

## Refusing the False Choice between Individual and Collective Liberation: Interview with Blair Taylor

Bionote: Blair Taylor is program director of the Institute for Social Ecology, a popular education center for ecological scholarship and advocacy founded in 1974. He holds a PhD in Political Science from the New School for Social Research, and has written on U.S. social movements, contemporary far-right politics, political ecology, and the history of the left. His work has been featured in *Les Temps Modernes*, *American Studies*, and *City: analysis of urban trends, culture, theory, policy, action*. He is co-editor of the Murray Bookchin anthology *The Next Revolution: Popular Assemblies and the Promise of Direct Democracy* (Verso, 2014).

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**Abstract:** The following interview is an email exchange with the author, which was conducted as a follow up to the School for Politics and Critique 2019: Municipal Organizing and Left-wing Environmental Solutions. The questions were prepared by Katerina Kolozova and Zdravko Saveski.

**Keywords:** (neo-)liberalism, Alterglobalization movement, Occupy movements, confederal direct democracy, Rojava, Murray Bookchin

**Question:** As a response to the crisis of neoliberal ideology, often equated with the global multinational capitalism and “deregulation” - even though authors like David Harvey, Ian Bruff and others have demonstrated that “neoliberalism” was a political project, heavily regulated, enabling what *appears* as mere “elemental force” of capitalism - the term “liberal” (and with it “libertarian”) has become despised on both ends of the political spectrum. Now that “liberal” has become a slur even liberals avoid, now that everyone shies away from the “l” word, how are we to understand “libertarian socialism” as anti-capitalist, emancipatory, and of transformative potential

(vis-à-vis the capitalist global order)? Libertarian socialism is anti-capitalist and radically transformative when it comes to economic inequality, political organization, the dialectics of political power, but it is “liberal” when it comes to individual freedoms and collective freedoms of marginalized social groups. In short, is it possible to vindicate the notion of “liberal” from within socialist, Marxist and anarchist discourses, and advocate for libertarian socialism without facing an enormous (false) preconception against the notion?

**Blair Taylor:** At a moment when authoritarian nationalism is pitted against the superficial cosmopolitanism of neoliberalism, it is important to defend the gains of democratic struggles which are falsely attributed to “liberalism.” As we have also seen in recent years, neoliberalism is a political and cultural project defined by commitments to market society and the presumed “meritocratic” rule of those who succeed within it - thus its democratic pretensions are quickly jettisoned in favor of stability of the status quo. The New Yorker’s widely-shared “These Smug Pilots Have Lost Touch with Regular Passengers Like Us. Who Thinks I Should Fly This Plane?” cartoon comes to mind.<sup>1</sup> Although neoliberals today often pose as the champions of the oppressed, they have never been at the vanguard of these movement victories. So we should not give neoliberals credit for the gains of struggles now subsumed under “liberalism” - freedom of speech, minority and anti-discrimination legislation, expanded voting rights, etc. - both for reasons of proper accreditation and to avoid creating a false association wherein these concerns are portrayed as opposed to the project of social protection for the majority. The right has been successful in this project, aided by those who defend “progressive neoliberalism,” Nancy Fraser’s description of the Clinton/Blair third way.<sup>2</sup> These neoliberals are largely responsible for the sadly transatlantic sentiment that understands cosmopolitanism and diversity as fused to and perhaps even a result of austerity and inequality, that the bargain was to trade one for the other. The rise of a left populist flank fueled by the multiracial working class (in the case of Sanders/Corbyn) has finally begun to destabilize this unproductive binary. The mainstream liberal defense - especially in America by critics of Sanders - has tended

<sup>1</sup> Will McPhail, “These Smug Pilots Have Lost Touch with Regular Passengers Like Us. Who Thinks I Should Fly This Plane?,” *The New Yorker* (January 2, 2017). <https://www.newyorker.com/cartoon/a20630?verso=true>.

<sup>2</sup> Nancy Fraser, “The End of Progressive Neoliberalism,” *Dissent Magazine* (January 2, 2017). [https://www.dissentmagazine.org/online\\_articles/progressive-neoliberalism-reactionary-populism-nancy-fraser](https://www.dissentmagazine.org/online_articles/progressive-neoliberalism-reactionary-populism-nancy-fraser).

to double down on this binary, trying to pit minoritarian grievances against an allegedly race-blind and “reductionist” economic populism. Adolph Reed and Nancy Fraser<sup>3</sup> have usefully critiqued the class politics lurking behind this discourse.

Liberalism, like all political terms, must always be articulated and defined; it is not a static given. The critique of neoliberalism has been essential, including the left articulating a critique of the limits of liberalism. But at the same time, it has never simply repudiated liberal values or aims, but rather used this language to move them beyond abstraction towards a concrete universalism. A dialectical apprehension of the problem must defend the gains of liberalism while illustrating how liberalism systematically blocks social potentialities by understanding freedom in purely formal and abstract terms, defining the material/economic factors out of existence. Andrew Yang’s presidential campaign, predicated on UBI plus STEM/TECH fetishism, is a thoroughly capitalist attempt to grasp this problem. Liberalism must be negated, but only by incorporation into a dialectical synthesis that resolves the false antinomy between individual and collective liberation. We must refuse this false choice and offer a better one offering both freedom and security collectively and individually. This desire is at the heart of the libertarian socialist project.

As reactionary forms of social protectionism are on the rise (Poland being perhaps the clearest case), it is important to remember that not all anticapitalist sentiments are equal, and that there are indeed worse things than even (neo)liberalism. Social ecology has long attempted to point out these important distinctions, from distinguishing emancipatory as opposed to reactionary analysis of ecological problems (Staudenmaier and Biehl’s sadly prescient book *Ecofascism* in the 1990s<sup>4</sup>) to attempts to articulate an anti-capitalist rather than simply anti-corporate/consumerist economic analysis within the alterglobalization and Occupy Wall Street movements.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Gabriel Winant, “Professional-Managerial Chasm,” *n+1* (October 10, 2019). <https://nplusonemag.com/online-only/online-only/professional-managerial-chasm>.

<sup>4</sup> Janet Biehl and Peter Staudenmaier, *Ecofascism: Lessons from the German Experience* (Edinburgh and San Francisco: AK Press, 1995). Available in *The Anarchist Library*: <https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/janet-biehl-and-peter-staudenmaier-ecofascism-lessons-from-the-german-experience>.

<sup>5</sup> G. B. Taylor, “Seven Left Myths about Capitalism,” *Institute for Social Ecology* (2012). <http://social-ecology.org/wp/2012/09/seven-left-myths-about-capitalism>.

**Question:** The previous decade was marked by horizontal movements against the detrimental socioeconomic effects of neoliberal governance: the Occupy movement, the Arab spring, Gezi Park resistance in defense of the “right to city,” anti-austerity student riots in the UK, and the same protest style and philosophy could be witnessed in the countries of Southeast Europe (SEE) too (as the reaction to more or less the same socioeconomic problems as in the rest of Europe). Popular assemblies, direct democracy, communalism were the values we based on our student and professors’ plenums (in Skopje, Zagreb), as well as “Ne da(vi)mo Beograd” (Serbian for “Let us not drown/give up on Belgrade”), and they have amounted to some temporal and superficial changes (some positive changes in legislation, even though modest, change in government) followed by regress (more authoritarian legislation or style of governance or elections that brought a populist right-wing party in power). This method of resistance has proven to be a failure, at least in the region of SEE, whereas its discursive success consisting in disparaging the notions of “liberal,” “European integration,” has (unwittingly) contributed to the creation of the grounds for the surge of populist right-wing authoritarian parties. Are we correct to compare this experience of SEE to that of the US (the trajectory being: the Occupy movement, mobilization around Bernie Sanders in 2016 and then a populist movement and a conservative party in power led by the strongman Donald Trump)? Have these movements (and the method and values behind them) failed, and for what reasons?

**BT:** The trajectory does sound similar, although there are differences. First, the North American alterglobalization movement (AGM), while often theoretically incoherent, was not antiliberal or antiglobal, despite the misnomer. At its core were primarily antistate ecological anticapitalists organizing via the Direct Action Network (DAN). For all its faults (more on this below), the AGM must be credited for first problematizing neoliberalism in the public sphere, but using an internationalist rather than protectionist language (contra right figures like Pat Buchanan). In the wake of 9/11 this movement was superseded by the reactive and ineffectual anti-war movement, characterized by a return of New Left Maoist/Marxist reactive and unfortunately largely ineffectual front groups that organized mass marches instead of utilizing direct action. The anti-war movement

also often engaged in crude binaries that uncritically valorized the “resistance” of right-wing actors like the Iraqi resistance and Hamas. This was a very different left from that of the AGM. During this time the left also became inundated with conspiracy theories, via 9/11 and unfortunately Green Party figures open to this discourse. Occupy Wall Street represented a return to the discourse and tactics of the AGM, but framed not on behalf of peasants, indigenous, and sea turtles, but the millions impacted by neoliberal austerity post-2008 crisis. It was the return of the AGM with a class analysis, if you will, and with much larger numbers. An older cadre of organizers, including DAN veterans like David Graeber, came out and wrested control and direction of the movement wrested control of the movement to give it the modular, direct action-oriented “neoanarchist” flavor it assumed.

So, my second point is that I would not depict this as the causal sequence your narrative implies, a.k.a. a chain of left failures leading through Sanders and Trump. Sanders emerged as outsider who challenged both the authoritarian nationalist and neoliberal paradigms, and his criticism of Clintonite neoliberalism and embrace of the working class had some limited crossover appeal to Trump voters. Thus, he was not truly part of the phenomenon Trumpism responds to. The AGM and OWS certainly paved the way, discursively, for the Sanders insurgency as well as other progressive/anti-inequality Democratic politicians like NYC Mayor Bill DeBlasio (whose wife, Chirlane Irene McCray, it might interest *Identities* readers, was a member of the Combahee River Collective). These movements successfully “changed the conversation,” which was then taken up by progressive politicians.

But this is a very low bar for success for self-described revolutionary movements. It underscores what is in my view the deeper failure of these decentralist antistatist, what I call “neoanarchist” movements - their tendency to be recuperated into neoliberal forms and discourse. On the one hand, their emphasis on political form - assemblies and the occupation of public space - rather than content was modular and easily reproducible across the world. But it also made it made it rather open in terms of political content - what are they for? What are the counter-institutions they propose? What are the organizations that carry this vision forward? These ideas of direct

democracy and councils remained at a tactical level, never articulated as a coherent political alternative to the neoliberal state. This would require a vision and organizations to carry it out, anathema to the pluralistic ethos of the movement of “one no many yeses.”

What else purports to enable “one no many yeses?” The market - no to the state, yes to everything else, so long as you can pay for it. Neoanarchist notions of “the journey is the destination” or “changing the world without taking power” were endemic, but few realized how much it resonated with neoliberal ideology. If both agree government is bad, and only one offers a purportedly non-state mode of social organization - markets - it is obvious which will win the day. For this reason, anarchist mutual aid projects like Occupy Sandy were literally praised by a report by the hated Office of Homeland Security, which noted: “Unlike traditional disaster response organizations, there were no appointed leaders, no bureaucracy, no regulations to follow, no pre-defined mission, charter, or strategic plan. There was just relief.” The report concluded that “We can learn lessons from Occupy Sandy’s successes to ensure a ready and resilient nation.” Thus despite Occupy’s noted fear of cooptation by political elites, one of the most feared offices of the U.S. federal government lauded these anarchist revolutionaries and held them up as a model to be emulated. This was the dominant mode of recuperation for Occupy - its scrappy communitarianism easily became ideological cover for the shortcomings of neoliberalism.

In the AGM 15 years earlier, it was the emphasis on corporate social responsibility and ethical consumption that accompanied the anti-consumer ideology of figures like Naomi Klein and *Adbusters* magazine. Instead of changing the world, they changed corporations, which simply incorporated these demands into the growing niche market of socially responsible consumption/investment/etc. Capitalism has increasingly taken up the language of social movements: sustainability, fair trade, authenticity, freedom. How did the language of the left become the language of business? I have argued elsewhere that it was not 9/11 but recuperation - the process of incorporating oppositional movements and discourse into power - that killed the AGM, constructing a “new spirit of capitalism” in the process that addresses growing demand for an ethical lifeworld while neutralizing critique, channeling oppositional energies into market solutions, systemic innovation, and stabilization.

The ascendancy of neoanarchism on the left was largely a response to a real problem - the need to develop antiauthoritarian alternatives to Marxism, such as the prefigurative political orientation that emerged from the New Left and New Social Movements and became the neoanarchism hegemonic within the alterglobalization and Occupy Wall Street movements. Post-Occupy this has shifted into older forms of recuperation, namely incorporation into social democratic political campaigns a la Sanders and the rise of Democratic Socialists of America. As a DSA member, however, I will say that the 2016 experience has soured many of the 60,000 who have recently joined the organization on electoral politics, favoring instead a movement-based "class-struggle social democracy" approach instead that overlaps significantly with right to the city/Communist/libertarian municipalist organizing. In fact, unlike in the late 1990s, the ideological divisions between Marxists and anarchists have never felt less salient than today. As Bookchin once said, "*There is nothing that can't be, at least hypothetically, co-opted, including anarchism,*"<sup>6</sup> so better if we are just aware of radical history and the various dead ends. Problems aside, the combination of Sanders and DSA has created a new framework for a national left that is capable of speaking outside the choir, something that has not existed in the US for a long time. My hope is that this proliferation of progressive political content will be accompanied by demands for radical form. This is my hope for Symbiosis, which has launched an exciting new federation of dual power-oriented groups and individuals that are a complement/alternative to DSA.

**Question:** Murray Bookchin once wrote: "To separate ecological problems from social problems - or even to play down or give only token recognition to their crucial relationship - would be to grossly misconstrue the sources of the growing environmental crisis."<sup>7</sup> The climate crisis is an increasingly pressing issue and the systematic neglect of our global capitalist order has had huge environmental and societal repercussions. On a positive note, there is growing awareness that this issue cannot be ignored, that something should be done. What should be done, according to you, who should do something?

<sup>6</sup> "Interview with Murray Bookchin," *Open Road*, No. 13 (Spring 1982), 8-9. <http://www.zisman.ca/openroad/1982-Spring/index.html>.

<sup>7</sup> Murray Bookchin, "Ecological Problems Are Social Problems," *Climate and Capitalism* (March 25, 2011). <https://climateandcapitalism.com/2011/03/25/murray-bookchin-what-is-social-ecology>.

**BT:** Once again, Murray was right, and ahead of the curve! I think the Yellow Vests have done the environmental movement an enormous favor by injecting class analysis in one fell stroke - no more green austerity for the working class, no moralistic finger-wagging environmentalism. It really transformed what was a pretty common response in the North American left ecological milieu almost overnight. I think pushing for a Green New Deal is a vital opening, one that - for all the criticisms - presents an historical opportunity to address social (material reproduction/capitalism) and ecological (climate) issues at the same time. Sure we need to go beyond the national frame, beyond green growth, etc.... but is it more likely for this to emerge from nothing, or from the failures and partial successes of a mass mobilization united around this vision, one which redefines who gets to be an ecologist? Bookchin, like Marx, sought to identify and build on dialectical potentialities in the real historical moment, rather than utopian schemes to jump from this world into the pure one overnight. We can keep our theoretical critiques of various shortcomings, but we must undertake strategic actions in a deeply compromised world. The pure movementism of the past 40 years has proven totally inadequate. My hope is for a fighting alliance of Green New Deal actors, Indigenous groups, direct action activists, unions, and regular people who desire a better future, with social ecologists pushing for a progressive form - confederated directly democratic councils.

**Question:** Turkey has recently invaded the Federation of North and East Syria (Rojava). After the invasion, Turkey struck a deal with Russia concerning the territories of the Rojava. What do you think of this development in the long-lasting Syrian Civil War?

**BT:** Since the US withdrawal, the Kurds were left with few options, and now it seems things are constantly shifting there between the Kurds, Turkey, Russia and Syria. It is too early to tell how all this will impact the incredibly important experiment in confederal democracy there. One perhaps hopeful byproduct of this experience is that it has - I hope - conclusively demonstrated the inadequacy of a crude antiimperialist analysis that denounces the U.S. but ends up supporting other imperial players like Russia and Iran. Hopefully the left can acknowledge a far more complex world of power relations going forward. The global Rojava solidarity movement continues

to work to defend the revolution there, so we will see how things evolve under these new conditions.

**Question:** The Kurds in Syria, under the leadership of The Democratic Union Party (PYD), in very difficult military and political circumstances, have established a political system that is highly progressive not only by Middle Eastern standards but by Western standards too. They are inspired by Abdullah Öcalan, the imprisoned leader of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), who in turn was inspired by the ideas of Murray Bookchin. What can you tell us about the concrete measures of social transformation implemented in Rojava, in particular about their eco-socialist and feminist aspects?

**BT:** There has been a lot of excellent work on this, I would refer folks to the various books and articles on the topic, *Make Rojava Green Again, Revolution in Rojava*, etc....<sup>8</sup> Their example of a pluralist and feminist model of democracy rooted in popular assemblies would be inspiring anywhere, but especially in that region. The fact that this project, one directly inspired by Bookchin's ideas, was also partly dependent on U.S. military support shows how wild and complex the world is, in contrast to most left sloganeering.

**Question:** Would you say it is in the interest of every major world power to suppress the "Rojava experiment"?

**BT:** Ironically, various world powers in fact supported it, of course for their own geopolitical reasons. It has been bizarre to see various Republicans and professional soldiers quit the Trump administration or write passionate op-eds defending our allies the Kurds. I do not think global powers - aside from Turkey - are too worried about what remains a relatively small project. And it is surprising how many have been inspired by it, we should not underestimate the power of popular opinion to act as a brake on what is and is not possible. Unfortunately for us, our current president prides himself exactly on being unconstrained by public opinion, not to mention decency, reason, or most other categories of human behavior.

**Question:** What is the way forward according to you, and is Bookchin's doctrine in need of some adjustments to the global context of the third decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century?

**BT:** I think the political vision of social ecology offers an important political alternative that speaks to many of the problems identified above, in particular resolving the pendulum of the streets/the state that the left has been bouncing between for so long. It offers a radical analysis of the overlapping political, economic, social, ecological crises we face, and a political vision for moving beyond them. This vision of confederal direct democracy addresses the need for lasting institutions that democratize power rather than unproblematically wielding it in state/party form or rejecting it entirely, reconciling the historical deadlock between the anarchist and Marxist traditions.

That said, it is only a general picture to orient our struggles. While social ecology/communalism offers a broad political vision to orient our struggles, many details need to be fleshed out and adapted to local conditions. As all our efforts have failed and the left remains weak, we should be flexible and experimental in terms of our strategy to achieve it. Bookchin developed most of his core ideas from the 1960s to the early 2000s, and while many things changed, sometimes quite dramatically, other things remained the same and bear the marks of that historical era. His theorization of hierarchy and domination was essential to introducing non-reductionist analytical concepts to the New Left. At the same time, his definition of hierarchy as "institutionalized relationships of command and obedience" describes Fordism better than neoliberalism, and is arguably too agentic to describe the systemic dynamics of capitalism, which happens "behind the backs of men" rather than at their command. As much as Bookchin criticized Marx, I think he accepted a large portion of his theoretical critique of capitalism; he was, after all, an anarcho-communist.

Bookchin shifted over time from an anarchist antistatism, to a broadly extraparliamentary dual power position, to later in life advocating more narrowly for running campaigns for popular power within existing local municipal government. But what is the essential difference between participating in local elections but not national ones? Instead of ceding an important (and, yes, problematic) field of struggle to conservatives and centrists, why not push nationally - then

<sup>8</sup> Internationalist Commune of Rojava, *Make Rojava Green Again*, intro. by Debbie Bookchin (London: Dog Section Press, 2019); Michael Knapp, Anja Flach and Ercan Ayboga, *Revolution in Rojava: Democratic Autonomy and Women's Liberation in Syrian Kurdistan* (London: Pluto Press, 2016).

internationally - for a progressive *form* in addition to progressive content? This was often connected to a somewhat rigid insistence on face-to-face deliberation that overlooks spatial/geographic challenges, disability access, and new potentially emancipatory technologies. Why be a purist on the how? For example, I have had my mind changed in online debates. Another element I think is worth reviewing is his insistence on a quasi-Athenian politics centered on "the general interest" over the particularism/sectoralism of class and other social axes. In my view, this concept overlooks the ongoing centrality of concrete interests accruing to different classes and other forms of particular hierarchies, not to mention affinity with centrist or Habermasian discourses that dissolve political conflict into deliberation and compromise. We certainly want to transcend those interests to achieve a common good, but to jump from the present into a premature and abstract universalism replicates the problems of utopian socialism Marx and Engels identified in 1848 (i.e., its middle class nature of offering a politics of class compromise and false unities which overlooks divergent objective interests).

But these are minor theoretical quibbles. Bookchin's work remains an incredibly important resource that speaks to the ongoing failure of oppositional movements across the globe confronting inequality, political authoritarianism and climate change to articulate any coherent political alternative. Communalism offers a political framework that resonates with what many of those movements are already calling for - Chile's calls for councils to draft a new Constitution, the assemblies of the Yellow Vests, Extinction Rebellion's advocacy of citizen's assemblies - and pulls it together into a new form of democratic revolutionary politics.