What Is Social Ecology?

written by Peter G. Prontzos | February 9, 2026

Murray Bookchin, who was born and raised in New York City, was one of the most significant thinkers—and activists—in the twentieth century, beginning with his pioneering ecological analysis *Our Synthetic Environment*, which was published over six decades ago (1962). His first major work, *Post-Scarcity Anarchism*, was published in 1971 and it had a huge impact on many political, social, and environmental movements.

Over the next three decades, Bookchin, wrote and lectured on an impressively wide range of issues, including the nature of cities, anthropology, the Spanish Civil War, technology, social movements, and political philosophy. He coined the phrase "social ecology" to denote the central element in his world view: that the ultimate source of humanity's domination and exploitation of nature is based on the continuing domination and exploitation of human beings by those in positions of power in society.

While there are obviously many forms of domination and oppression, Bookchin focused primarily on two intersecting types: the political and the economic, exemplified by capitalism and the state (which he described as "the cesspool of bourgeois parliamentarianism"). Another key element in Bookchin's thought was the idea of "unity in diversity," the notion that both nature and human societies are healthier and more flourishing when there is harmony between the various elements in the system and its overall structure. His suggestions as to how such a society can be democratically organized form the basis of his notion of "communalism," starting with the smaller units of society, e.g., co-ops, neighborhoods, and cities, with power flowing upward to larger confederations.

One of Bookchin's primary insights is that due to the unprecedented productive power of modern technology all scarcities in the world—food, medical care, education, even free time—are all artificial and unnecessary.

He also argued that even those of us living in the richer countries are oppressed, not just by the need to sell our time and creativity to survive, but also because we have lost sight of our true, compassionate humanity and have been conditioned to give up our dreams. The ultimate source of these problems is, in Bookchin's view, the result of the global capitalist economy, which prioritizes corporate greed over both people and nature.

(An informative discussion of his life and ideas can be found in *Ecology or Catastrophe: The Life of Murray Bookchin* [Oxford], written by Janet Biehl, who was his companion in his last two decades.)

His influence has spread ever further since his death in 2006 and had been put into practice in a number of places around the world—most notably in Kurdish-controlled areas in the Near East. Nobody has described these movements and ideas better than Eleanor Finley in her *Practicing Social Ecology: From Bookchin to Rojava and Beyond*.

Finley, a researcher in the Department of Anthropology at the University of Massachusetts, begins

her exploration of social ecology by alerting the reader to the fact that Bookchin's ideas can be quite complex and that understanding "his work requires commitment and patience and, often, a robust background in philosophy, Marxian theory, sociology, and anthropology." Yes—but that should not deter anyone from giving it a try, and it is for this reason that Finley's book (and the glossary that she includes) is so helpful, as it offers readers a way to understand and connect many of Bookchin's ideas, as well as explaining how groups around the world are trying to use them in their organizing and community building.

Chapter 2, for instance, outlines the major elements of Bookchin's ideas, to provide the background needed to understand the theories and practices of the groups discussed. The next chapter focuses on the more personal and interpersonal dynamics that are necessary to create viable and effective movements and societies. Another section considers the idea of popular assemblies and direct democratic governance, in which power moves from the bottom up. "Popular assemblies lie at the heart of social ecology."

To illustrate this approach, she also provides case studies of these efforts in places like the United States, Spain, Chile, Poland, Mexico, and especially in the Kurdish region of Rojava. She explains that "In 2012, the Rojava Revolution became the first major uprising to invoke Bookchin's vision, bringing confederal direct democracy to the center of global geopolitics and redefining 'democratization' in the Middle East."

One of the defining elements of the Rojava Revolution is the role played by women. For instance, the Kurds have two citizen-led militias, one of which is the Women's Protection Units (YPJ), which has fought off attacks from Syria, the so-called Islamic State, and especially Turkey (which "consistently ranks among the top human rights abusers").

Equality between women and men, *hevalti*, not only includes defense and decision-making, but it also means that, "daily chores such as cooking and cleaning are split evenly between women and men…." *Hevalti* is also "a revolutionary generosity of spirit."

It's important to stress that the Rojava Revolution is just the most well-known of these attempts to apply Bookchin's insights. Finley points out that "Legacies of self-governance can be found in every corner of the globe," and that in the last twenty years, countless civil society projects have been created…including environmental and ecological initiatives, women's collectives and cooperatives, community-based justice, artists collectives, student unions, popular education projects, and village communes."

Reading about all these attempts to organize truly democratic and ecological movements recalls a very profound comment made in the movie *The Maltese Falcon* by Humphrey Bogart (as Sam Spade): "It's not always easy to know what to do."

Looking at the larger picture, it is vital that promoting direct democracy, human rights for all, sustainable economies, healthy social connections, and educational opportunities (especially in affinity groups) for everybody to fulfill their best potential (what Aristotle called *eudaimonia*) will take a lot of time, patience, and effort. Bookchin understood that "revolutionaries have to revolutionize themselves." And as Finley elaborates: "Even the best democratic procedure cannot make up for the dysfunctional habits we learn while living under capitalism." That is why she also points out the need for "emotional healing" as part of the revolutionary process.

Indeed, Finley writes that an activist from the Pacific Northwest told her that projects usually fall apart "due to people's inability to handle their own trauma." But healing cannot be done alone, which is why working with other people in a supportive and non-judgmental environment is so

important. She also references the work of Dr. Gabor Maté, whose most relevant work is his *The Myth of Normal*.*

Finley sums it all up with this insight at the end of the book: “Reconciliation with nature is, at the end of the day, a reconciliation with ourselves.”

And at the risk of stating the obvious, if people fail to create truly democratic and ecological societies, then the future is dark indeed. As Martin Luther King Jr. understood, the choice is “chaos or community.”

In that context, one of the last things that Bookchin said to me when I visited him in Burlington, Vermont, may be even truer now: “These days, I’m not trying to make a revolution,” he said. “I’m just trying to preserve The Enlightenment.”

These days, we need to do both, and Finley’s book is an excellent guide to doing just that.

*My review of this book can be found on p. 45 of this link: Monitor, Spring 2024, Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives.