

The Modern Crisis

Murray Bookchin. Oakland, CA: AK Press, 2022. 196 pp. \$16.00 paper (ISBN 9781849354462), \$8.00 electronic (ISBN 9781849354479)

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The Modern Crisis

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A Republishing Endeavor¹

The latest edition of *The Modern Crisis*, published in 2022, is part of an ongoing effort to amplify the work of Murray Bookchin, the founder of social ecology and the political project of communalism. Interest has revived in recent years due to Bookchin's influence on two important contemporary political phenomena: The first is grassroots initiatives by new municipalist movements in North America and Europe that draw on his work to bring social change and democratically transform local economies and institutions (Thompson 2021), and the second is the creation in the last decade of the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES), a self-managed region in the Syrian state deeply influenced by Bookchin's social ecology and communalism (Hunt 2021). Since the early 2000s, Bookchin's works have deeply influenced the sociopolitical organization of the Kurdish Freedom Movement through its leader, Abdullah Öcalan, who developed a political project called Democratic Confederalism.

Two books have been published posthumously, *Social Ecology and Communalism* (2006) and *The Next Revolution: Popular Assemblies and the Promise of Direct Democracy* (2015), alongside more recent reprints of key texts, including *Remaking Society: A New Ecological Politics* (2023), *The Philosophy of Social Ecology: Essays on Dialectical Naturalism* (2022), and *From Urbanization to Cities: The Politics of Democratic Municipalism* (2021), which have been published by AK Press under the guidance of Murray's daughter, Debbie Bookchin. Debbie Bookchin has made it her life's mission to spread her father's ideas. This has broadly centered on keeping up with



the demand for Bookchin's texts because few copies remain from previous printings (often from relatively small publishing houses). She has also involved herself with various social movements including the municipalist Fearless Cities Network and the Kurdish Freedom Movement.

The first edition of *The Modern Crisis* was published in 1986 and later expanded for a second edition in 1987. In this new version, under Debbie Bookchin's leadership, there is a new foreword by Andy Price,² a close friend and scholar of Bookchin, and six essays. "What Is Social Ecology?" is one particularly crucial text, often used as a stand-alone introductory text to social ecology. "Market Economy or Moral Economy?" also stands out as one of the few instances where Bookchin goes into detail on the subject of a democratic economy.

Beyond Modern Crisis for Social Change Call

In *The Modern Crisis*, Bookchin emphasizes the need to abandon the benefit-versus-risk mentality that permeates the Left's thinking, pushing them to continually opt for "the lesser evil." He also dismantles the idea that self-interest is inherently human, a concept deeply ingrained in our society. He argues that we need to think organically about the possibilities of a different world based on participation and differentiation. From this need is born *social ecology*, a theory and a call for action, starting from the point that "nearly all of our present ecological problems originate in deep-seated social problems" (p. 35). Nature is not static, however, but a developmental process in which humans have the unique characteristic of constituting both biotic nature and social nature.

For Bookchin, social justice is essential to solving today's ecological crisis. In the natural world, no concept of domination exists. Yet, in human society hierarchies started to develop from gerontocracy and later patriarchy. This is what Price (2023) called the *motor of social ecology*. The institutionalization of hierarchies throughout history was caused not by the creation of surplus (as the Marxist tradition would argue) but because of the presence of coercion and privileges originating in social domination.

From this perspective, class exploitation is part of wider forms of domination within society. Today's economy is deeply immoral, yet market-inspired values now pervade each aspect of our life, leading to alienation and misery. Rather than relying on a grow-or-die economic imperative, according to Bookchin, we need to build a moral economy that fulfills the needs of all communities and heals our relationship with nature. To bring about social change, it is helpful to "turn economics into culture rather than to visualize it as the 'circulation' of things" (p. 70). Doing so, Bookchin highlights the limitations of socialism and syndicalism in ascribing a revolutionary significance to the proletariat. Rather than inciting revolutionary consciousness, he argues that deteriorating economic conditions cultivate calls for reforms within the capitalist system, which lead to resignation and submissive attempts to conform to societal vocational demands (p. 101). In essence, the dispossessed and all oppressed individuals should collectively embody the concept of "the People" as a revolutionary subject.

In this effort, Bookchin emphasizes the importance of a discerning perspective that considers society, politics, and statecraft as separate realms, despite their frequent conflation. In the past, the proletariat was seen as the revolutionary force, but this belief has been proven incorrect, as market values have permeated social and cultural domains. Drawing inspiration from the ancient Greek concept of the polis, Bookchin advocates instead that we direct our efforts toward the local community, both as a political strategy and an ultimate objective, so that all citizens actively participate in its governance. It is crucial to remember that any city, regardless of its size, has the potential for political decentralization. Through his philosophy of communalism, Bookchin proposes the formation of a confederation of communes, modeled on the recallable delegated system seen in the Zapatista Autonomous Municipalities, extending the scope beyond the local level.

In his concluding remarks, Bookchin acknowledges the terrifying possibility of mutual nuclear destruction, a fear that has resurfaced with the recent Russian invasion of Ukraine. Additionally, he addresses the destruction of nature in a world that has internalized hierarchies and domination. The book concludes with an impassioned appeal to construct a society that is both free and ecological, rooted in decentralized decision-making processes based on eco-technology tailored to the needs of each community.

Why Geographers Should Read This Text

This volume is of interest to geographers for multiple reasons. It serves as a valuable resource for individuals interested in exploring the origins of social ecology as a cohesive body of work and its availability on the market facilitates the study of the evolution of Bookchin's ideas over time. As Price notes in the foreword, "While offering a devastating critique of humanity's crisis, Bookchin simultaneously insists on and celebrates the fact that humanity has the

tools and capability to rescue itself from that crisis" (p. xv). *The Modern Crisis* showcases a thinker who was ahead of his time, vividly illustrating that the roots of today's crises, as well as those of the past, lie in various forms of domination.

More important, *The Modern Crisis* retains its relevance because the crises of our modern world persist. Despite being written during the Cold War era and occasionally referencing outdated debates, the core themes and reasoning presented in the text withstand the test of time. Unfortunately, many of the pressing issues highlighted within the book remain unaddressed, necessitating our urgent search for solutions. We are pushing our planet beyond its limits, and a climate catastrophe resulting from human intervention looms ominously. Yes, human societies have indeed contributed to the mess we find ourselves in, but they might also possess the tools and ethical framework necessary to navigate a way out of it. As we delve into the root causes and develop potential solutions, it is imperative for every critical geographer to be acquainted with this book.

Notes

1. I would like to thank Neha Arora, Debbie Hopkins, and Eleanor Finley for their comments and suggestions on early versions of this text.
2. My mentor and comrade, Andy, passed away at the end of December 2022. His legacy will live on through the new edition of his book *Recovering Bookchin: Social Ecology and the Crises of Our Time*, which was released in April 2023 by AK Press.

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