chasm* (Edinburgh and San Francisco: A.K. Press, 1995).

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 35.

anarchists “draw their inspiration from aboriginal peoples and myths of an edenic prehistory.” They believe that “life before domestication/agriculture was in fact largely one of a leisure, intimacy with nature, sensual wisdom, sexual equality, and health.” Primitive peoples “refused technology” because “with their animistic beliefs [they] were saturated by a ‘love’ of animal life and wilderness.” People in prehistory consciously decided to refuse not only tools but even language. Theirs was “a dancing society, a singing society, a celebrating society, a dreaming society.” Lifestyle anarchists seemed to imagine that complex societies could one day return to the simple forms of social organization of tribal or even band societies.

Lifestyle anarchists categorically rejected libertarian municipalism and anything resembling democracy

By denying institutions and democracy, lifestyle anarchism insulates itself from social reality, so that it can fume all the more with futile rage, thereby remaining a subcultural caper for gullible youth and bored consumers of black garments and ecstasy posters. To argue that democracy and anarchism are incompatible because any impediment to the swishes of even a minority of one constitutes a violation of personal autonomy is to advocate not a free society but a herd. No longer would “imagination” come to power. Power, which always exists, will belong either to the collective in a face-to-face and clearly institutionalized democracy, or to the egos of a few oligarchs who will produce a “tyranny of structurelessness.”⁷⁹

And above all they rejected socialism. Kropotkin had once said that anarchism was the left wing of socialism. “The rise of modern secularism, scientific knowledge, universalism, reason and technologies,” wrote Murray, “potentially offer the hope of a rational and emancipatory dispensation of social affairs.” But “in a very real sense [lifestyle anarchists] are no longer socialists — the advocates of a communally oriented libertarian society—and they eschew any serious commitment to an organized, programmatically coherent social confrontation with the existing order.”⁸⁰

Nor did they seem to grasp, Murray wrote, that true individuality (as opposed to individualism) depends on a social context. “Left to his or her own self, the individual loses the indispensable social moorings that make for what an anarchist might be expected to prize in individuality: reflective powers, which derive in

⁷⁹ Ibid., p. 58. On “the tyranny of structurelessness,” see Jo Freeman’s classic 1970 article by that name online at flag.blackened.net.

⁸⁰ Kropotkin, “Anarchism” (1910), in *Kropotkin’s Revolutionary Pamphlets*; Bookchin, “Social Anarchism,” pp. 35, 1–2.

great part from discourse; the emotional equipment that nourishes rage against unfreedom; the sociality that motivates the desire for radical change; and the sense of responsibility that engenders social action.”⁸¹

Against this cultural tide, Murray warned, anarchism must retain its social and political core.

There must be a place on the political spectrum where a body of anti-authoritarian thought that advances humanity’s bitter struggle to arrive at the realization of its authentic social life — the famous “Commune of communes” — can be clearly articulated institutionally as well as ideologically. There must be a means by which socially concerned anti-authoritarians can develop a program and a practice for attempting to change the world, not merely their psyches. There must be an arena of struggle that can mobilize people, help them to educate themselves and develop an anti-authoritarian politics . . . that pits a new public sphere against the state and capitalism. In short, we must recover not only the socialist dimension of anarchism but its political dimension, democracy. ”⁸²

For the name of this “place on the political spectrum,” Murray used his old word “communalism,” now explicitly defining it as “the democratic dimension of anarchism”: “I wish to propose that the democratic and potentially practicable dimension of the libertarian goal be expressed as Communalism, a term that has not been historically sullied by abuse.”⁸³

Lifestyle anarchists respond

Lifestyle anarchists responded to “Social Anarchism or Lifestyle Anarchism,” often in ad hominem ways. Kingsley Widmer, for one, accused Murray of engaging in an “inquisitional burning which allows only one tradition and style of anarchism” — an absurd accusation, given even the title of Murray’s essay. Another tactic was to diagnose Murray as suffering from a mental disturbance: Jason McQuinn asserted that the article revealed his “paranoid side”: “Murray ‘aims to pin the blame for his lifetime of frustration [in contesting the powers-that-be] , . . on an evil anti-socialist conspiracy which has subverted his dreams at every turn.’ Far from seeing a conspiracy, Murray clearly identified lifestyle

⁸¹ Bookchin, “Social Anarchism,” p. 16.

⁸² Bookchin, “What Is Communalism?” p. 4.

⁸³ Ibid., p. 5.

anarchism as a symptom of a larger social malaise, of social reaction and capitalist commodification. Others diagnosed Bookchin as power hungry, or as intent on making a power play. Laure Akai, a reviewer for *Anarchy*, asserted that Murray was “fighting for his seat as leading theoretician.” She nonsensically dismissed him (along with Hakim Bey) as “old men hungry for affection who want to leave their mark on radical theory before they croak.” Bob Black also portrayed Murray as wealthy and privileged, motivated by a lust for power.⁸⁴

The most popular tactic was to caricature Murray as an authoritarian — especially of the Marxist or Stalinist variety. Murray’s defense of the libertarian social-revolutionary left was distorted into a devious, indirect defense of the authoritarian, Stalinist left. David Watson, untroubled by the fact that Murray had broken with Marxism in the 1950s, designated him as both “General Secretary” and “Chairman,” suffering from megalomania to boot. Steve Ash wrote that Murray “retains a kind of Marxoid determinism that undermines his claim to be a libertarian.” John Clark accused Bookchin of a pernicious “Bakuninist (or anarcho-Leninism).” Taking issue with none of Murray’s arguments, he went on to write a “Confession to Comrade Murray Bookchin,” casting Bookchin metaphorically as Stalin, staging a Moscow show trial — and self-servingly casting himself (Clark) as a Bukharin — type victim.

On the issues of substance, David Watson wrote an entire book, *Beyond Bookchin*, in which he militantly defended primitivism and mysticism.⁸⁵ People, he wrote, should “humble themselves . . . before the smallest ant, realizing their own nothingness.” Murray wrote a long article entitled “Whither Anarchism?” in which he defended himself against Watson’s, Clark’s, and other criticisms.⁸⁶ Astonishingly, scarcely a year after the publication of *Beyond Bookchin*, in the pages of *Fifth Estate*, Watson proceeded to reverse himself and rejected “pretenses to an anarcho-primitive perspective or movement,” calling primitivism “a fool’s paradise” and “self-proclaimed primitivists” as “deluded.”⁸⁷ Murray couldn’t have said it better.

⁸⁴ Kingsley Widmer, “How Broad and Deep Is Anarchism?” *Social Anarchism*, no. 24 (1997); Jason McQuinn, review of *Social Anarchism or Lifestyle Anarchism*, in *Alternative Press Review* (Spring — Summer 1987); Laure Akai, “Social Anarchism Revisited,” in *Anarchy: Journal of Desire Armed*, no. 44 (Fall-Winter 1997–98); Bob Black, *Anarchy After Leftism* (Columbia, Mo.: C.A.L. Press, 1997).

⁸⁵ David Watson, *Beyond Bookchin: Preface for a Future Social Ecology* (Brooklyn: Autonomedia, 1996).

⁸⁶ Bookchin, “Whither Anarchism?” in *Anarchism, Marxism*.

⁸⁷ David Watson, “Swamp Fever, Primitivism, and the ‘Ideological Vortex’: Farewell to All That,” *Fifth Estate* (Fall 1997).

Conclusions about capitalism

In the wake of the lifestyle anarchism fight, Murray was exhausted. In 1996 he was seventy-five years old. The intractable and unwavering anarchist rejection of libertarian municipalism demoralized him, and the attacks by the lifestyle anarchists were personally discouraging. No one seemed to stand up for him, to take his part. He felt alone and misunderstood, a man out of his time, even a relic from another era.

The whole experience, he believed, said a great deal about the world he was living in. The primitivists “are telling us to look inside ourselves and discover our own ‘real’ selves,” he noted. Apparently we are “to shed the psychic layers that civilization has imposed on us for thousands of years — civilization being responsible for our problems — and peel away our various civilized attributes, much like an onion, until we get to the innermost core.” But “if we do so, we are likely to find very little in the core, if anything, but our barest physical attributes, instincts, and emotions.”

The fact is that “human beings are social beings.” As such we “have no natural inner self that exists apart from . . . the civilization in which we live, whether we accept its values and lifeways or are in revolt against them. This is true for even the most militant individualist. What we do have is the ability to develop intellectually, to absorb knowledge, to become emotionally, mature, and above all to innovate and create. For that we require the presence of other people.”

Oriented as he was toward the future, he looked fondly back to some aspects of precapitalist society, especially insofar as people were “tied to one another by their feelings, communities, and a generous capacity for empathy.” Under capitalism, by contrast, “commodification severs all the ties created by feeling and community, decomposing them . . . capitalism turns the organic into the inorganic, so to speak . . . It fetishizes commodities as substitutes for genuine social ties.

Thus people come to relate to one another through things. If we’re unhappy, we are advised to buy a new outfit or household device, and then we’ll feel better. The family mutates into a unit of consumption. Acquiring an education is reduced to training for earning an income; gaining one’s livelihood often involves the exploitation of other people and plundering the natural world. Friendships are reduced to relationships designed to advance one’s career. Commodification, in short, replaces genuine social ties to such an extent that things seem to preside over human relationships, as Marx observed, instead of human beings administering the disposition of things.

People today have become interested in mysticism and religion out of emptiness and despair. “In the Western industrialized countries, the mystical revival is primarily a substitute for the creation of a politics that would otherwise genuinely empower people. Thus, rather than entering into a political sphere, trying to change the society around them, to destroy the disease — capitalism — and replace it with a new social order, people today are more likely to turn inward, in their despair, and to belief in a god.” But even the god becomes commodified. “Capitalism commercializes emotions by placing a dollar sign on everything people believe or feel.” It not only creates desperation but then “tries to profit from the aspirations that surge within and yearn for meaning and significance.”

Murray believed that “today capitalism and commodification are trivializing people to a remarkable extent,” and that “the egoism, the narcissism, and the psychotherapeutic mentality that are all so typical of our society today” are symptoms of that trivialization. “One of our most important first tasks, as revolutionaries, is to de-trivialize ourselves and others, . . . to recover the great revolutionary traditions that once existed when people devoted their lives to creating a better society.”⁸⁸

The chasm widens

As the debate wore on, the “unbridgeable chasm” between social and lifestyle anarchism became ever more evidently unbridgeable. Murray had treated lifestyle anarchism and social anarchism as two strains of the same movement, in the hopes of bolstering the social strain, but many of his critics seemed intent on consigning social anarchism to the unrecoverable past. The great divide, according to anarchist Kingsley Widmer, was not simply the one between social and lifestyle anarchism but the one between anarchism past and anarchism present. Murray, in this view, was an anachronism, standing “in lonely splendor . . . on the ghostly shoulders of Bakunin, Kropotkin, and their descendants in such as the Spanish anarchists of more than two generations ago.” Social anarchism, Widmer wrote, is historically over: “What Bookchin propounds overall seems a sometimes admirable but now narrow and thin libertarianism of a different time and place and conditions. To put it kindly, much of Bookchinism steams with quaintness.”⁸⁹

Such critics seemed intent on defining social anarchism as anarchism-of-the-past, and lifestyle anarchism as anarchism-of-today. Steve Ash, writing in *Freedom*,

⁸⁸ Quotations in this section are from Murray Bookchin, *Anarchism, Marxism*, pp. 122–24.

⁸⁹ Widmer, “How Broad and Deep?”

went even further, asserting that individualistic anarchism was anarchism-of-always: “Anarchism as a whole . . . has always emphasized self determinism” — that is, autonomy. If Murray thought anarchism ever had some collectivist or communal dimension, he was apparently mistaken; indeed, Ash asserted, Bookchin had joined the “anarchist movement mistaking it for a radical form of anti-hierarchical communism.” To which Murray replied: “Can it be that Mr. Ash has never heard of *comunismo libertario* or the tens of thousands of Spanish anarchists who raised the cry for it in the streets of Zaragoza, Barcelona, and Alcoy, among other Spanish cities and towns, as well as on the battlefronts of Aragon? If it is a mistake to believe that ‘anti-hierarchical communism’ belongs to ‘genuine [!] anarchist idea,’ then we have chosen to ignore a major chapter of anarchist history.” Ash’s critique not only consigned social anarchism to the past but lost all historical memory of it.

Those of us who knew Murray personally understood that he had privately rejected anarchism as such in 1995, around the time he wrote “Social Anarchism or Lifestyle Anarchism.” In that booklet he essentially was saying, If anarchism continues in this vein, I’ll have to leave the movement. But in reality he had already left, emotionally and intellectually. Still, for four years he hesitated to make a public break. He had forty years of history with the movement and many anarchist friends. He had anarchist publishers and a major reputation. Was he going to jettison that? But Murray, to his credit, never made the intellectual mistake of caring about reputation. He cared only about doing what he thought was right.

Why, then, did he procrastinate with the break? In my view, an important reason was his age. He had just been through a vicious fight with the lifestyle anarchists. He might now write an article called “Communalism vs. Anarchism,” but if he did so he would open up another fight. At seventy-five, he felt himself to be too fragile, and his health too poor, to withstand the counterattack. He knew that he would need my help to write the replies, but I was already hard at work editing and research-assisting the final two volumes of *The Third Revolution*.

Another reason was the libertarian municipalism conference series of 1997–99. In 1997 I wrote a small book summarizing his political ideas, called *The Politics of Social Ecology: Libertarian Municipalism*, which was almost immediately translated into several languages. Some of his friends wanted to use the book to try to interest whatever social anarchists remained in face-to-face democracy. The publisher proposed that we organize a series of two international conferences, to pitch democracy to anarchists one last time. Since Murray was too crippled by arthritis to travel, I agreed to participate in his stead. He was impatient with the whole project but, perhaps out of deference to me, kept his misgivings to himself. The first conference took place in 1998 in Lisbon, Portugal; the second, in 1999,

in Plainfield, Vermont. As Murray had predicted, the conference series failed to produce a movement or even a set of initiatives. On the contrary, the anarchists that the conferences reached continued to make the same objections: Democracy is rule. Libertarian municipalism is statism.

By then his friends understood as well as Murray did that no progress could be made. He had given it his best shot. “I’m tired of defending anarchism against the anarchists,” he used to say. Writing to the English periodical *Organise!* he admitted that his attempt to transform anarchism had been a failure:

I do not fault myself for trying to expand the horizon of anarchism in the sixties along cultural lines. I regret only that I failed, not that I saw the wrong possibilities for profoundly changing our society. Tragically, many self-professed American anarchists didn’t even try to do much back then and have since abandoned their convictions for private life and academic careers. Surely failure doesn’t mean that one shouldn’t try?⁹⁰

Over the decades Murray had indeed transformed anarchism — much to its benefit, he had infused it with ecology and the critique of hierarchy and other ideas.⁹¹ But George Woodcock turned out to be right — anarchists had no taste for democracy. At least Murray had the satisfaction of knowing he had tried. In the end, his loyalty to democracy as a concept and a praxis was stronger than his loyalty to anarchism. So when he had to choose between them, he chose democracy.

In the meantime a group of talented Scandinavian communalists had come into his life. They met with us in 1996–97 and, upon returning home, proceeded to create a solid organization, Democratic Alternative. They formed study groups. They held meetings and public forums. They wrote platforms and programs. They held internal congresses and external conferences. They translated Murray’s and my works into Norwegian and published them. They wrote their own articles. They edited and published periodicals. They de-trivialized themselves. They were astonishing.

In Norwegian, as in other European languages, the word municipalism is translated as an equivalent of “communalism.” Our Norwegian comrades therefore

⁹⁰ Bookchin, letter to *Organise!*, p. 18. Sadly, Iain Mackay, a writer associated with *Organise!*, is currently circulating a rumor that late in life Murray suffered from Alzheimer’s disease. As his primary caregiver, I can state categorically that this rumor is entirely false. Murray remained lucid almost to the end of his life.

⁹¹ Space has not permitted me to discuss Murray’s philosophical ideas, which he called dialectical naturalism. See his *The Philosophy of Social Ecology*, rev. ed. (Montreal: Black Rose Books, 1984).

easily called themselves “communalists.” In 1994 Murray had referred to communalism as “the democratic dimension of anarchism”; his next, inevitable step was to separate communalism from anarchism. The Norwegians gave him the political and psychological support he needed in order to make the break with the ideology that had been his home for forty years.

At the second conference of the libertarian municipalism series, in Vermont in 1999, Murray broke with anarchism. Then three years later, he wrote it down in his final theoretical article, the brilliant summation of his late-life views that he called “The Communalist Project.”⁹²

In the late 1950s, when anarchism in the United States was a barely discernible presence, it seemed like a sufficiently clear field in which I could develop social ecology, as well as the . . . political ideas that would eventually become . . . libertarian municipalism. I well knew that these views were not consistent with traditional anarchist ideas . . . Today I find that anarchism remains the very simplistic individualistic and antirationalist society it has always been. My attempt to retain anarchism under the name of “social anarchism” has largely been a failure, and I now find that the term I have used to denote my views must be replaced with Communalism, which coherently integrate and goes beyond the most viable features of the anarchist and Marxist traditions.

The article is notable for its sobriety — although critical of anarchism, it does not polemicize against it but rather calmly explicates a transformation:

I myself once used this political label [anarchism], but further thought has obliged me to conclude that, its often-refreshing aphorisms and insights notwithstanding, it simply is not a social theory . . . Regrettably, the use of socialistic terms has often prevented anarchists from telling us or even understanding clearly what they are: individualists whose concepts of autonomy originate in a strong commitment to personal liberty rather than to social freedom, or socialists committed to a structured, institutionalized, and responsible form of social organization . . . The history of his ideology is peppered with idiosyncratic acts of defiance that verge on the eccentric, which not surprisingly have attracted many young people and aesthetes. In fact, anarchism represents the most extreme formulation of liberalism’s ideology of unfettered autonomy, culminating in a celebration of heroic acts of defiance of the state.

⁹² Bookchin, “Communalist Project.”

He did not lash out at anarchism, his former ideological home.

Several years ago, while I still identified myself as an anarchist, I attempted to formulate a distinction between “social” and “lifestyle” anarchism, and I wrote an article that identified Communalism as “the democratic dimension of anarchism.” . . . I no longer believe that Communalism is a mere “dimension” of anarchism, democratic or otherwise; rather, it is a distinct ideology with a revolutionary tradition that has yet to be explored.

As for the communalism that he now affirmed, Murray saw it as a transcendence of both anarchism and Marxism, and he attributed to it all the political and philosophical and social ideas that he had been advocating for decades.

It is my contention that Communalism is the overarching political category most suitable to encompass the fully thought out and systematic views of social ecology, including libertarian municipalism and dialectical naturalism. As an ideology, Communalism draws on the best of the older Left ideologies — Marxism and anarchism, more properly the libertarian socialist tradition — while offering a wider and more relevant scope for our time.

My own view is that Murray had no alternative but to do what he did. Anarchists had repeatedly and consistently rejected his approach. “The Communalist Project” is a fitting capstone to a life of immense intellectual integrity. Here he hoped that, having blazed a new trail, he would give libertarian social revolutionaries a new path forward. The task of further developing communalism and working to build a communalist movement therefore now falls to the next generation of social ecologists.

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Janet Biehl
Bookchin Breaks with Anarchism
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