

The Ecology Montreal Party: A “Libertarian” Frankenstein

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Shortly before the last Canadian elections, the head of the ruling Conservatives, Brian Mulroney, resigned. Enormously unpopular, his approval rating approaching 10%, Mulroney was visibly damaging the party's already slim chances of winning the upcoming elections. Replacing Mulroney at the party helm was Kim Campbell, a one-time member of the Social Credit Party, a right-wing populist party which is now defunct except in one province.

During the elections any mention of Mulroney by the Conservatives was predictably avoided. Their campaign, though, went further. The party, incredibly, attempted to present itself as outsider, as anti-establishment. It was almost as if the party in power was running against itself.

This desperate reality-bending was ultimately more amusing than effective. The Conservatives were virtually wiped out, going from a comfortable majority to two seats. Such events, however, eloquently reflected a climate in which politicians and parties are despised as never before.

The response of the parties to what negates them — their attempt to integrate and neutralize it — is populism. Significantly, when the Conservatives were elbowed out, they were displaced on the right by the populist Reform Party, which went from three seats to fifty-two. The Party is run almost single-handedly by Preston Manning, an evangelical Christian who presents himself as an anti-politician, ostentatiously refusing a few of the perks of office, but is in fact the son of a former premier and a consummate politician.

Ross Perot, a paranoid, unvarnished authoritarian, evokes electronic town halls while running essentially a one-man show. Demonstrated by Perot is populism's ability to transcend traditional political categories and draw support from both the left and right.

In Russia, a potent nationalist-populist brew allowed a ranting buffoon, Zhirinovsky, to gobble a quarter of the parliamentary vote.

Today populism is ubiquitous, seemingly obligatory. Above all, it is a sure-fire indicator of demagoguery.

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One of the newest kids on the populist block is the libertarian municipalism-inspired Ecology Montreal Party. If "Vote for me, and the people will be in power" constitutes populism's usual refrain, libertarian municipalism's spin might be phrased: "Vote for me, and the state will eventually wither away."

Uh huh.

Montreal is a major centre of libertarian municipalism. Ecology Montreal in effect was initiated primarily by one person, Dimitri Roussopoulos, a self-described anarchist who was a candidate in the last elections, in which more than one "anarchist" ran. Ecology Montreal's members take "their inspiration from the social ecology and urban theories of Murray Bookchin," according to Phillip Chee, a party militant, and many libertarian municipalist books, including Bookchin's, emanate from Roussopoulos' Black Rose Books/*Our Generation* magazine operation. Bookchin himself was brought in to address an Ecology Montreal policy conference. An international social ecology conference with libertarian municipalism as the featured topic will take place in Montreal in 1994...

Until recently, libertarian municipalism has been primarily confined to institutes and academia. Now that it is generating actual political parties and is acquiring a history, it is useful to look at how that history is being represented by the ideology's adherents.

In its "Living in the City" special issue (Fall 93), the Murray Bookchin-influenced Toronto journal *Kick It Over* published an excerpt from a text on libertarian municipalism by Bookchin

and an article on Ecology Montreal by Phillip Chee. A one-two, the Bookchin reprint theoretically softens us up for Chee's Ecology Montreal sucker punch.

In his piece Bookchin encourages anarchists to become politicians and to run for office, and drools over "cybernetic devices," making clear his desire to mediate experience through them.

Central to libertarian municipalism is drawing a dubious distinction between the nation-state and the municipal state. Libertarian municipalism legitimizes the city-state but turns up its nose at the nation-state (although Ecology Montreal is clearly willing to coexist with it). Differences between these states, however, are far outweighed by what they have in common: the omnipresence of the money/commodity economy, the existence of politicians, the laws they impose and the cops and courts that back them up, and the reign of the technocrats necessary to run modern industrial capital. We deal with municipal cops, not the army, on a daily basis.

Chee's article about Ecology Montreal is a classic illustration of Party Thinking eclipsing autonomous thought — of the political organization imposing its own logic and imperatives. Once set in motion, a party rapidly takes on a life of its own. For the party militant people are either inside or outside the party and those on the inside, having internalized the party's imperatives, view those on the outside in a reified, manipulative way (ultimately principally as vote fodder). Thus Chee reels off the banal facts of party life, seemingly blissfully unaware of how it sounds to the unconverted, that Ecology Montreal, rather than a radical departure, is actually more akin to partyism-as-usual: choosing candidates, counting voters, setting up party structures, putting out position papers, making deals with other parties etc. *ad nauseam* — these staples of party "life" provide a structure, a bureaucratic playpen to keep the militants' hands occupied. Psychologically the militant needs to assign the party and his or her activities a key role — to be convinced, in Chee's words, that Ecology Montreal "has the potential to ignite a movement." Also key is the moral superiority which justifies the militant's leading role. For Chee, the party becomes the model of the future society; it is the very purity of the militants' lives which justifies handing them state power.

For the militant the organization becomes the beacon. Thus Ecology Montreal presents itself as an "educational organization," and puts on "educational events." Having come up empty-handed in the most recent elections, libertarian municipalists in Syracuse are presently producing and distributing a journal in order to "educate the public." This vanguard aspect is crucial to Bookchinism. In a recent issue of *Green Perspectives*, for example, editors Murray Bookchin and Janet Biehl defend an "educational" approach, and specifically advocate vanguardism, attempting to put an innocuous, cultural spin on the concept: "The word *vanguard*, we should add, does not throw us into a panic. An avant-garde teacher (or artist) is still a teacher (or artist), and there is no point in pretending otherwise." Present-day anarchists who question vanguardism are referred to with the word anarchist in quotation marks, implying that being an anarchist and questioning vanguardism is incompatible, as the duo pines after the good old days, *i.e.* the "nineteenth and early twentieth centuries," when anarchists and "their organizations" adopted a vanguardist posture. Displayed here is how much Bookchin and Biehl have in common with the foibles of the nineteenth century anarchists — their Enlightenment-based religious belief in techno-rationalism and the ideology of progress, which finds its natural culmination in Bookchin's "cybernetic devices." Also key here are specialization and division of labour: the student/teacher dichotomy and its institutionalization become the initial hierarchy on which all the others are built.

If academia-drenched, this is not simply an academic question. In the early '80s an attempt took place to put this outlook into practice with the creation of the briefly very active and now

moribund Anarchos Institute. Initiated in large part by Bookchin and Roussopoulos, the Institute epitomized their vision of a coterie of academics implementing a top-down relationship vis-a-vis non-academic anarchists initially, and, presumably, eventually a broader milieu. In Bookchinist discourse this is theorized as the “indispensable radical intelligentsia” without which “a libertarian movement” will be unable to “emerge.” This, however, was not the approach of everyone involved in the Institute. Rapidly a crisis took place, triggered off by Roussopoulos’ authoritarianism and unilateral decision-making. When the non-academics in the local Montreal group objected, they were purged by the pros in a clear instance of academic class solidarity. (If they don’t support Roussopoulos, where are they going to publish?) At a key meeting Bookchin was parachuted in to lend his authority to the purge exercise. In the resulting scandal the Institute rapidly became a ghost of its former self, as the academic rump group implemented classical sleaze techniques like refusing access to the mailing list to the non-academics so they couldn’t inform the membership about what was going on. This is just one in a long string of similar incidents involving Roussopoulos, including firing two anarchists at Black Rose Books when they attempted to collectivize the project.¹

* * *

Despite abundant talk about triggering off “participatory, face to face” activity, no examples are provided by Chee of Ecology Montreal causing anyone to do anything. On the contrary, as he acknowledges, “By far the most publicly visible activity Ecology Montreal has engaged in has been its electoral efforts.” Chee’s account is a classic case of electoralism imposing its logic and priorities. “During the election campaign,” he recounts, “the fundamental disagreements about the movement’s structure were pushed below the surface. The crux of the matter was what type of leadership the party should adopt.” And, Chee informs us, presently Ecology Montreal is “putting considerable effort into creating an electoral strategy for the 1994 elections.”

Ghee goes to considerable lengths to distance Ecology Montreal from other parties, especially the social democrats. Evoked by Roussopoulos in Chee’s piece is the term “anti-party party,” using the German Greens as a model(!). But Ecology Montreal’s main concern is clearly grabbing parliamentary power (entirely understandable from an electoral viewpoint, seeing that no Ecology Montreal candidates won in the last election). Thus the party is currently hammering out a “common platform” with “independent city councillors” and other “progressives.” This is only more of the tired leftism that has been discredited worldwide, notably, in Canada, with the arrival in power for the first time in the province of Ontario of the New Democratic Party (social democrats). Within a year the popularity of the party plummeted; few retain any illusions about “really-existing” NDPism. Ecology Montreal’s desperate attempt to elect a candidate or two also involves an infusion of traditional political horse-trading, as “Alliance 94” proceeds to “divide up the electoral map so as not to run alliance candidates against each other.”

Another example of opportunist tinkering with the system is the party’s reaction to a proposal to reduce the number of politicians from the current 51. Instead, Ecology Montreal proposed that “Montreal adopt a partial system of proportional representation. Thirty-one seats would remain single member constituencies with election by direct majority, and 20 seats to be distributed among representatives of the municipalities proportionally to the percentage of

¹I was not a member of the Anarchos Institute, but followed events closely. Documents about the Institute and the Black Rose firings are available by writing to: Michael, C.P. 1554 Succ. B, Montreal, Quebec, Canada H3B 3L2.

the popular vote gained by each party to the city as a whole.” Demonstrated here is that despite obligatory complaints about “impersonal bureaucracies and professional politicians,” Chee *really believes* in representational democracy — that politicians are legitimate, that parties represent people, that people can be represented by politicians. Thus Ecology Montreal’s pathetic solution becomes sprinkling in a few councillors from presently marginalized parties, or otherwise slightly shifting the final party tallies. These token councillors of course would probably be powerless. Disappeared here is that its totalitarian nature is what most defines representative democracy: even when most people don’t vote (often the case), politicians get in, backed by the entire state/police apparatus.

Another bureaucratic horror story, to go by Chee’s account, has been Ecology Montreal’s internal functioning, including factions exiting the party, periods where people weren’t talking to each other, and a tendency for power to accumulate in a coordinating committee. At one point, for example, a coordinating committee had to “‘clean up’ the movement” (what movement? Ecology Montreal is a groupuscule, not a movement). In another example of centralization of power, it is also the coordinating committee which is discussing the agreement with other opposition groups not to run candidates against each other. In fact, Ecology Montreal is presently dysfunctional with respect to the structure it has set up, which invests some power in “local associations.” However “Ecology Montreal currently does not have any local associations in existence,” Chee informs us, so the ubiquitous coordinating committee is presently acting as the “principal coordinating council.” Which is hardly surprising: these municipal parties are basically empty shells which only come “alive” at election time.

An Ecology Montreal program was produced by the coordinating committee and adopted by the membership in 1992. Dense fog and rhetoric render navigating this document a perilous undertaking. Much is clarified though when we learn that the ruling MCM party “can no longer be considered an instrument for progressive change.” In other words the MCM *once was*, to use Ecology Montreal’s Old Left terminology, “progressive.” Ecology Montreal is in large part a back-to-the-roots MCM (a party in which Roussopoulos was once a militant).

Instead of abolishing money, Ecology Montreal intends to preserve the law of value, wage labour and the commodity economy, ensuring that people will continue to buy and sell each other as before. The party’s call for full employment makes it clear that they wish to retain high levels of production, and talk of “hiring and promotion practices” underlines that bosses and hierarchy will endure.

Ecology Montreal’s call for “the application of a user-pay system on all highways” typifies the Band-aid solutions to be expected on an ecological level. Thus the party is reduced to grumbling about the “excessive use of the automobile,” and vaguely wants to “reduce pollution from industrial sources.” These people obviously intend to keep the techno-grid fundamentally intact.

Also of note is a section on non-violence. Here we learn that Ecology Montreal is “simply opposed to the use of force.” They certainly don’t want non-pacifist hordes of uncontrollables dislodging *their* politicians. The document explicitly rules out going on the offensive against the cops (e.g. riots), and advocates a “weapons-free zone,” disarming people against fascists and Stalinists, who are hardly in the habit of beating swords into plowshares.

Concerning elected candidates, the Party’s approach is democratic centralism. Once arrived at, in other words, the party line must be toed. “Defending and promoting the programme and strategy” is obligatory, the party statutes outline, and “the final decision of Ecology Montreal on any matter must be accepted.” Mindless obedience is of course the very definition of the party

hack.

Lumping libertarian municipalism in with other strains of populism will elicit objections from some, no doubt. After all, Bookchin and Chee often *sound* anti-authoritarian, even anti-statist. However, implementing change top-down through the state is clearly not anti-statist: it's leftism. Roussopoulos' idiotic position papers which hope "to unite the left" demonstrate that, despite the anarcho-rhetoric, he's just a leftist. Libertarian municipalism is a form of left populism because instead of locating all legitimacy in autonomous activity, it posits political parties which claim to *represent* widespread disgust with "impersonal bureaucracies and professional politicians" (in Chee's words). People, however, can only represent themselves; the party has no role to play. The role of the party in other words is to immediately abolish itself.

Ecology Montreal wishes to recuperate our disgust and to channel it towards electoralism, the reformist Ecology Montreal racket, and leftism — "... so unpopular is the MCM that the 1994 election may reflect enormous political ferment, according to Phillip Chee," we learn for example in *Green Perspectives*. At the same time Chee fears that Ecology Montreal "will fall on the deaf ears of a people fed up and increasingly cynical of the current political system" — in other words that his gang will get the boot along with the rest. Cynicism is corrosive and a double-edged sword to be sure but it is also an antidote to false hopes. Unfortunately there are always new parties popping up, propping up a more and more discredited system. With enough negativity, however, there might just be a qualitative leap...

* * *

Ecology Montreal, Chee, and Bookchin also exalt "the citizen," a term which, like "the proletariat" of yore, becomes the defining role — *the* role we are all expected to play. Max Stirner notes this term's relation to the (anti-monarchist) bourgeois revolution, whereby everyone is "raised or lowered to the dignity of the *citizen*: (...) the *third* estate becomes the sole estate, namely, the estate of — *citizens of the state*." Or, in Ecology Montreal's words, citizens "must be aware of their duties and rights as citizens." As Stirner notes, "... few qualms are felt about changing existing laws. But who would dare sin against the *idea* of the State, or refuse to submit to the *idea* of law. So people remain 'law-respecting' loyal 'citizens.'" Libertarian municipalism proposes to decentralize the state, to create a profusion of mini-states. Thus "neighbourhood councils should be empowered to enact laws," according to Ecology Montreal. With laws of course come the cops to back them up (green-uniformed, no doubt). Hardly surprisingly the police question propels Ecology Montreal to new heights of Orwellian obfuscation: in Ecology Montreal-speak, the police become yet another brand of *coordinator* — they "coordinate ... efforts to enhance and protect public safety." How sweet.

Instead of using the ever-changing desires of unique individuals as a starting point, Chee imposes a pre-fab, abstract, all-purpose councilism. "Mandated and recallable delegates" become the theoretical antidote to bureaucratization. But as John Zerzan notes, "delegates and recall have always been, in practice, direct routes to bureaucratization and the rule of experts (consult all trade union history)." In an industrial economy these so-called mandated and recallable delegates become mouthpieces of the desires of the megamachine, which are relayed back to the base *as necessities*.

Ecology Montreal's role is to legitimize the present municipal state through their participation and to legitimize the cybernetic state to come. Ecology Montreal wants us to internalize

— to self-manage — the state. With our resistance to it weakened, authority will circulate more freely through the pyramid of power. As opposed to a Japanese-style implanted technobureaucracy, Ecology Montreal proposes a more participatory self-alienation where we choose our technocrats more directly (if we vote for them, they must be ours). Integral to this approach are the “cybernetic devices,” “mass technology” and “sophisticated technology” marketed in Bookchinism. I have already discussed this aspect in a previous article in *Anarchy* in a passage which began with a quote from Bookchin:

“I believe that science and technology should be used in the service of refurbishing and rehabilitating a new balance with nature.”

But Bookchin’s vision of a high-tech apparatus passively “in the service” of humanity — a discourse he shares with all the technocrats — denies the qualitative leap, the autonomization of technology which occurs with the implementation of mass techniques in the metropolis. Later, Bookchin backhandedly acknowledges this autonomization, when the underlying technor determinism of his discourse makes “sophisticated technology” a universal given: “...the very things we are using presuppose a great deal of sophisticated technology. Let’s face the fact that we need these technologies.” Rather than presupposing a great deal of sophisticated technology, isn’t it more appropriate to question “the very things we are using”? When Bookchin says “we need” these technologies, he is speaking only for himself.

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Not surprisingly, anti-civilizationists are the object of particular scorn in the Bookchin organ *Green Perspectives*, where “anarcho-primitivism” is termed a “pathology.” That civilization thinks it needs to cure us is par for the course. It is more and more obvious, though, that it is civilization which is the problem.

* * *

Once parties and the municipal state are swallowed, accepting the nation-state is only a short theoretical step away, as demonstrated by anarcho-nationalist Serge Roy’s call for Quebec separatism in the Bookchin-oriented Quebec City journal *Hors d’Ordre*.

Meanwhile, Bookchinism continues to spread. The most recent issue of *Green Perspectives* lists works by Bookchin translated into Norwegian, Dutch, German, Greek, Italian, Japanese, Portuguese, Spanish and Turkish. This interest in effect is hardly surprising. Apart from its academic appeal, Bookchinism can be very attractive to a wide variety of middle-of-the-road anarchists who are searching for simplistic, seemingly squeaky-clean solutions.

This essay is not intended as an over-all critique of Bookchinism, which hopefully someone will undertake. In the meantime, John Zerzan’s brief but pointed review of Bookchin’s *The Rise of Urbanization and the Decline of Citizenship* remains the most incisive critique to date.²

Update

On February 24, Alliance ’94 made its first public appearance in the form of a forum on the role of the opposition at City Hall. The event was a complete flop; as many journalists showed up

² Appeared in *Anarchy*, *Demolition Derby* and *Interrogations Pour La Communauté Humaine*.

as members of the public. Four Alliance hacks gave pep talks, followed by a discussion/question period. It quickly became apparent that yet another coordinating committee was running the show; people could offer comments but had no real input in decision-making. One person called for a debate about what is apparently a major feature of the Alliance — running a candidate for mayor. Roussopoulos immediately squelched the idea of a debate. Running a mayoral candidate was the “center,” the “heart” of the Alliance, he enthused, waxing lyrical, a necessary “symbol of unity.” Besides, the question had already been dealt with by the coordinating committee.

Much hand-wringing took place over the fact that there was no chance that anything approaching 50% of the electorate would vote. Figures were tossed around as to what would be a reasonable Alliance tally. Marcel Sevigny, a leftist councillor, said that winning six or seven seats could be counted a success.

The evening was co-chaired by Bernard Bourbonnais, who also gave a talk as the Ecology Montreal rep. At one point he excused himself after making a clumsy statement, joking that he “wasn’t enough of a politician yet.” Not to worry, chump, you’re learning fast. Also at the presiding table were three people from the *Our Generation*, crowd. In effect the Alliance apparently consists of Ecology Montreal, two leftist councillors and a handful of academics and hangers on. The few people who showed up to check out the event seemed primarily wary. One man who had been sent an invitation complained bitterly about being confronted with a “*fait accompli*” concerning process and decision-making. “The community isn’t here,” another man noted, injecting a refreshing breath of reality into this stale, tedious non-event.

April 19 Update

Alliance ’94 has now collapsed. Ecology Montreal and the DCM (a small leftist party) are presently courting each other with an eye to stitching together a “federation” for the election campaign. “Our hope is to form a federation, meaning there would be a single party, but membership in the party would be limited to associations [Ecology Montreal and the DCM],” Ecology Montreal spokesperson Andrea Levy is quoted as saying in *Hour*, a local cultural/news-weekly.

“There is considerable interest and enthusiasm on both sides at this point,” chirped DCM leader Sam Boskey. O the mating rituals of marginalized leftist groupuscles!

Meanwhile, the international social ecology conference on libertarian municipalism will take place on May 7 and 8. Bookchin will be the predictable featured speaker and Andrea Levy will give a talk as the Ecology Montreal rep. Some local anti-authoritarians are contemplating showing up to protest the libertarian municipalism racket and to distribute this text.

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