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Independent Research into Radical Theory

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Social Ecology and Revolutionary Technology

We are facing an age in which technology is often posed as the enemy of human survival and the planet. The extraction of materials such as oil and coal has consistently escalated pollution since the Industrial Revolution, clearcutting of massive areas of trees around the world with machinery that runs off of oil and gas has devastated natural environments, and the mechanization of the agricultural industry poisons our bodies and the land with chemicals such as pesticides. Workers see jobs disappearing as they are replaced with technology; people face unemployment and low wages due to competition fueled by machines that can now work faster and often smarter than humans. Indigenous ways of caring for and living with the environment are erased through the uses of industrial technology. The reason that technology has been so detrimental is because of capitalism and ecocide: inventions are funded by capitalists to increase production rather than meet the material needs of humans while casting little care about environmental destruction.

 Murray Bookchin, a social ecologist and anarchist, says technology has the potential be liberatory, that if used in the right contexts could create better lives for humans while eliminating a lot of the toil that restricts us from participating in revolutions. In his compilation of essays titled *Post-Scarcity Anarchism*, he discusses the possibility of an anarchist revolution that utilizes technology in order to meet the needs of all, while attempting to balance the relationship between human beings and the environment. The reason that I chose to read Bookchin is because, while many radical theorists discuss social revolutions, they often lack any analysis of what a technological revolution would look like; these two parts are inextricable in liberation of humans from capitalism. Many anarchist and communist theorists I have been writing about this quarter were writing in the late 19th and early 20th century, when the working class was dealing with scarcity of resources.

The institutions that we still participate in today, such as, “property and classes.. Monogamy and patriarchy… hierarchy and authority… bureaucracy and the state,” no longer have “any social rationale” (Bookchin, 19). Now that capitalism engages in “production for its own sake and consumption for its own sake,” scarcity has to be created in order to keep the economic system going, as well as keep capitalists profiting (Bookchin, 59). This means that within the modern global capitalist economy, products are not made because they are necessary, but because the system needs buyers and sellers of products to survive--even if those products are throwaway commodities rather than necessities, even if many people do not have access to the resources they need to live.

The security of capitalism relies on enforcement by the state, and Bookchin thinks that the existence of the state, as well as cities, systems of oppression and markets are not only unnecessary to human life, but are detrimental to us as well as the planet (Bookchin, 61). The use of reforms, or what some have called “green capitalism,” to combat destruction of the environment, cannot redeem “the atmosphere, the waterways, the soil and the ecology required for human survival,” and are often just ways that the rich manipulate the system to justify more exploitation and human labor (Bookchin, 60). Carbon credits are an example of this: corporations can buy and trade carbon credits, which put a limit on how much carbon pollution factories can emit. In the end this is just a reform that makes consumers feel better while corporations purchase credits; it does not really restrict emissions. The more money you have, the more money you can invest in carbon credits, which basically eliminates any sort of restriction on pollution. As an anarcho-communist, Bookchin calls for abolishing the state and restructuring the way that humans produce and consume products as well as our social, technological, and environmental relationships.

I see some issues with Bookchin’s approach to social ecology, maybe because he was writing from the 1960’s to the 1980’s. Fifty years ago there may have been hope that if we completely reorganized our ways of growing food, creating products, utilizing energy resources, and interacting with our natural environments in a more ecological way then we would not be hurling towards food shortages and climate crisis so quickly. Bookchin calls for a “decentralized, ecological system of food cultivation,” in which humans must cooperate with nature--what Peter Kropotkin would refer to as “mutual aid” (Bookchin, 64). This would include the use of solar, wind and water power to fuel land-management that would always be rooted in ecological principles; he discusses how humans could potentially farm on a “human scale” without “sacrificing mechanization” through utilizing more localized means of survival (Bookchin 137). In order to do this, we would definitely need to abolish capitalism, since the funding for projects is hardly ever invested in supporting alternative energy sources to oil, coal and gas. It is hard to imagine this happening any time soon, but that does not mean that it is entirely impossible.

There are specific areas of the world that could possibly power communities based solely off of alternative renewable energy resources, but the entire planet is not necessarily in the position at this point to make that change. A social revolution would have to happen, and as the mass strikes of the 1800’s and early 1900’s in the United States have proven, people who want to revolt often end their participation in a revolution because they need to work to feed themselves and survive. This is why Bookchin says that “the most critical function of modern technology must be to keep the doors of the revolution open forever;” the purpose of technology would not be to end work for humans in some utopian dream (Bookchin, 153). Technology would be used to relieve workers from toil so that they could invest in ecological projects, social change, and inventing new ways to survive that are more harmonious with nature. In other words, there would be no more capitalist labor but there would be plenty of work that needs to be done. Bookchin sees this revolution as something that creates the space to allow us to become creative in challenging the environmental and social issues on earth.

There are other theorists, such as anarcho-primitivists, who believe that technology will only lead humans and the planet toward doom. They promote the idea of going back to more “traditional” ways of living in harmony with the environment. I would have to agree with Bookchin that while the development of technology has been destroying the planet and rupturing the relationships that humans once had with the land and the environment, “a liberated society...will not want to negate technology precisely because it is liberated and can strike a balance” (Bookchin, 156). Just because capitalism has used mechanization to poison the land, eliminate access to jobs (or create hazardous jobs) and extract toxins from the earth does not mean it could not be utilized in different ways. Even in a capitalist world seemingly rooted in individual accumulation of wealth and resources, I can believe that “a basic sense of decency, sympathy, and mutual aid lies at the core of human behavior” (Bookchin, 160).

If we are hurtling towards an apocalypse, or if we are already living in one, I think it is worth trying to reorganize ourselves outside of capitalism. I could disagree with Bookchin and think that all the work would be fruitless because we will all die either way; death is inevitable for all of us. There is no such thing as permanence. On this rock spinning around a burning ball of gas in space, everything that seems so important to us is actually very small in the scope of the universe. That is what makes it so meaningful and special, though: we can still fight, we can still organize, we can still attempt to make light of the situation that we have at hand even if it could all end any minute. My love for this planet could even be at the center of my resistance, whether or not I think humans will survive. In reality I want the best for humans, I want us to survive and build something better for each other and for the other creatures on this earth. Either way, with or without a future for humans, I think we should invest in more ecological solutions in order to hope for the best future for the rest of life on this planet.