

Libertarian Municipalism & Murray Bookchin's Legacy

An interview with Debbie Bookchin

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From the USA to Spain and beyond, the last decade has seen a surge in municipalist and local democracy citizens' movements. Many have been influenced by the ideas of American writer and thinker Murray Bookchin (1921-2006), which envisaged a new left politics based on popular assemblies and grassroots democracy. We sat down with Debbie Bookchin to discuss how these movements are implementing her father's ideas and what the potential challenges are for libertarian municipalism.

Green European Journal: How do you explain the expansion of municipalist and local democracy citizens' movements and assemblies in the last decade? How far are they a realisation of your father's ideas?

Debbie Bookchin: Municipalism is taking various forms today as it evolves in practice. For my father it was part of a profoundly revolutionary project to abolish capitalism, hierarchy, and the state. He believed neighbourhood assemblies were an essential building block for true grassroots democracy and began urging the Left to develop a radical municipalist politics 50 years ago. In his 1968 essay 'The Forms of Freedom' he said, "There can be no separation of the revolutionary process from the revolutionary goal. A society based on self-administration must be achieved by means of self-administration." In these statements you see an early iteration of what we today call 'prefigurative' politics – the idea that we must create a new society in the shell of the old by living and practicing the ideals of the society we want to bring into existence. If we want to put power in the hands of everyday people in their cities and towns, we must begin by organising this kind of face-to-face radical democracy now on the local level.

My father observed that there were many historical antecedents for this, from the *ecclesia* of ancient Athens, to the revolutionary sections of Paris in 1793, to the anarchist collectives of 1936 Spain. And we can add the Kurdish communes in Rojava, Syria today. I think municipalism is catching on for several reasons. First, it's become clear that the Marxist notion of seizing state power is bankrupt – centralised power invariably corrupts those who claim to speak in the name of the people. At the same time, decades of organising in the interstices of capitalist society, as anarchists have traditionally done, have failed to produce foundational changes, even as it has created spaces for more holistic types of community. Municipalism offers a third pole in this debate. It allows people to actually practice politics as it should be: an art in which every interested member of a community participates in the governing of the community. Municipalist politics is also very satisfying – it allows people to come together and experience empowerment and community. And it can begin to achieve substantive changes, as it has in Barcelona, where Barcelona en Comú has reined in AirBnB, municipalised the electric department, and made it more difficult for banks to foreclose.

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From the Occupy Movement to municipalist platforms, what is your assessment of the radical democratic and left initiatives of the last years in the USA?

The Left has been weak in the US for many years, ceding local political organising to the far right. The

municipalist movement is still nascent in the US but it is beginning to grow. In part because of the size and diversity of the country, it has taken very different forms in different places. In Jackson, Mississippi, which is in the American south and where 80 percent of the population is African American, Cooperation Jackson has been working for two decades to build a cooperative economy that empowers black and working-class residents. In other parts of the US, like the Pacific Northwest cities of Portland, Oregon, and Seattle, Washington, municipalism has gained steam more recently in part because of the 2016 presidential election. There is an effort now to tie many of these municipalist movements together through gatherings like the Fearless Cities summits held in New York and Warsaw last summer and by the Symbiosis Research Collective which is helping to organise a convergence of municipalist activists that would result in an organisation spanning North America.

What is libertarian municipalism?

At the age of nine, my father became a ‘Young Pioneer’ with the Communist Party USA. So he was essentially raised by them. But over the years he became troubled by the economic reductionism that had historically permeated the Marxist Left. After working in a steel foundry, where most workers were interested in a higher wage, and not much else, he became disenchanted with the revolutionary potential of the ‘proletariat’ and sought to expand the idea of freedom to be more than mere economic emancipation. Freedom, he felt, should address all manner of oppression: race, class, gender, ethnicity, as well as freedom from mindless toil. In the late 1950s and early 1960s it also became increasingly clear to him that the grow-or-die ethos of capitalism was on a collision course with the ecological stability of the planet and that ecological problems cut across class lines and had the potential to radicalise all segments of society.

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He began to elaborate the idea that he called social ecology, which starts from the premise that all environmental problems have their origin in social problems. This means that we can’t solve the ecological crisis until we eliminate every form of domination and hierarchy: of the old over the young, men over women, cisgender over trans, as well as economic oppression and a myriad of other social stratifications. In social ecology he was both critiquing current social and ecological crises and also articulating a coherent reconstructive vision. The question for him was how, concretely, do we bring a new egalitarian society into being? As a historian he was aware of this rich history of direct democracy and self-government – the idea that local communities could chart their own futures and then confederate to address regional and even national problems without the need of a centralised state. He called this idea libertarian municipalism or Communalism.

Your father emphasised the role of the city in leading to social ecological politics. Why are cities so important and is there not the risk of further polarising cities and countryside with its smaller towns?

There is no question that cities are Janus faced. On the one hand cities are noisy, polluted, and overwhelming. They have been the engines of capitalism. On the other hand, historically, they have also been the places where tribal affiliations were superseded by the emancipatory idea of citizenship – the right to be a fully participating member of society regardless of one’s origins. We need to reclaim this liberatory potential of municipalities by empowering people in their neighborhoods and decentralising cities. We can also employ decentralised technologies like solar and wind power and promote ecological values like unity in diversity, and social stability as a function of complexity, variety, and diversity – values that foster mutual aid and community building. My father understood both the oppressive and liberatory potential of cities and felt that they did not need to be placed in opposition to the

countryside. The reality is that more and more people are living in cities and that a politics that is based on community, that indeed must be *embedded* in the community, could provide a vehicle for organising that the Left has lacked.

In the book *The Next Revolution: Popular Assemblies and the Promise of Direct Democracy* that you edited on your father's writings, the 'future of the Left' and the urgent need for unity are a recurring theme. Why and what exactly was his call?

In the essay in that book called 'The Future of the Left,' my father traces the historical failings of the classical Left. He suggests that capitalism remains an ever-evolving, remarkably resilient system whose ability to degrade not only the natural world but the human psyche continues unabated. He says that a future Left must mobilise people on issues that cut across class lines, and that a politics based on protest is no politics at all. In rather prescient observations (given the rise of right-wing populist politics today), he urged the Left to focus on issues that have trans-class appeal, understanding matters such as gender discrimination, racism, nationalism, and even global warming as evidence of the ills caused by hierarchy. He believed that the Left had to consciously explain to people the wider significance of individual issues, connecting them to the ravages of capitalism, hierarchy, and domination, and that one of the best ways to do this was on the neighbourhood level.

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For my father, municipalist politics was about much more than bringing a progressive agenda to city hall. For him it was very much an educational process, in which during the practice of meeting or 'communing' we develop the character that enables us to restore politics to its original definition, as a moral calling based on rationality, community, creativity, and free association. At a time when human rights, democracy, and the public good are under attack by increasingly nationalistic, authoritarian centralised state governments, it seems more important than ever to engage in face-to-face meetings with our neighbours, to reclaim the public sphere for the exercise of empathy, understanding of our commonalities, authentic citizenship, and freedom.

Beyond crisis periods, how do we sustain the real political engagement from citizens that libertarian municipalism requires? While libertarian municipalism and the feminisation of politics tend to reject institutionalisation and leadership, both may be necessary to take the political project further.

People become involved and stay engaged when they see results in their communities. They want to see change on their doorsteps – whether better housing and schools or improved air quality – and municipalism offers people a means for addressing those issues. The next step is to tie those issues to bigger ones like racial justice, ecological degradation, and capitalism, but everything starts with the community. We have been conned into the idea that politics is going into a voting booth once every two, four or five years and pressing a button. Municipalist politics allows us to reclaim this very essential part of being human, to become transformed into new human beings through its practice and to in turn transform society. Municipalism seeks to change the very nature of politics as something that people do for themselves, rather than something that is done for them, or more often *to* them.

I don't think that libertarian municipalism and the feminisation of politics are antithetical to institutionalisation or leadership. There will always be leaders, people who are better-informed or rhetorically gifted. And libertarian municipalism is actually calling for the institutionalisation of political power in the form of bottom up, directly

democratic neighborhood assemblies; this is what distinguishes municipalism from other progressive movements. The important element is that politics and political institutions be transparent and accountable. Specifically, a municipalist politics demands that those elected to City Councils view themselves as delegates of the local assembly and are 100 per cent accountable to their assemblies; they are recallable if they fail to represent the wishes of those who have placed them in a position of power. It requires that they abide by a code of ethics, and that they rotate. This transparency is designed to transform politics into something that everyone can do and that is fundamentally based on assembly forms of organisation.

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In the early 2000s, the Kurdistan Workers' Party's (PKK) imprisoned leader, Abdullah Öcalan, decided to infuse the Kurdish political project with Communalism, popular assemblies, and confederalism. How is Rojava (the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria) implementing your father's ideas?

Rojava, now home to about 4 million people living in a swath of land along Syria's northern border with Turkey, has been a tremendous living example of libertarian municipalism, or what the Kurds call 'democratic confederalism.' Built on the pillars of ecology, direct democracy, and women's liberation, the Kurdish people have implemented a system in which women hold a minimum of 40 per cent of all elected offices, co-chair all administrative positions, and have a separate committee system that adjudicates all issues relating to women. People meet at the 'commune' level of about 40 to 100 families to collectively make decisions about every aspect of life, from traffic control to which municipal cooperatives they wish to open; they send delegates to the neighbourhood level which in turn sends delegates to the city level and finally the 'canton' level. They are able to make even regional decisions across a fairly large territory, about the size of Belgium, without resorting to a centralised state, by using a delegate system that reports back to the local communes. In addition, a corresponding committee system addresses things like education, youth, women, economy, and health. It's a testament to the Kurds' commitment that they have implemented this system during a fierce civil war and while losing thousands of their young women and men fighting the Islamic State.

What do you know of the Rojava experience and how do you support them? How is this radically democratic and municipalist project perceived in the USA?

In the US, as in Europe, there are pockets of solidarity in the form of local groups that try to build consciousness about Rojava. Alas, the American solidarity effort is far weaker than its European counterpart. The American media does a fairly poor job of conveying the nuances of overseas affairs and the larger American public is myopic and insular. Meanwhile, from the Left we are often confronted by anti-imperialist, anti-interventionist politics which argues that the US must stay out of all international conflicts and that villainises the Kurds for accepting coalition air support for their battle against ISIS. I must say that I find this argument extraordinarily narrow-minded. To hear those on the Left who claim to stand for freedom, women's rights, and economic equality be willing to let the Kurdish movement be defeated rather than accepting Western air support is the privilege of arm-chair leftists who have no idea what it means to fight on the ground for a democratic socialist society. I've found it profoundly disturbing that the broader Left hasn't done more to make solidarity with the Kurdish people in their struggle. It's not as though we have so many examples of egalitarian, multi-ethnic, non-sectarian, grassroots democratic societies that we can afford to let it be crushed.

You are carrying the flame of your father's political work. How do you proceed? What are the difficulties

you've encountered?

Most of my adult life has been spent as an investigative journalist, but since my father died in 2006, I've increasingly felt that it's my job to help project his ideas forward. My father developed his social theory for 60 years, in constant engagement with the Left, arguing that we had to do more than go into public office, protest, or live alternative lifestyles – we had to build alternative institutions of political power. And I think that as well-intentioned as, for example, the German Green Party has been, its trajectory – which I followed very closely, including while living in Frankfurt in 1984 to 1985 – shows how easy it is to start out as a 'non-party party' and, when you run for national office, become assimilated into existing power structures where you ultimately have relatively little influence and cannot rehabilitate society, much less transform it. In the US, there is no question that we would have been far better off with a Bernie Sanders presidency than with Donald Trump and I'd certainly vote for democratic socialist candidates like Sanders and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez from the DSA. But we will never win under the current system. It forces compromise after compromise until we settle, gratefully, for pathetic tidbits, like a carbon tax, when the entire planet is going up in flames.

After my father died, the association of his ideas with the Kurdish autonomy movement brought a new generation of activists into contact with his work. I feel compelled to press forward with his vision because today, we are living in a time when the need for political change has never been greater, and his work has a major contribution to make to the Left. When global warming has placed us at the brink of ecological suicide far sooner than even my father predicted 50 years ago, we *must* build alternative institutions of political power that will contest the power of global capitalism and the nation state. The future of the planet depends on it.



Debbie Bookchin is a journalist and author who co-edited a book of essays by her father, Murray Bookchin, *The Next Revolution: Popular Assemblies and the Promise of Direct Democracy* (2015), and co-wrote, with her husband Jim Schumacher, *The Virus and the Vaccine: Contaminated Vaccine, Deadly Cancers and Government Neglect* (2004). You can follow her on Twitter [@debbiebookchin](https://twitter.com/debbiebookchin).

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