

1968 — MEETING MURRAY

Paul McIsaac remarks, Bookchin memorial, August 30 — international seminar organized by the Network for Communalism (Germany/Switzerland)

I met Murray Bookchin in 1968.

That was the year Paris erupted into a general strike that nearly toppled a government, and its universities — Nanterre and the Sorbonne — were occupied by their own students. In New York, Columbia was occupied, and so was Berkeley; in South Carolina, police gunned down three young Black protesters at Orangeburg. In Germany, the Free University of Berlin. In Japan, Tokyo University and Nihon University were shut down by their students.

That January, the Tet Offensive shattered any illusion that the war in Vietnam was close to over, and it drove the antiwar movement into the streets — not just against the Republican establishment, but against the Democrats themselves, boiling over at their own convention in Chicago that August.

Violence was emerging everywhere in America, the whole country watching live on television. Memphis — Martin Luther King, gunned down on a motel balcony. And the cities burned. Los Angeles, two months later — Robert Kennedy, shot in a hotel kitchen just as it seemed he might win.

Warsaw Pact tanks crushed Prague Spring that same August. And in Mexico City, ten days before the Olympics opened, the army opened fire on student demonstrators.

It was at this moment that Murray had his first real impact on the politics of the movement in America — Murray's voice, Murray's presence, Murray's thinking, challenging us directly.

I think few of us on the Left knew Murray's earlier work. *Our Synthetic Environment* which was already written, but he'd published it anonymously — under a pseudonym, to protect himself from both the Red-baiting of the McCarthy era and the very real danger of Stalinist reprisal; some in his own political circle had already been assassinated.

Wherever you were at that time, the same three roads lay open: work within electoral politics, take to the streets in demonstrations, or turn toward armed struggle. In Germany, in Italy, in the anti-apartheid struggle in South Africa, in Japan, in Mexico... and in Chicago in 1969, at the convention of Students for a Democratic Society, Murray arrives with a pamphlet: *Listen, Marxists!*.

He was challenging Marxism-Leninism and Bolshevik politics head-on — “all the old crap of the thirties,” he called it, “coming back again... in a more vulgarized form than ever.” That third road — armed struggle — would soon take shape as the Weather Underground, the Red Brigades, Baader-Meinhof, the Tupamaros. Some of these groups wouldn't exist in name for another year or two, but the choice itself, the pull toward that road, was already being made in '68 and '69.

At that very moment, in my own group, NY Newsreel — a militant film collective, making films about the war in Vietnam, on civil rights, about the Black Panthers, the Young Lords, early feminist films, every movement stirring at that time— we were making a fiction film called ICE

(I ad-libbed here. This is not ICE as in the Immigration and Customs Enforcement. There's a joke going around. " Why did they decide to call it ICE? Because they didn't know how to spell Gestapo.)

The film ICE imagines an armed revolutionary movement in America. I brought Murray in to talk with our Newsreel group about it, and that's how my relationship with him really begins. He challenges the premise of ICE directly. But it let us play out on the screen, for everyone to see, a kind of thought experiment ... what would an armed insurrectionary movement look like. Almost none of us followed where the film pointed. We didn't join the Weather Underground.

Soon after, Bookchin's *Post-Scarcity Anarchism* showed us a positive, almost utopian vision: modern technology itself providing the basis for a truly liberatory, ecological society. Listen to how prescient he was — what he called cybernetics then, we'd call artificial intelligence now. He saw that this technology could finally end material scarcity for human beings and open the way to real liberation. What stood in the way, he understood, was capitalism itself. And he believed the emerging movement — disaffected young people, Black and Latino communities and other minorities, a rising consciousness — could guide these new technologies not toward oppression and commodification, but toward liberation.

At that time, I was working at radio station WBAI in New York and was sharing his ideas — the emerging concept of social ecology — with a nationwide audience and eventually the first Conference on Social Ecology, which was heard from coast to coast. I joined the Institute for Social Ecology at Goddard, and built its parallel program, Community Media. He was, in all those years, my teacher, my friend, my inspiration. I've been part of the Institute ever since.