Rethinking Social Transformation

Institute for Social Ecology Online Seminar

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This seminar explores the challenges and possibilities of linking emancipatory vision to practical political engagement today. It brings Murray Bookchin's theory of social ecology into conversation with the ideas of Rosa Luxemburg, Antonio Gramsci, Karl Marx, and David Harvey. The aim is to use this dialogue to develop communalist politics by going beyond false choices between reform or revolution, instead exploring the possibilities and challenges for social transformation in our present historical moment. Together we will examine key topics including dialectical versus conventional thinking, participatory/direct democracy, agency and historical change, utopian thinking, and practical political engagement.

The course format is a participatory seminar comprised of five sessions. Each session begins with a short introduction of the texts and central issues by the instructor, followed by facilitated discussions among participants. The aim is to develop new questions about common problems or dilemmas rather than provide simple and closed answers. Texts are available for download via the Haiku course portal. There are no grades or written assignments for the course; all participants receive a certificate of course completion.

Course Overview

The first session sets the groundwork through a discussion of dialectical thinking as an alternative to static forms of conventional reason. We think about how change occurs in terms of the fulfillment of latent potentialities, and as a form of development that overcomes the limits of a previous mode of existence. We will discuss Hegel, Bookchin, and Ernst Bloch's ideas on the difference between dialectical thinking and conventional reason.

This discussion is given more practical relevance in the second session, when we bring dialectical thinking to bear on the topic of history and historical change. We will discuss the transformation between historical periods, focusing on how potentialities within one conjuncture are nurtured, mature, and eventually actualized in the birth of a new social order. This discussion is informed by selected readings by Marx, Bookchin, and Karl Polanyi.

The third session will apply this dialectical analysis of historical development to our contemporary context by considering capitalism as a conflicted and contradictory form of society. This will involve reflecting on the progress of human struggles for emancipation, unfulfilled potentialities in the present, and the limitations that constrain such developments. We will address Bookchin's ideas of democracy and statecraft, freedom and unfreedom, universalism and particularism, among other topics. We will engage with Gramsci's idea of hegemony to consider how such contradictions are held together, and Poulantzas' idea of 'compromise' to reflect on how one may go beyond current disequilibriums.

The fourth session centers on the questions of political strategy and agency. It will discuss the possibilities and limitations of action via selections from Rosa Luxemburg's classic essay 'Reform or Revolution?' We will examine the problems of both 'determinist' and 'voluntarist' conceptions of agency by way of Gramsci's Prison Notebooks, and imagine going beyond the utopia/pragmatism binary by interrogating Luxemburg's notion of 'revolutionary Realpolitik.' We also discuss the role of the state, comparing and contrasting Nicos Poulantzas' "democratic route to democratic socialism" with Bookchin's libertarian municipalist strategy. This will frame a broader conversation about how people become agents by nurturing certain immanent social potentialities in the contemporary context and by deepening and expanding the specific historical trajectories of struggles for democracy, ecology, and freedom.

The final session makes the discussion more concrete by considering strategy in the context of urban spaces today, of agency in terms of (universal) citizenship, and freedom in terms of expanding democratic popular self-governance. The discussion will interrogate the contemporary activist turn towards 'municipalism' through readings of Bookchin's libertarian municipalism as well as David Harvey's discussion of the right to the city.

Themes and Readings by week

Session 1: Dialectics contra conventional reason

Murray Bookchin. "Introduction: A Philosophical Naturalism", from *The Philosophy of Social Ecology*. Montreal: Black Rose Books, 1996.

Ernst Bloch, “Dialectics and Hope”, in *New German Critique*, 1976, No. 9. (PP 3-10).
Ernst Bloch. “The Dialectical Method”, in *Man and World*, 1983, No. 16. (PP 284-288)

Session 2: History as transformation

Murray Bookchin (1995), "Cities: The Unfolding of Reason in History" in *The Next Revolution* (eds. D. Bookchin & B. Taylor). 2015.

Karl Marx, *The German Ideology*, (pp 155-163) from *The Marx-Engels Reader,* Tucker (ed.) (2nd ed.) (1978).

Gareth Dale, “Double movements and pendular forces: Polanyian perspectives on the neoliberal age”. *Current Sociology* 2012, No. 60(1). (PP 5-8).

Session 3: Society and state as contested terrains

Jan Rehmann. “The Relevance of Gramsci’s Theory of Hegemony for Social Justice Movements”, in *Pedagogy of the Poor*, Baptist and Rehmann (eds). New York: Teacher’s College Press, 2011. Pages 108-123.

Murray Bookchin, “A Politics for the Twenty-First Century”, in *The Next Revolution* (eds. D. Bookchin & B. Taylor). 2015: 43-66.

Rafael Khachaturian, “Poulantzas and the Juridical Constitution of the Subject” (2017). https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/3473-poulantzas-and-the-juridical-constitution-of-the-subject

Session 4: Strategy and political conjuncture

Rosa Luxemburg. *Reform or Revolution?* (1900) https://www.marxists.org/archive/luxemburg/1900/reform-revolution/ (page selection to be announced)

Nicos Poulantzas. ”The Democratic Route to Democratic Socialism.” *The Poulantzas Reader: Marxism, Law, and the State*. Verso (2008).

Bob Jessop. “Left Strategy” in *Transform!* (2012) *http://www.transform network.net/journal/issue-102012/news/detail/Journal/left-strategy.html*

Session 5: Municipalism and the urban commons

Murray Bookchin, “Libertarian Municipalism. The Politics of Direct Democracy”, in *The Next Revolution* (eds. D. Bookchin & B. Taylor). 2015.

David Harvey, "Reclaiming the City for Anti-capitalist Struggle" in *Rebel Cities: From the Right to the City to the Urban Revolution*. Verso (2012) (PP 115-154).