

Libertarian municipalism in Europe

– Rafa Grinfeld

It was Murray Bookchin who learned me much about the causes for the ecological crisis when I was in my early twenties, in the first half of the nineties. But also later on. What will this ecological crisis bring us in the 21st century? In the long run, even those who try to buy themselves safety are certainly not one hundred percent safe on this planet without giving up on things for it. You can't just escape a global warming-related whirlwind, flood or excessive heat. And because of all the misery involved, wars or other major conflicts can easily arise. That makes it extra irrational how many rich people deal with the current polycrisis (growing authoritarianism and militarism, wars, a greater chance of zoonoses, further climate disruption and so on). This summer we see heat waves and massive forest fires popping up in Europa all of the time. These are currently affecting animals more than people, for many people but for many more animals in Europe they can lead to disasters.

What has the social ecology of Murray Bookchin and its political dimension called libertarian municipalism brought to us in the past few decades in Europe?

What is social ecology? This short text made by the Institute for social ecology in North America describes what it is:

Social Ecology advocates a reconstructive and transformative outlook on social and environmental issues, and promotes a directly democratic, confederal politics. Social Ecology envisions a moral economy that moves beyond scarcity and hierarchy, toward a world that reharmonizes human communities with the natural world, while celebrating diversity, creativity and freedom.

A bit short so I have made a text that can continue describing the ideas, it is much inspired by the way Murray Bookchin described social (or socialist) anarchism in 1998 (in the text 'The Unity of Ideals and Practice'):

Social ecologists understand that capitalism is a competitive market system in which rivalry compels bourgeois enterprises to continually grow and expand. This process of growth is absolutely inexorable, driven by the “competitive market forces” of production and consumption. Social ecologists understand that if capitalism continues to exist, it will yield catastrophic results for society and the ecological integrity of the natural world. And these features are really inherent to capitalism. So social ecologists tend to believe that if humanity is ever to attain a free and rational society, capitalism must be completely destroyed. They will rather prefer a society in which production and distribution are organized according to the maxim “From each according to ability, to each according to need”. Problems in that may arise when there is not enough access to

the existing resources of the society. Social ecologists also have a problem with the idea and the existence of the state, with its professional bureaucracy, its monopoly over the means of violence, and its inherent commitment to the interests of the bourgeoisie. Social ecologists think that the state must be replaced by a democratic political realm, one that comprises “communes” or municipalities of some kind that are in confederation with one another. They want to replace competitive market-oriented social relations with free institutions.

Other ideas, inspired by other texts of Bookchin or other social thinkers, could be added to it. The idea that there should be more about social hierarchy in these texts, or about problems we have with things like colonialism and the domination of women by men. There could also be something about technology in it and the way we think of it. What we see as good technology, or technology that can help us get rid of the ecological crisis or make it less bad. Social ecologists also tend to comprehend that, in some contexts, participating in electoral politics at the local level can be strategic in order to try to give the political power to communal popular assemblies. We could add the terms direct democracy and popular assembly to the texts (by saying that public power is exercised by the people assembled in popular assemblies, at the communal level and deciding in a form of direct democracy. We could add as well a small explanation on the concept of a confederation and how it differs from the state.

But we can see all of these ideas as quite central to the ideas of Murray Bookchin his social ecology. And they have inspired political groups and social movements in Europe during the past few decades. In the West of Europe they have inspired groups like Social Ecology London, quite active in the beginning years of this century but later on disappearing after some people moving from London to other regions in the world. They have also inspired municipalist groups in France and Spain and the anarchist movement in those countries. In the low countries in movements like the Occupy movement and later Extinction Rebellion. Or with the international RIES network, that made many people in the Belgian city Liège interested in social ecology after plans to organize a conference there about it, just before the pandemic made so many things impossible to attend or retain.

In the south of Europe in countries like Greece, where not the RIES but the quite similar TRISE network has organized a conference on social ecology several times. In the Andalusian collective Los Arenalajos, that has been practicing radical pedagogy and ecological agriculture. Or in Italy, one of those countries in Europe Murray Bookchin liked visiting. In Portugal, where there was a well attended international conference on libertarian municipalism in 1998. I also attended it. And there also were the in the south of Europe with prefiguration experimenting movements of Indignants in the year 2011. I have seen less influences of social ecology in central Europe and the east of Europe, where the Left has always had it quite hard to survive after the rise of the stalinist parasite.

In the north of Europe, where libertarian socialism has had quite some influences in the Swedish Left. Where we also had about 150 people active, many of them quite young, in an organization called Democratic Alternative. Which was a communalist organization established in Norway in 1999, and that soon became a Scandinavian organization in 2001. Later on it diminished in size and ceased to exist, but it continued to live on in various initiatives in the Nordic countries. It also participated in local elections in Oslo, in 2007. I can advise you the text 'The Oslo Election Campaign in Retrospective' written by Sveinung Legard, who made an assessment of what he and a small group of other people did in Oslo that year. Many of the ideas on what libertarian municipalism should be about go back to what Murray Bookchin thought it should be. And to what the Burlington Greens did in the second half of the eighties and during municipal elections with a 1989 platform in the North American State of Vermont.

Rafa Grinfeld, July 2026