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2.5 Federico Venturini

Social Ecology and the non-Western World

Murray Bookchin was the founder of the social ecology, a philosophical perspective whose political project is called libertarian municipalism or Communalism. Recently there has been a revival of interest in this project, due to its influence on the socio-political organization in Rojava, a Kurdish self-managed region in the Syrian state. This should not be a surprise because Bookchin's works influenced Abdul Öcalan for a more than a decade, a key Kurdish leader who developed a political project called Democratic Confederalism. We should all welcome this renewed interest in social ecology and take lessons from the Rojava experience. Bookchin's analyses have always been more focussed on North-American or European experiences and so libertarian municipalism draws from these traditions. Moreover, Bookchin, who was writing in a Cold war scenario, was suspicious of the limits of national movements struggling for independence. The aim of this paper is to develop and enlarge Bookchin's analysis, including experiences and traditions from different cultures and movements, and their interrelations on a global scale. First, it explores social ecology perspective in non-Western contexts. Second, it will introduce new tools to deal with inter-national relations based on world system theory. Third, it will suggest that new experiences coming from non-Western regions can strength social ecology understanding and practices.

1.

On one side the fall of the Soviet Union and the shift of the People's Republic of China to unrestrained capitalism, have shown the limits and faults of authoritarian Marxist projects. On the other, the dramatic Global Financial Crisis in 2008 and the environmental crisis have shown also the limits of the current dominant system. However, the Left (with the few exceptions, particularly in Latin American countries) seems unable to express new alternatives and credible projects to neoliberal economies and bourgeois democracy. It is crucial for anti-capitalist movements to reach people and whole societies with alternative solutions that offer, not only strategies to overthrow the actual system, but sketch possible solutions on how to structure a future, social, equitable and ecological society. Recently Harvey (2012) has affirmed that “Bookchin's proposal is by far the most sophisticated radical proposal to deal with the creation and collective use of the commons across a variety of scales, and is well worth elaborating as part of the radical anti-capitalist agenda” (85). In my view the power of social ecology goes beyond a proposal to deal with the commons. Permeated by dialectical naturalism, it clearly challenges the current capitalistic system and all forms of oppression including racism, ethno-centrism, and patriarchy. Moreover, social ecology offers a reconstructive and revolutionary vision for an ecological post-scarcity society. Social ecology considers current societal

struggles that surface in both urban and rural contexts, while also addressing central questions of nature, science, and technology that arise in these contexts. What is more, social ecology suggests how to construct a new society, promoting pre-figurative political organizing strategies that include affinity groups, the formation of directly-democratic social movements, as well as educational and political projects that include Communalism or Libertarian Municipalism. Moreover, social ecology provides an ethic of complementarity that lays at the foundation of struggles to promote sex/gender liberation, horizontalism, egalitarianism, mutual aid, self-determination, and decentralization. This is the power of social ecology: it offers a coherent theory that, while critiquing current social and ecological crises, provides a reconstructive vision as well as the tools to achieve a free and ecological society.

This powerful theory, which has been influencing the European and American ecological movements for decades, has, however, a limited application in non-Western contexts; as Bookchin himself recognised: "I am more knowledgeable about this country [USA] than I am about other parts of the world" (Biehl 1998, 151). Despite some fervent critiques that blame this attitude of "disconnected from the realities of contemporary global society, and based on a highly Eurocentric theoretical problematic [...] with no references to places such as Kolkata, Beijing, Jakarta, Rio, Nairobi, or indeed, any of the great Third World Megalopolises" (Clark 2013: 17), Bookchin's approach is fully understandable and we cannot blame him for that. However, I believe that it is now our duty to develop and enlarge his analysis, including the analysis of single movements, and their interrelations on a global scale.

2.

As I stressed in the previous sections, in their analysis Bookchin and other social ecologists remained and remain, unfortunately, concentrated on European or USA experiences and points of view, denying an opening to a global scale that is currently recognised to be the real scale of the struggle. If we want to develop a meaningful explanation of these struggles, a worldwide viewpoint is necessary, as well as a surpassing of a Western-centred mind-set.

I recognise the power of social ecology as a tool for social change but also as an instrument to understand the current social-environmental crises and to identify the key areas in which to intervene, proposing valid alternatives. Key concepts of social ecology like community, citification/urbanization, urban sprawl, use of resources and technology, relations with institutions, role of the city planners and so on, can be fundamental to understanding the global features of capitalism. I recognise that we can reinvigorate these aspects by introducing new points of view: dealing with experiences from the semi-periphery can help to develop a more organic social ecology view that, so far, has been mainly based on the analyses of cities from the core. Moreover, a more articulated analysis of the experiences of periphery and semi-periphery countries is needed, especially considering the forms of oppression of neo-colonialism (Njrumah 1965):

"the essence of neo-colonialism is that the State which is subject to it is, in theory, independent and has all the outward trappings of international sovereignty. In reality its economic system and thus its political policy is directed from outside." (ix)

In a globalised world, these dependency relations between nations are maintained with different methods among which military occupation is still a possibility but less likely to be used. The new main way of

controlling a foreign nation is through economic/monetary power:

“The result of neo-colonialism is that foreign capital is used for the exploitation rather than for the development of the less developed parts of the world. Investment under neo-colonialism increases rather than decreases the gap between the rich and the poor countries of the world” (x).

The main aim of this new, indirect power relation is the continuity and enhancement of the control of sources of raw materials and the production of manufactured goods.

It is evident how these forces act on a global scale and that it is fundamental to account for them, despite Bookchin's decision of concentrating his work on revolution mainly in Europe and North America because modern revolutions in other parts of the world “tended to be deeply self-oriented, and their ideological impact upon the world has been very limited” (Bookchin 1996: 17) and “their ideologies lingered on mainly as echoes of the older European revolution” (Bookchin 1996: 18). The importance of any anti-colonial struggles or other forms of struggles in non-core countries is severely downplayed, while they are, in reality, demonstrating a special vitality in fighting against various forms of domination. For example, the Brazilian scholar Cavalcanti (2010) points out that: “the main criticism to Bookchin could be, from our point of view, the little attention that he devoted to problems of social ecology in Third World countries” (15). In this context the position of Ramnath (2011) that highlights the importance of decolonizing knowledge in revolutionary struggles is relevant. In order to do so, it is important to avoid certain shortcomings in dividing the countries into First and Third World, Developed-Developing, Global North-South, etc.. Terms like Core, Semi-Periphery and Periphery countries, introduced by Wallerstein (1984) in his World-System Theory, can enrich the explanation of the complicated power-economic relations between countries. Moreover, if social ecology aims at challenging all forms of domination, it needs to address the relationship between the periphery and semi-periphery, considering neo-colonialism as a form of domination based on the indirect control and forced dependency of the economy and culture of a country.

3.

The only case in which Bookchin directly influenced a movement and a revolutionary project outside the core has been in the Kurdish context. In this case, indeed, it is clear how the political program of Öcalan has been shaped around the concepts of confederalism presented in Communalism (Akkaya & Jongerden 2012).

There is a direct line between the elaborations of the founder of social ecology and Öcalan, built on an intense exchange of ideas, whose history has been described and analysed by Biehl (2012).

This evidence needs, however, a deeper confirmation, in a body of literature that surely suffers from the context in which it has been developed: Öcalan is writing from prison, with a major aim of defending his legal case and finding a political solution for the Kurdish question, with limited access to books and visits (Öcalan 2007). One of the major concerns is to “map a solution that [...] fits the situation of the Middle East better” (Öcalan 2011: 8), and the PKK struggle is for a general revolution in Turkey, beyond the single Kurdish question (Jongerden & Akkaya 2012).

In any case, today's events, show the power of this intervention and of social ecological influence. The experience of the Rojava cantons, since 2013, are a live example of concepts of democratic confederalism

put into practice, experiencing large autonomy in the communities, communal economy and emancipation of women.

The adaptation of social ecology principles to local scale and to local needs it is the crucial key for the expansion and sprawl of this idea. This can be learned from the Kurdish case as well as from the Zapatistas experience, another example of autonomous government in practice today outside the capitalist domain (Stanchev 2015).

Learning from these experiences and using them to reflect on and enhance social ecological thought, will permit us to maintain it as a dynamic philosophy, avoiding the danger of ossified theorization, as Bookchin himself recognises: "Utopian dialogue in all its existentiality must infuse the abstractions of social theory. My concern is not with utopistic "blueprints" (which can rigidify thinking as surely as more recent governmental "plans") but with the dialogue itself as a public event" (Bookchin 1982: 334).

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Biographical Information

Federico Venturini is a PhD student of geography in Leeds. He holds a master degree in Philosophy and one in History and European Culture. He researches the relations between modern cities and urban social movements, using Social Ecology as research framework. He is working with social movements in Rio de Janeiro with participatory/militant methodology. He is a member on the of the Transnational Institute of Social Ecology (TRISE).