



## LIBERTARIAN MUNICIPALISM IN MURRAY BOOKCHIN'S SOCIAL THOUGHT

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### ABSTRACT

The paper addresses the issues of libertarian municipalism in the social thought of the anarchist and communitarianist M. Bookchin. The aim of the author was to present a brief biography of M. Bookchin, and explain and interpret his views connected with the concept of restructuring society within the framework of an original thought and criticism of the modern political governance and social order. It was especially important to illuminate the criticism of a hierarchic society and parliamentary system, explain the need for decentralisation of the state as well as the changes to governing the city as proposed by M. Bookchin and creation of a political system based on autonomous confederations.

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### INTRODUCTION

In Poland, the social thought of Murray Bookchin is relatively little known. Only a few of his books<sup>1</sup>, papers and interviews with him have been translated. In the literature, M. Bookchin is presented as a leading representative of the modern U.S. anarchism [Sepczyńska, 2013, p. 92] and the anarchy-advocating current of ecopolitics [Tokarczyk, 2010a, p. 490] – “social ecology”, also referred to as socialist libertarianism (libertarian socialism, left-libertarianism) [Sepczyńska, 2013, p. 107]. Referring to his views, M. Bookchin himself used the term libertarian municipalism [M. Bookchin, 2009; Sepczyńska, 2013, p. 113] to describe a social thought that is based on anarchist collectivism, the concept of a directly democratic self-government, a political system that is based on radical decentralisation and confederalism and supported by ecological philosophy. Towards the end of his life, he was a proponent of communitarianism – a philosophy that stresses superiority of the community over the individual.

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<sup>1</sup> They include, among other things: *Granice burżuazyjnego miasta*, translated by P. Borodulin-Nadzieja, 1998 Zielona Góra, *Anarchizm społeczny czy anarchizm stylu życia?*, Poznań 2006, *Przebudowa społeczeństwa*, translated by I. Czyż, Poznań 2009.

Formulating his social and political views in the period of the development of the theory of libertarian municipalism, M. Bookchin openly referred to anarchism, a doctrine in which “the criticism of the existing or the vision of the future social order is based on the principle of abolishing all forms of rule, on anarchy” [Malinowski, 1983, p. 9]. The anarchism of M. Bookchin is above all anti-hierarchic, but it is not purely classical, though Bookchin repeatedly refers directly to the thought of P. J. Proudhon and P. Kropotkin.

Knowledge of the concept of libertarian municipalism allows to determine M. Bookchin's contribution to the modern political and social thought of libertarianism, anarchism and communitarianism. It also allows to learn about alternative ideas for the functioning of modern states. His views also focused on criticism of capitalism and state authority, in particular the parliamentary system. He saw great importance in the development of a local community – governed from the bottom up. He left a lot of writings behind. During his lifetime, he changed his views several times.

## LIFE AND WORK

Murray Bokchin was born on January 14, 1921 in New York<sup>2</sup>. His parents were Russian emigrants of Jewish origin. Undoubtedly, their world view and participation in the Russian revolution movement had an impact on the young M. Bookchin, as already in 1930 he became involved in a communist youth organisation. From the very beginning of his activity, he manifested a critical attitude to Stalinism, which drove him to search for disparate leftist ideas and, after several years, link his interests with Trotskyism. Unable to participate in the civil war in Spain in 1936-1939, he was supporting those fighting on the side of the leftist Popular Front. His interest in the war in Spain did not pass, and later resulted in a book on the subject of Spanish anarchism and the events at that time [M. Bookchin, 1977; Laskowski, 2006, p. 425]. In the following years, his interests were extended to include the labour movement and the issues of environmental protection. One of the reasons was gaining the insight of the proletarian environment from inside. He was a worker at a steel foundry and an autoworker. In 1940, he served in the U.S. army. Upon discharge from the army he became involved in the activity of the U.S. trade union United Auto Workers (UAW). In 1948, he took part in a highly-publicised strike at General Motors plant organised by the trade union UAW [General Motors..., 1948]. After these events, he became disillusioned with the idea cherished at that time in the leftist movement about the revolutionary and leading role of the working class. He was searching for a communism that was more universal and less hierarchic. In the 1950s, M. Bookchin started to call himself libertarian socialist. At that time, he established cooperation with German Marxists living in New York and started to publish under the pseudonyms M. S. Shiloh, Lewis Herber, Robert Keller and Harry Ludd. His texts appeared in magazines published by New York Marxists such as “Dinge der Zeit” or “Contemporary Issues” among other things. He showed a broad interest in ecology. In 1952, under the pseudonym of L. Herber he published the paper The problem of chemicals in food (1952) in “Contemporary Issues”. Later, he addressed the issues

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<sup>2</sup> The basic biographical information was based on: J. Biehl, A short biography of Murray Bookchin, [http://dwardmac.pitzer.edu/Anarchist\\_Archives/bookchin/bio1.html](http://dwardmac.pitzer.edu/Anarchist_Archives/bookchin/bio1.html) [23.09.2015].

of ecology in the publications *Our Synthetic Environment* (1962) and *In Crisis in Our Cities* (1965). In them, he presented the negative impact on the human life of pesticides used in agriculture and preservatives used in the production of food, as well as describing environmental protection problems in U.S. cities<sup>3</sup>

[Liszewski, 2009, p. 7-9; Miliszewski, p. 267]. In the 1960s, the work of M. Bookchin inspired part of the European and U.S. New Left which was being formed at that time. In his book *Ecology and Revolutionary Thought* (1964) M. Bookchin described the assumptions of radical ecology, combining the ideas of ecology and anarchism and dubbing these views social ecology. In the subsequent publication *Towards a Liberatory Technology* (1965), he expressed a positive attitude to the use of alternative sources of energy and new technology in building the infrastructure of the new social order [Biehl, A short...]. In the 1960s he taught at Alternative University in New York and City University of New York in Staten Island. In the 1970s he was active in the anti-nuclear movement. In 1974, he co-created and later became the director of Institute for Social Ecology in Plainfield, Vermont. The organisation gained a reputation in teaching social theories, ecophilosophy and alternative technologies. In the subsequent publication, *The Limits of the City* (1974), he continued work on the issue of urbanisation. In the same year, he became a teacher in Ramapo College of New Jersey. In 1977, his book on the Spanish anarchist movement *The Spanish Anarchists* came out. In 1982, he published *The Emergence and Dissolution of Hierarchy* (reprinted in 1991 and 2005) on ecology and social hierarchy, describing the negative impact of social hierarchy on the human nature and the shaping of human relations. 1986 saw the publication of his another important work *The Rise of Urbanization and the Decline of Citizenship* (reprinted as *Urbanization Without Cities* [1992] and *From Urbanization to Cities* [1995]). This publication was a lecture on libertarianism which referred to anti-capitalist, decentralisation and confederal ideas. In the 1980s his view inspired the establishment of the Green Party in Germany and other ecological groups. He was active in the U.S. ecological movement, participated in campaigns to raise awareness of the pollution of the environment in the city. In 1988, he co-created Left Green Network. In the 1990s he resigned from active political involvement and focused on publication of his works. He co-created the newspaper "Green Perspectives" (later renamed "Left Green Perspectives"). In 1990, he published *The Philosophy of Social Ecology* (reprinted in 1994). In the book *Re-enchanting Humanity: A Defense of the Human Spirit Against Anti-humanism, Misanthropy, Mysticism, and Primitivism* (1996) he criticised postmodernism. In that period, he started to criticise anarchism, and did so more explicitly in *Social Anarchism or Lifestyle Anarchism: An Unbridgeable Chasm* (1995), where he expressed antagonism towards individualistic anarchism in favour of communitarianism. Between 1993 and 2003 he was writing an extensive work *The Third Revolution* describing revolutions in the USA, France, Russia and Spain. He died on July 30, 2006, in Burlington [Biehl, A short...].

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<sup>3</sup> It should be added that the first of the above-mentioned books came out half a year earlier than the famous book by Rachel Carson *Silent Spring* [J. Biehl, A short...], which opened the eyes of the public to the use of pesticides in the production of food and gave the impulse for the establishment of the radical ecological movement, in particular the supporters of the Deep Ecology and the Animal Liberation Front organisation.

## CRITICISM OF SOCIAL ORDER AND THE CONCEPT OF LIBERTARIAN MUNICIPALISM

Underlying M. Bookchin's historical inspirations was his fascination with the ancient Athenian democracy, Medieval and Renaissance ways of managing cities in Europe and communes of Parisian streets in the times of the French Revolution. According to J. Biehl, what fascinated him in those historic forms was political decision-making which was based on direct governance by citizens [Biehl, 2007, p. 5]. In 1972, in the article written under the pseudonym The Anarchos Group (for the newspaper "Anarchos") and entitled *Offensives and Summer Vacations*, M. Bookchin started to call for combining the methods and goals set by students', anti-war, municipal and feminist [Biehl, 2007, p. 6] social movements into one type of organisation, a new social movement organised in local and regional coalitions of confederated communes [Biehl, 2007, s. 6]. It is at that time that the fundamentals of the theory of libertarian municipalism were created to be enlarged on after 1983 [Biehl, 2007, p. 8]. It seems that this theory arose out of the desire to combine countercultural anarchism with legal democratic institutions and officially accepted politics. It is a combination of the mainstream and an anti-system philosophy, entry of anarchism into political practice, highlighting of the need for the development of society.

M. Bookchin's libertarian municipalism is a concept built on the need to redefine politics and reconcile libertarian ideas with ecological ones. This thought relies on the assertion that politics should be more ethical and bottom-up in character. For that purpose, it is necessary to create a new political culture [Bookchin, 2011, p. 28] and give the public space back to citizens [Bookchin, 1991]. The new political culture would be based on the concept of decentralisation, bottom-up democracy and emphasis put on the values vital for local communities [Bookchin, 2011, p. 28]. In his opinion, politics degraded by politicians to governing and administering the country is damaging to the country and goes beyond the fundamental aspects of human social coexistence. Such politics has to be rehabilitated through anarchism to its original meaning as a form of active citizenship [Bookchin, 1985, p. 19]. By giving the social space back to citizens M. Bookchin means resignation from the parliamentary system and republican form of government, systems that deprive citizens of the possibility of having an impact on local and regional affairs [Bookchin, 1991]. Motivation for creating a new society should not be particular interests of individual social groups, but enlightenment ideals of freedom and equality [Bookchin, 1986a]. They would be actualized by a radical movement of bottom-up municipal communities which would focus on problems of housing, pollution of the environment as well as issues of governing cities and urbanisation [Bookchin, 1991]. M. Bookchin criticised the modern parliamentary system for being too bureaucratic and facilitating the functioning of the capitalist system. He thought that the social and political spheres should be separated and the state's influence on the public should be reduced. The state is an apparatus of constraint and control of citizens' life imposed from outside, i.e. it was not created as a social body. M. Bookchin postulated return to understanding politics and democracy as a direct rule of the community of citizens in urban and rural centres. He was convinced that authentic democracy meant a desire to stop the growing strength of national states developing at the cost of local communities [Bookchin, 1991].

Underlying his criticism of the modern social order was M. Bookchin's conviction that social hierarchy was responsible for unjust relations among humans. By that he meant the rule of human over human in every aspect of life. In a broader sense, M. Bookchin described as hierarchic the unjust social relations between men and women, humans and the nature, and the state and the individual. Until we eliminate ruling in all forms, it will not be possible to create a truly equal society. Ecology is the element on which the new social order should be based, one in which no hierarchy-based relations can exist. This is a return to the equality ideas of the first human societies where all members of a human community should have the right to livelihood [Bookchin, 2009, p. 60-63].

M. Bookchin was a proponent of decentralisation of the state. He understood it as self-government independence of institutions from the state structures and global economy. He was convinced that decentralisation of the state would lead to growing civic participation in communes and the need to create confederations. For M. Bookchin the pillars of the establishment of a system based on libertarian municipalism were social ecology and participatory, anarchist communes which would be increasingly independent from the state. Communes, both urban and rural ones, should be bodies that take over the tasks assigned to the state. The new politics and society should be built through revolution understood by M. Bookchin as continuous work rather than an armed uprising. This work would involve educating society and taking up self-improvement as the way of life. "The aim of revolution has to be liberation of the every day life [...] This is because it is above all us that have to be liberated, our life, all the moments, hours, days in our lifetime and not the generalities like "history" or "state" [...]. What has to emerge from revolution is personality that will completely take over the every day life, not the every day life that will completely take over personality" [Bookchin, Anarchizm ery...]. For M. Bookchin, social changes should be carried out through implementing the so-called "green policy", which is like an ecological organism. It should start from the smallest, bottom-up and fundamental structures of the social life: neighbourhood groups, villages, cities [Bookchin, 1985, p. 21; Bookchin, 1986b]. Social participation should be stimulated in all aspects of human life to make people independent from the state and bureaucratic system [Tomasiewicz, 1998]. He thought that social gaps should not be ignored in the revolutionary process, as divisions would lead to establishment of a new hierarchy of society. A truly libertarian community and anarchist self-government would never be created through state legalization. This is because the state is an institution of hierarchic compulsion of rule. Therefore, municipal structures have to be formed bottom-up through establishment of a society that is aware of ties and group distinctiveness, capable of implementing own objectives [Bookchin, Anarchizm ery...].

M. Bookchin's libertarian municipalism is an idea of dualism in the functioning of a political system [Bookchin, 1985, p. 21 and subsequent]. Bookchin was convinced that at least for some time it was possible for the present parliamentary system and confederationism created based on libertarian municipalism to co-exist. He contrasted the confederation system with national centralised states. Unlike the revolutions we saw in the past, supporters of the confederation system as proposed by him should not be motivated by the desire to gain political power and introduce their own administrative apparatus in place of the current bureaucratic system. He thought that the experiences of the 19th and 20th centuries showed that the victory

of the revolution always led to the emergence of national states [Bookchin, 1986a]. Confederation would consist in delegating deputies from local and regional institutions (assemblies) to representative bodies.

The place where the new social order is created was in M. Bookchin's ideas a commune and city. It is there that revolution-education should take place, it is in communes that the bottom-up anti-hierarchic and anti-capitalist social movement is formed. According to him, the city in the historical sense is a natural creation of humankind. Cities created citizens who in the best case were free to make decisions concerning civic responsibility [Eiglad, 2016, p. 87]. According to M. Bookchin, modern cities, both in the past and today, are the place where human is civilised, a citizen (civitas) is born, which he understood as getting him/her involved in political activity, i.e. establishment of an ethical and rational political body. Otherwise, we would be confined to a demographic figure in urbanisation, to taxpayers, electorate, while the city – to constituency. M. Bookchin understood the term city as a self-governing community, which he contrasted with the term large urban agglomeration which has nothing to do with self-government [Bookchin, 1990, p. 182]. Libertarian municipalism assumes that communes are not merely a place where we live, but also a place of social participation, where we invest our money, build houses, create culture, want to feel safe and work honestly. The term commune as used by M. Bookchin can be understood analogously to the term society, which he himself understood in terms of “public interest” that facilitates the development of culture, morality and ecology [Bookchin, 1985, p. 12-18]. Communes should be medium-sized territorial units situated close to one another. Such units should be divided into smaller households or single buildings. As for the issue of whether one should live separately, he left it open [Bookchin, 2009, p 190].

In the 1990s M. Bookchin' anarchist views were dominated by communitarianism. By communitarianism M. Bookchin understood a theory and system of government in which autonomous local communities are loosely connected by federation [Bookchin, 2006, p. 100]. He accepted participation in elections for the lowest levels of local politics, for resolution-making bodies and executive positions, mayors and city presidents. Thanks to direct government by citizens it would be possible to achieve politics free from political elites and the rule of bureaucracy. Resolution-making bodies, councils or commune assemblies would have to undertake activities aimed at mutual help and coordination of policy. Taken over in elections by citizens who wanted to introduce the principles of communitarianism, local governing institutions would de facto operate alongside the state, though within its area, undertaking activities consistent with the libertarian idea. Directly democratic assemblies would fulfil the most important role in the political system as resolution-making bodies superior to the administration.

Despite criticism of the bureaucratic system and involvement in the anarchist movement, M. Bookchin was in favour of a minimal functioning of administration in the form of administrative councils [Bookchin, 1991]. Their members would be delegated, recalled and accountable to the assembly (commune council, neighbourhood councils). This is another element and level of the political system proposed by M. Bookchin. According to him, it was necessary to create confederal (administrative) councils, which would include local, regional, national and continental councils [Tomasiewicz, 1998]. Councils would function above people's assembly (neighbourhood, district, quarter, rural ones). They would fulfil only coordinating and administrative roles [Bookchin, 1991]. Each of them should have increasingly

smaller administrative power [Tomasiewicz, 1998]. A challenge for the communitarianism movement is institutions' opposition to the existence of double state structures, official ones and those based on libertarian municipalism principles [Bookchin, 2006, p. 102].

Introduction of libertarian municipalism would lead to abolition of private property and abolishment of nationalisation of production means. In return, he proposed self-governance of the economy, which meant that factories, workplaces and agricultural holdings would be managed by local community [Bookchin, 2006, p. 102 and subsequent]. Bookchin saw more advantage in public transportation than individual one [Bookchin, 2009, p. 190]. Local authorities should be partially self-sufficient and function according to the principles of interdependence. This means that he did not advocate the functioning of closed societies, as it increases the risk of the emergence of cultural parochialism, xenophobia, exclusiveness and chauvinism. Local self-sufficiency should be confined to production relying on local products, which as a result will be of good quality, and production based on rational consumption. This would reduce the growing impact of international capital which controls local communities and makes them economically dependent on global production. Making such changes would not be possible without cultural changes [Bookchin, 2011, p. 27-30]. Economy should rely on technological innovativeness created based on the new ethics of communitarianism. M. Bookchin was concerned with new technologies and their impact on human life. He thought that it was necessary to get humanity back in contact with the natural environment [Bookchin, 1982, p. 343]. That could be achieved using new technologies. It would be possible by separating what is social from what is technological, which can be interpreted as criticism of the loss of control over machines and a postulate of greater use of technology for the development of ecology [Bookchin, 1982, p. 240]. He called for intensive use of wind and solar energy as well as technology that was based on the latest innovations requiring minimum energy and saving work, such as computers or automatic machines [Bookchin, 2009, p. 191]. Humans are responsible for the nature, therefore, in the broader context, the economy should be adjusted to the area and environmental conditions of a given commune [Eiglad, 2016, p. 87]. Communes should unite in a confederal fashion to provide one another with necessary goods and services, according to their production capacities, which to a large extent depend on the natural environment.

#### CONCLUSION: INTERPRETATIONS AND CONTINUATION

Contemporarily, M. Bookchin's views influence the alter-globalization movement, environmental organisations such as Social Ecology Network, Left Green Network and the political party Ecology Montreal [Tomasiewicz, 1998]. Part of his views are visibly coincident with broadly understood residents' movement and the movement propagating methods for governing cities through the tools of participatory budgeting.

M. Bookchin's thought was evolving throughout his lifetime, from Marxism through anarchism to communitarianism. He was a representative of the school of leftist anarchism, which is visible in his perception of reality and Marxist dialectics, in which he referred to criticism of social and political systems in the context of class struggle. He also attached great importance to historical determinants of social relations,

in particular hierarchic ones<sup>4</sup>, and criticised capitalist and patriarchal social relations. Similarly to P. Kropotkin, he based the functioning of society on confederations and autonomous municipal, regional, national and international communities [Malinowski, 1983, p. 68].

The idea of libertarian municipalism is a variant of anarchist social order and political governance where the state is replaced by autonomous and self-governing commune associations which cooperate with one another on a confederation basis implementing the program of all citizens' participation in deciding on economic issues and realising the ideals of a society guided by the principles of social ecology. This idea is implemented according to the principles of communitarianism. It is based on pursuing the principles of pluralism, justice, solidarity, participation, inclusiveness, constructivism [Grygień, 2011, p. 23 and subsequent]. M. Bookchin assumed that society should commonly accept diversity of views. They have to be accepted unless they have a negative impact on the whole society. Consequently, he had a negative attitude to a national state and societies isolating themselves from others. A community has to accept the will to participate in the political life and guarantee access to it through enabling direct decision-making, excluding elites and authorities in politics. In M. Bookchin's views a commune is equated with the concept of society as a community. It not only has a spatial dimension (specific commune, city), but also, more importantly, a symbolic one, perceived as common acceptance of ecological and anarchist views. Of importance are relations between communities. They are shaped by principles of cooperation to achieve defined objectives, which should include, among other things, benefits of trade between communes.

M. Bookchin's libertarian municipalism is an example of combining the ideals of anarchist defiance of neoliberal capitalist society and modern national states. His views show the unfairness of the wide criticism of anarchist movement saying that anarchism does not offer specific practical solutions. In today's crisis of the conviction about the legitimacy of the road taken by the world based on neoliberalism ideals, which as recently as a few years ago was commonly accepted, M. Bookchin's views constitute a significant contribution to our exploration of other alternatives concerning the functioning of a capitalist system based on representative democracy. They are also an example of theoretical research into the functioning of modern urban agglomerations, posing questions about the legitimacy of their present shape and the roads that should be taken in the future in order to avoid the problems of overpopulation, pollution of the environment, alienation of the individual or lack of possibilities for the individual to fulfil himself/herself within the modern capitalism and democracy.

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<sup>4</sup> This distinguished him from the post-anarchist movement. See: R. Tokarczyk, *Nowa Lewica. Rodowód, ruchy, ideologia, recepcja*, Kraków 2010b, p. 207 and subsequent.



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