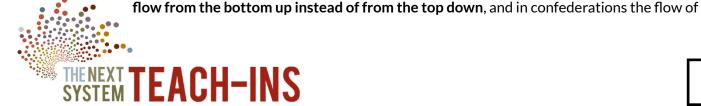# MURRAY BOOKCHIN, COMMUNALISM, AND ROJAVA
# BY THOMAS HANNA

The late Murray Bookchin was a lifelong American social revolutionary who had been, at various stages in his long life, a Stalinist, a Trotskyist, and anarchist. Beginning in the 1950s, he realized that while capitalism had many flaws, the fatal one was, in the words of his friend and colleague Janet Biehl, "the fact that it was in conflict with the natural environment, destructive both of nature and of human health…**The crisis of capitalism, then, would result not from the exploitation of the working class but from the intolerable dehumanization of people and the destruction of nature**."[1]

Over the subsequent decades Bookchin developed a model of political economic decentralization that he came to call libertarian municipalism and then communalism.  "We must create an ecological society…" he wrote in *Toward an Ecological Society*. "We must begin to decentralize our cities and establish entirely new **ecocommunities** that are artistically molded to the ecosystems in which they are located."[2] Bookchin believed that **ultimately nation-states would need to be dissolved and power devolved to local democratic assemblies**. In 2001 he stated that: "The overriding problem is to change the structure of society so that people gain power. The best arena to do that is the municipality — the city, town, and village — where we have an opportunity to create a face-to-face democracy."[3] Economically, Bookchin **rejected both nationalization** (in terms of ownership by a central state) **and worker-ownership** (which he called collectivistic capitalism) **in favor of "municipalization**."[4] "Libertarian municipalism," he wrote, "proposes that land and enterprises be placed increasingly in the custody of the community⬚ more precisely, the custody of citizens in free assemblies and their deputies in confederal councils."[5]

What distinguishes Bookchin and his model from many anarchist and communalist models of the past and present is that it **intentionally focused on achieving structural and political power**. "Marxists, revolutionary syndicalists, and authentic anarchists," he maintained, "all have a fallacious understanding of *politics*, which should be conceived as the civic arena and the institutions by which people democratically and directly manage their community affairs… politics, almost by definition, *is* the active engagement of free citizens in the handling their municipal affairs and in their defense of its freedom."[6] Importantly, Bookchin also directly confronted issues of scale or coordination problems between communities. Bookchin described a system whereby "a network of councils whose members or delegates are elected from popular face-to-face democratic assemblies, in the various villages, towns, and even neighborhoods of large cities. These confederal councils would become the means for interlinking villages, towns, neighborhoods, and cities into confederal networks. **Power thus would flow from the bottom up instead of from the top down**, and in confederations the flow of

power from the bottom up would diminish with the scope of the federal council, ranging territorially from localities to regions and from regions to ever-broader territorial areas."[7] "*Policy,*" Bookchin wrote, "is made by a community or neighbourhood assembly of free citizens; *administration* is performed by confederal councils composed of mandated, recallable deputies of wards, towns, and villages."[8]

## IN PRACTICE

While Bookchin's model has yet to be seriously experimented with in the United States, it is today being explicitly put into practice in Kurdish areas of southern Turkey and northern Syria. Following his abduction from Kenya and imprisonment in Turkey, the Kurdish leader Abdullah Öcalan began to study the work of Bookchin and various other scholars and groups (including the Zapatistas in Mexico) as part of his process of moving away from traditional Marxist-Leninism. He began recommending Bookchin's books to Kurdish mayors and PKK fighters (Kurdistan Workers' Party) who had long been struggling against intense oppression by the Turkish state.[9] Öcalan also reached out to Bookchin in an attempt to engage in a dialogue around these issues but, unfortunately, Bookchin was too sick. Upon his death a few years later at the age of 85, the PKK assembly called him as "one of the greatest social scientists of the 20th century." "His contributions to our leader's thesis on social ecology will always be remembered," the statement continued. "To attain the democratic socialism that we envisage, his contributions to the ideas of "confederalism", his thesis on the state, power and hierarchy will be implemented and realized through our struggle and hence will continue to make its impact. We undertake to make Bookchin live in our struggle. We will put this promise into practice this as the first society which establishes a tangible democratic confederalism."[10]

While differing on certain issues, Öcalan's "Democratic Confederalism" model draws on Bookchin's work in several ways. "In contrast to a centralist and bureaucratic understanding of administration and exercise of power," Öcalan writes, "confederalism poses a type of political self-administration where all groups of the society and all cultural identities can express themselves in local meetings, general conventions and councils. This understanding of democracy opens the political space to all strata of the society and **allows for the formation of different and diverse political groups**. In this way it also advances the political integration of the society as a whole. **Politics becomes a part of everyday life**."[11] Öcalan's model envisions democratic confederations that scale up and cross traditional borders and territories. In an echo of Bookchin's conception of "dual power," while **these confederations would be able to function within existing nation-states in the short term, they would resist assimilation and, in time, overcome nation-state**s.

In Rojava, the Kurdish areas of north-west Syria, the bloody civil war and collapse of the Assad regime has led to on-the-ground implementation of Bookchin's and Öcalan's ideas. A **system**

**of autonomous self-government has been set up** whereby communes send delegates to neighborhood councils, which send delegates to district councils, which send delegates to city councils, which send delegates to the canton level. For instance, in the city of Qamişlo there are 18 communes (each representing 300 people) in each of 6 districts. Each commune elects two people to represent them at the district level. The district councils then elect two people to represent them at the city level. All the cities and towns in the canton (in this case Cizîre) then sent delegates to the canton-level people's council based on their population.[12] Reflecting on Öcalan's specific focus on women's liberation, councils at every level have a **40 percent gender quota** and there are separate self-organized women's councils "We believe that the state system equals the systematic destruction of women, and that democratic autonomy equals the liberation of women," Abdulkerim Omar and Çınar Salih of Tev-dem, the Movement for a Democratic Society, told an academic delegation to Qamişlo in late 2014. "That's why our Rojava revolution is a revolution of women. In Rojava there is no area of life in which women don't take an active part."[13]

Farms, including those abandoned by the Syrian state, have been turned into **agricultural cooperatives**. In this sector there are now 12 general cooperatives and 6 independent women's cooperatives that together have planted 328,270 acres of farmland. Other cooperatives include union co-ops, livestock co-ops, factory cleaning co-ops, electric cable co-ops, a fuel station co-op, a real estate construction co-op, and more.[14] Oil refineries have been put under control of local councils and are **self-managed by workers' committees**. Doctors have formed committees and are moving towards creating a **free health care system**. "Our economic project is the same as our political project," Abdurrahman Hemo, adviser for economic development in Cizîre Canton, Dêrîk stated in late 2014. "We call it 'social economy,' and all parts of society participate. It's cooperative. We have started to build cooperatives in all different sectors: we have trade cooperatives, company cooperatives, construction cooperatives. The organizational model for our economy is the cooperative. Our aim is to be self-sufficient. If there is just bread, then we will all have a share."[15]   Despite these advances the economy remains relatively weak due to years of intentional disinvestment by the Syrian state, a brutal war against Islamic extremists that requires vast spending on weapons and provisions for the YPG/YPJ (the People's Protection Units and the Women's Protection Units respectively), and an economic embargo led by the Turkish state (which has recently returned to outright war against the PKK and Turkish Kurds).[16]

# ENDNOTES

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