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Umair Muhammad

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## An unsuitable theorist? Murray Bookchin and the PKK

Umair Muhammad

Department of Political Science, York University, Toronto, Canada

### ABSTRACT

Over the course of the last decade and a half the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) has transformed its ideological orientation in accord with the changing outlook of its imprisoned leader, Abdullah Öcalan. It has discarded its erstwhile Marxist-Leninist ideology for the anarchist-inspired thought of the American political theorist Murray Bookchin. Yet, the PKK's new theorist of choice may not be an entirely suitable one. Bookchin was a rabid anti-nationalist, and this paper argues that, even after having appropriated Bookchin, the PKK has been unable to chart a non-nationalist course. Scholars of the Kurdish question have so far let Bookchin's seeming unsuitability go unnoticed. This is likely because Bookchin's thought is not well known. This paper offers an overview of Bookchin's thought, and in doing so, hopefully contributes to making Bookchin better understood.

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### Introduction

When the American political theorist Murray Bookchin died in 2006, Kurdish rebels based in the Qandil Mountains paid homage to his legacy in a moving tribute. 'Bookchin has not died,' they stated, 'he will live through his work and through the work of others.'<sup>1</sup> Bookchin's passing had been marked by few people even in his native United States. It was therefore strange that somewhere in a remote corner of the Middle East, it was noticed that Bookchin had left the world.

Among the small groups of admirers that Bookchin has acquired across North America and Europe, a favorite piece of trivia is that Bookchin's 1962 *Our Synthetic Environment* was published a few months before Rachel Carson's famous *Silent Spring*. In his book, Bookchin sought to describe, in terms similar to Carson, the environmental destruction being created by modern civilization.<sup>2</sup> Following *Our Synthetic Environment*, Bookchin's

**CONTACT** Umair Muhammad ✉ [umair.muhammad@gmail.com](mailto:umair.muhammad@gmail.com) 📧 Department of Political Science, York University, Ross Building, Room S672, Toronto, ON, Canada M3J 1P3

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writings would take a radical, anarchist turn, though they would retain an ecological focus.

That an eco-anarchist like Bookchin had his death commemorated by Kurdish rebels was no doubt odd. It was stranger still that the organization marking Bookchin's passing, the Kurdistan Workers' Party (*Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê*, PKK), had once been famously Marxist in orientation and had come to be known for its struggle in the interest of creating a separate nation-state for the Kurds.

Bookchin, as a libertarian, could hardly be associated with anyone wanting to create a state, far less a Marxist movement trying to do so in the Global South. If Bookchin's writings contain numerous refrains about the need to overcome the confines of Marxist workerism and the need to smash the state, they are equally marked by the lack of attention they give to the poorer regions of the world. Bookchin's voluminous and wide-ranging writings rarely ever touch on events and issues concerning the non-Western world. When Bookchin addressed the lack of attention he gave to the Global South, he did so in his characteristic unapologetic manner. 'The possible charge that I am "Eurocentric",' Bookchin wrote on one occasion, 'leaves me singularly untroubled.'<sup>3</sup>

What could a 'Eurocentric' eco-anarchist like Bookchin have to do with the PKK? It turns out that by the time Bookchin died, the PKK had come around to appropriating his thought. Abdullah Öcalan, the imprisoned head of the PKK, became a convert to Bookchin's outlook after coming across his writings. And the PKK followed in Öcalan's footsteps. By and large, the transformation in the PKK's ideological orientation has been celebrated by academics and activist commentators. A rare few, like Alex De Jong, have offered critiques of the extent of the PKK's transformation from 'Stalinist caterpillar into libertarian butterfly.'<sup>4</sup>

This article seeks to intervene in the ongoing discussion about the change in the PKK's outlook not in order to celebrate or decry the transformation, but in order to point out that the organization's new theorist of choice may not be an entirely suitable one. Bookchin, as will be detailed below, was a rabid anti-nationalist. He believed that the mobilization of nationalist sentiments for political purposes could not contribute to progressive social change. Nationalism, for Bookchin, was a poisonous creed that could only befoul the project of universal human emancipation. How interesting, then, that the PKK – an organization helping to lead a struggle on behalf of an oppressed national minority – has come to appropriate Bookchin's thought.

Along with highlighting Bookchin's anti-nationalism, this article presents an outline of Bookchin's overall system of thought. While the overview of Bookchin's ideas is hardly exhaustive, the hope is that it will contribute to making Bookchin's ideas better understood. This paper will also offer a critique of Bookchin's anti-nationalism. Critical reflections should allow the

reader to grapple with Bookchin's thought at a deeper level than a simple summary might. While this work is not meant to explore the way in which the PKK has appropriated Bookchin's thought, I do offer a tentative take on the subject in the conclusion. I make the case that Öcalan has not been able to use Bookchin to chart a non-nationalist course. Rather, he has appropriated Bookchin's thought to derive new nationalist myths.

### **A seamless appropriation?**

Most scholars of the Kurdish question had not even heard of Bookchin's name until only a few years ago. It is not surprising, then, that the treatment Bookchin has tended to receive in recent scholarship on the PKK has been less than rigorous. Michael Gunter, for example, devotes just three pages of his recent book on the Syrian Kurds for discussing Bookchin.<sup>5</sup> Paul White has a similarly brief treatment of Bookchin in his new book-length study of the PKK.<sup>6</sup>

For those commentators who are not familiar with Bookchin's writings, the idea that he may not be a suitable theorist for the PKK does not, of course, come up. But even those who know Bookchin well have so far failed to note that there might be something amiss about the ideological orientation the PKK has adopted.

Janet Biehl, Bookchin's partner and biographer, and Damian White, who wrote a PhD dissertation on Bookchin's thought, are two of the leading authorities on Bookchin. Both Biehl and White have delved into the discussion about the PKK's appropriation of Bookchin. Neither has said anything to suggest that Bookchin might be an unsuitable theorist for the PKK.

White celebrates Bookchin's appropriation by the PKK, though he does raise some concerns about the effectiveness of libertarianism.<sup>7</sup> Biehl is even more celebratory than White. In an essay comparing the two thinkers, Biehl makes the case that, far from there being anything odd about Öcalan's appropriation of Bookchin, Bookchin and Öcalan had a lot in common. She points out that Öcalan's transition away from Marxism toward a libertarian political outlook paralleled Bookchin's political transformation half a century earlier. Bookchin, like Öcalan, spent a part of his life as a Marxist, eventually concluding that a libertarian outlook was a more suitable disposition to take up.<sup>8</sup>

According to Biehl, Bookchin and Öcalan both 'shared a dialectical cast of mind' which meant that they were 'in love with history's developmental processes'; both 'wrote sweeping historical accounts of civilization'; and the historical accounts both thinkers crafted were meant 'to serve current political problematics.'<sup>9</sup> It would seem that for Biehl, then, Bookchin and Öcalan are two peas in a pod. Indeed, were Bookchin alive, Biehl contends that he would have wholeheartedly adopted the struggle of the Kurds as his own:

I think he would be traveling to Rojava whenever possible and participating and offering advice and inspiration and assistance. He would be trying to help to make the democracy work. He would be traveling around the Middle East, trying to spread the revolution beyond the Kurdish areas, throughout the region. And he would be talking about it to the outside world, to whoever would listen.<sup>10</sup>

The appropriation of Bookchin by Öcalan (and the PKK) appears, within the existing commentary, to have been seamless. But we shall see as we explore Bookchin's thought, and in particular his position on nationalism, that the existing commentary is missing important parts of the picture.

### An overview of Bookchin's thought

Bookchin, born in the 1921, began his political life rather early. He became a member of the Communist Party while still a child. He remained a Marxist for much of his early adulthood, though he broke with the Communist Party and became a Trotskyist. In the 1960s he broke with Marxism altogether and adopted the Left libertarian tradition as his own.

What led Bookchin to leave the fold of Marxism was the belief that the working class had largely been co-opted by the capitalist system. Far from wanting to overturn it, workers had become complicit in capitalism's conservation. In the post-War period, according to Bookchin, 'the traditional class struggle stabilizes capitalist society by "correcting" its abuses (in wages, hours, inflation, employment, etc.).' Thus, the class struggle could no longer be relied on to serve as the engine of social change. Marxism, with the primacy it gives to working class agency, would have to be 'transcended.'<sup>11</sup> A new revolutionary theoretical outlook would have to be developed to deal with the realities of the post-War period, and new agents of revolution would have to be identified.

Bookchin thought that a process of 'cultural degeneration' was underway: a process that was leading to the creation – at least culturally if not economically – of 'declassed' individuals. A non-class, as it were, was coming into being. This non-class was made up of people from all segments of society. And the banality produced by the advanced capitalist social order could, possibly, push it in a revolutionary direction. Eventually, the vast majority of people could potentially take up a revolutionary outlook.

Along with positing a new agent of revolutionary change, Bookchin argued that a new capitalist contradiction would serve as the engine of social change: not exploitation of labor but ecological destruction would provide the impetus for revolutionary change. Having laid the basis for a renewed theoretical project, Bookchin set out to craft a system of thought.

Bookchin's thought came to be rooted in the claim that ecological problems had social roots – he therefore called his system of thought 'social ecology.'

The following maxim, often referenced by Bookchin, is ‘perhaps the most fundamental message that social ecology advances’: ‘the very *idea* of dominating nature stems from the domination of human by human.’<sup>12</sup> That is to say, the antagonistic relationship between humans and the natural environment is an extension of the antagonisms that have come to exist within human society itself.

Primitive humanity – ‘organic society’ in Bookchin’s parlance – possessed an ‘intense solidarity internally and with the natural world.’<sup>13</sup> The development of institutionalized hierarchies over the course of human history directly contributed to the development of an anti-ecological disposition within human societies. As men came to dominate women, the old to dominate the young, and so on, the natural world too came to be increasingly seen as a realm into which humanity could extend its domineering sway.<sup>14</sup>

The emergence of the state was a crucial moment in the institutionalization of the ‘epistemologies of rule’ that had beset the minds of human beings ever since they made their way from egalitarian social formations into hierarchical ones. The rise of the state was accompanied by the development of economic classes, with exploitation of labor becoming a defining feature of human civilization. By the time the modern state – with its all-encompassing coercive apparatus and bureaucracy – came into its own ‘traditional societies, customs, and sensibilities were so thoroughly reworked to accord with domination that humanity lost all sense of contact with the organic society from which it originated.’<sup>15</sup>

Bookchin did not hold the view that we should strive to return to our ‘organic’ roots. While humanity’s trajectory out of organic society and into hierarchical society may have resulted in a tragic ‘loss of innocence,’ it also resulted in ‘a growth of intellectual powers, an increasing degree of individuality, personal autonomy, and a sense of a universal *humanitas* as distinguished from folk parochialism.’<sup>16</sup> Despite its many merits, organic society also had its downsides. The primitive level of technology meant that living standards were low. Moreover, organic society’s ethical horizon did not extend very far: the tribe’s intense solidarity was reserved only for its members. Outsiders were not trustworthy, or worse, they were feared and hated.

Bookchin believed that technological and ethical development had progressed to such an extent that the solidarity of tribal society could be extended to all of humanity.

To be expelled from the Garden of Eden can be regarded, as Hegel was to say, as an important condition for its return – but on a level that is informed with a sophistication that can resolve the paradoxes of paradise.<sup>17</sup>

The annulment of hierarchy in all its forms was a necessary precondition for returning to paradise, as was the abolition of the state.

According to Bookchin the traditional Leftist approach, which hoped to capture state power in the interest of achieving social progress, was wrong-headed. The city, rather than the state, was the domain in which politics had its proper home. Bookchin highlighted the fact that the very first cities that human beings created, in Mesopotamia, are thought to have been governed by popular assemblies. He made the case that it was in these cities that the political sphere was first carved out. The state arrived much later. It developed, not in congruence with, but in opposition to the Mesopotamian urban centers. The cities served as sites of resistance against the encroachments of the state: the state's efforts to usurp power for itself were challenged at every step by popular movements that tried to restore the political sphere.<sup>18</sup>

Bookchin argued that, while the political sphere may well have been closed off in the Eastern world as it succumbed under the weight of giant imperial states, the conflict between the city and the state was to be found throughout much of Western history. The conflict was played out in the struggles of the Athenian *demos* to establish and maintain their power, it was found in the hopes of the Gracchi brothers and the popular assemblies of Rome, and among the autonomous cities of medieval Europe which tried to keep the state at bay.

Yet, even in the Western world, the state did eventually close off the political sphere. In its place, a civics bereft of content was allowed to develop. No longer could an active citizenry manage its own affairs. Instead, 'representatives' managed the affairs of the people on their behalf. And citizenship came to have its basis in payment of taxes, in exchange for which state services were provided – the arrangement was not unlike the transactional nature of the marketplace.

To work within the constraints of the reigning conception of citizenship by, for instance, engaging in party politics was a hopeless strategy. Such an approach only served to give legitimacy to political parties, 'as though they even have a justifiable place in a rational society.'<sup>19</sup> Rather than exhausting itself by working within the existing state system, the Left should put its efforts in the struggle to resuscitate popular democracy. That is, instead of losing its soul by perpetuating 'statecraft,' the Left should place its hopes in the municipal sphere.

Bookchin called the political strategy he advocated 'libertarian municipalism.' The strategy involved running candidates for municipal government on a platform that sought to open up the management of municipal affairs to popular decision-making. The idea was to institutionalize participatory government, in a step-by-step manner, as more and more aspects of the city's functioning was placed under popular control.

It was not just the political powers of the municipality that would be democratized. The economy too would come under municipal control. The rule of capital would therefore be undercut as private property was, piece-by-piece,

converted to municipal property. Municipally-owned production would be directed towards the manufacture of goods that serve the needs of the community, as opposed to serving the bottom-line of capitalist firms. In this arrangement, it would be community members, not workers, who took the lead in determining what would and what would not be produced. Densely-packed populations would be spread out, and giant urban centers like New York and Toronto would be broken up into wards that could more effectively be governed by participatory assemblies.

The objective would be to confederate municipalities within a given geographical region. Regional issues, such as the management of water bodies, would be dealt with at the confederal level. Confederated municipalities would act as a counter-power to the state, pulling more and more power away from it. The coming into being of confederations of municipalities across the territory administered by a state could, Bookchin seemed to believe, annul the power of the state altogether.

### Bookchin on nationalism

Given his position on the state, it should hardly come as a surprise that Bookchin regarded nations and nationalisms – necessary concomitants of modern states – as worthy only of deprecation. A whole lot of deprecation, as we are about to see. The caustic bite that accompanies Bookchin's writing on nationalism is, I think, important to convey. And this can best be done by letting him speak for himself. I will therefore be directly quoting Bookchin rather frequently in this section of the paper.

'There is no place in a free society,' Bookchin wrote, 'for nation-states – either as nations or as states.'<sup>20</sup> Nationalism, as far as Bookchin was concerned, was 'a form of tribalism writ large.'<sup>21</sup> It was 'a disease that divided human from human,' and a 'fuel for intercommunal warfare.'<sup>22</sup> Nationalist sentiments could not be allowed to dictate the Left's political agenda. Socialists should not be in the business of promoting the division of the world into distinct – and inevitably rival – nation-states. Far from being an instrument that could be used to press for freedom, "nationality" is a social pathology that must be cured if society is not to further deteriorate.'<sup>23</sup>

Political independence for colonial peoples had not, Bookchin argued, resulted in substantive freedom. Formally independent countries have remained just as 'manipulable by the forces of international capitalism' as they ever were. Worse still, the nationalisms of the oppressed have shown themselves to be just as regressive in content as the nationalisms of their oppressors. Formerly colonized nations have used their newly-found political freedom, fostered by 'myths of "national sovereignty",' to engage in such horrid practices as territorial acquisition and ethnic cleansing. 'Nationalisms that only a generation ago might have been regarded as national liberation



struggles are more clearly seen today ... as little more than social nightmares and devilizing blights.<sup>24</sup> Oppressed peoples no doubt had a right to fight off their oppressors, but nationalism was a road that could lead to nowhere but disaster:

Put bluntly, nationalisms are regressive atavisms that the Enlightenment tried to overcome long ago. They introject the worst features of the very empires from which oppressed peoples have tried to shake loose. Not only do they typically reproduce state machines that are as oppressive as the ones that colonial powers imposed on them, but they reinforce those machines with cultural, religious, ethnic, and xenophobic traits that are often used to foster regional and even domestic hatreds and subimperialisms.<sup>25</sup>

Bookchin held the view that it was only in the advanced capitalist world that socialist revolution could successfully be made.<sup>26</sup> It was only in this part of the world that the technological preconditions for the achievement of socialism were in place. Moreover, even if successful socialist revolutions could be carried out in the underdeveloped world, they would face the danger of being violently snuffed out by the military might of the imperialist West. Thus, instead of hoping for socialist revolutions to take place in the Global South, the task of radicals in the advanced world was to make the revolution at home.

Bookchin thought it was a shame that the post-War American Left maintained an 'essentially international focus.' Moreover, Leftists unthinkingly extended solidarity to national liberation movements across the colonized world. Indeed, the cry for 'national liberation' came to seem as inherently progressive in content. Particularly when accompanied by Marxist sloganeering, the struggles for national liberation in the Global South could easily reach into the hearts of well-intentioned Leftists in the North. Bookchin wished these well-intentioned Leftists could realize that the 'avowals of socialism' on the part of those who led anti-colonial struggles were cynical at best. Such avowals were 'used by national liberation movements very much the way Stalin used socialist ideologies to brutally consolidate his own dictatorship.'<sup>27</sup>

Before deciding to support anti-imperialist struggles, Leftists in the advanced countries should have had the nerve to find out where these struggles were leading. They should have made an effort 'to inquire into what type of society Mao Tse-tung, to take a striking case in point, would establish in China if he defeated the Kuomintang.' They similarly should have 'inquired into what type of society Castro, to cite another important case, would establish in Cuba after the expulsion of Batista.'<sup>28</sup> Instead of asking hard questions, Leftists unwittingly allowed themselves to become the pawns of Third World dictators-in-waiting, who had little interest in the ideals of socialism aside from instrumentalizing these ideals to push forward their own agendas.

Radicals in the United States had a particularly important role to play. Bookchin lamented the fact that the American Left was increasingly looking to the Global South to seek inspiration – that the likes of Ho Chi Minh, Fidel Castro, and Mao Zedong had become the heroes of the rebellious youth culture that developed in the 1960s. Bookchin's response to this trend was a characteristic tirade:

One is tempted to scream: "Listen, motherfucker! Help the Third World by fighting capitalism at home! Don't cop out by hiding under Ho's and Mao's skirts when your real job is to overthrow domestic capitalism by dealing with the real possibilities of an American revolution! Develop a revolutionary project at home because every revolutionary project here is necessarily internationalist and anti-imperialist, no matter how much its goals and language are limited to the American condition."<sup>29</sup>

The politics of libertarian municipalism, as devised by Bookchin, were meant to be taken up and applied in the advanced capitalist countries. Trying to concern oneself with the possibility of socialist revolution in the Global South was getting the order of things wrong. If revolution was made in the advanced countries, the rest of the world would follow.<sup>30</sup> Were the major centers of the global economy to be caught up in the revolutionary tide, it would hardly be possible for the poorer regions of the world to resist going in a similar direction. After the global revolutionary wave, the North could do its part in assisting the South with material help. Thus, instead of worrying about the Global South, Bookchin kept the focus of his political theorizing at home.

For Bookchin's part, he thought the only moral position was to oppose, at once, the imperialism of the Global North and the anti-imperialist nationalism of the South. According to Bookchin, there are occasions which call upon us to refuse to choose between the available alternatives. The choice between imperialist aggression and anti-imperialist nationalism was one such occasion:

In the 1960s, those who opposed American imperialism in Southeast Asia and at the same time rejected giving any support for the Communist regime in Hanoi, and those who opposed American intervention in Cuba without supporting Castroist totalitarianism, stood on a higher moral ground than the New Leftists who exercised their rebelliousness against the United States predominantly by supporting national liberation struggles without regard to the authoritarian and statist goals of those struggles.<sup>31</sup>

Bookchin further stressed this point by claiming that the choice between imperialist aggression and anti-imperialist nationalism was a choice between a greater and a lesser evil. And behind lesser-evilmism, the specter of Hitlerism loomed:

It is not a sign of political ineffectuality to reject such a choice altogether and declare that to oppose one evil with a lesser one must eventually lead to the support of the worst evil that emerges. German Social Democracy, by abetting one “lesser evil” after another during the 1920s, went from supporting liberals to conservatives to reactionaries who finally brought Hitler to power.<sup>32</sup>

### An unsuitable theorist?

Now that we have had a chance to explore Bookchin’s political thought, the fact that he may not be the most suitable theorist of choice for the PKK will, I think, be self-evident. But rather than press the point about his unsuitability in a head-on manner, I want to make this point by working through the possibility that Bookchin’s thought may indeed be suitable for the PKK.

If one was interested in doing so, I think it would be possible to interpret Bookchin’s position on nationalism so that his appropriation by the PKK does not seem entirely out of line. One could try to make the case that since the PKK no longer wishes to create a separate Kurdish state, Bookchin’s rebukes against nationalism do not apply to the group. Bookchin, this line of reasoning might suggest, only chastised those national liberation struggles that had ‘authoritarian and statist goals.’ Had national liberation movements that had anti-authoritarian and anti-statist goals existed in his day, the argument might continue, he may well have supported them.

Such a line of argument has its basis in two claims. First, it claims that the PKK is not really a nationalist organization, at least not in any conventional sense. Second, it claims that Bookchin was opposed only to conventional, statist national liberation struggles. Both of these claims cannot be convincingly substantiated. Let us consider them in turn.

A number of scholars have taken the view that the PKK, following Öcalan’s directives, is no longer charting a nationalist course.<sup>33</sup> In fact, the PKK continues to deal in nationalism of a very conventional sort. Whether the organization wants to create a separate state for the Kurds has little bearing on the ethno-nationalist character of its agenda.

It will worthwhile to point out that the PKK’s abandonment of separatism long predates its adoption of Bookchin’s political outlook. Throughout its early existence, the PKK took the view that anything short of independence from Turkey was a betrayal of the Kurdish people. But by as early as 1991, the PKK started to make apparent that it would be willing to accept a federalist solution to the Kurdish question in Turkey.<sup>34</sup>

Several reasons could be cited to explain the PKK’s abandonment of separatism, but one especially noteworthy reason has to do with demographic trends. Due to the ravages of war and economic hardship, over the last several decades large numbers of Kurds have been forced to migrate out of Turkey’s southeast and have had to settle in urban areas outside of Kurdistan.

By now, Istanbul, situated in the north-western corner of Turkey, contains more Kurds than any other population center in the country. The creation of a separate Kurdish homeland in Turkey's southeast would, therefore, leave millions of Kurds stranded in Turkey. Such an outcome would hardly seem worth fighting for, especially given that some of most politicized Kurds live outside of Kurdistan.<sup>35</sup>

Having backed down from the demand for independence in the 1990s, the organization continued to maintain what could be called a 'statist' orientation: along with demanding cultural rights for all Kurds living in Turkey, it called for the creation of a federal arrangement that would grant the Kurdish region a certain degree of autonomy within the existing Turkish state.

By now, of course, it would seem that the PKK has given up on the 'statist' route altogether. The organization now claims to have adopted the libertarian municipalist project advocated by Bookchin. If this project was to be carried out in earnest, it would seek to establish municipal confederacies that could challenge the sovereignty of the Turkish state.<sup>36</sup>

I do not believe, as Bookchin did, that a libertarian municipalist project could in fact be non-statist in character. I will briefly address this issue below. For now, let us assume that libertarian municipalism *is* a non-statist project as Bookchin and the PKK – though with more ambivalence than Bookchin – claim. Does having a non-statist approach mean that the PKK is no longer a nationalist organization?

Most of the PKK's recruits continue to be Kurdish. The leaders of the organization, such as Cemil Bayık and Murat Karayılan, continue to speak about such things as the 'national unity' of the Kurds.<sup>37</sup> And Kurdish identity continues to serve as the basis for the PKK's political agenda. These realities have not been changed by the fact that the organization no longer openly subscribes to a 'statist' outlook. It also does not matter that the PKK has formulated its political project as one that seeks to win rights for marginalized ethnic groups – Arabs and Armenians, for instance – that live alongside the Kurds. The PKK's inclusionary nationalism is hardly the first of its kind.<sup>38</sup>

What about the idea that Bookchin only distanced himself from conventional, statist nationalist movements? This claim ignores the numerous rebukes that Bookchin raised against nationalism *as such*. For Bookchin, nationalism *as such* was 'a regressive atavism'; nationalism *as such* was 'a form of tribalism writ large'; nationalism *as such* was 'a social pathology.'

It is certainly true that Bookchin held the 'statist and authoritarian' objectives of such groups as the Vietnamese Communists in particularly contemptuous regard. But he seemed to have little hope, in general, that the politicization of ethnic and cultural differences could lead to progressive social change over the long term. A nationalist struggle that one day seemed to provide a basis for progressive social change could very easily, according to Bookchin, be turned in the opposite direction. Nationalist

movements were set in motion on behalf of a small subset of humanity: they sought to forward the interests of the particular nations they represented, however broadly these nations might be conceived of. They therefore fell far short of the Enlightenment goal of winning freedom for all of humanity.

Given their inherently restricted social bases, Bookchin seemed to believe that a regressive political outlook came naturally to nationalist movements. If a nationalist movement seemed to possess a progressive political outlook at any particular moment, it would not be long before it would openly avow a regressive agenda. 'Nationalisms that only a generation ago might have been regarded as national liberation struggles,' Bookchin wrote, '*are more clearly seen today ... as little more than social nightmares and devilizing blights.*'<sup>39</sup> Thus, as far as Bookchin was concerned, the progressive-seeming national liberation struggles of the anti-colonial era were, from the outset, 'little more than social nightmares and devilizing blights.' It was only a matter of time until they were 'clearly seen' as such.

As noted earlier, Biehl tells us that Bookchin would have celebrated the Kurdish cause if he were still alive. It is possible that Biehl is right. We, of course, have no way of ascertaining what his attitude would have been. But given his outlook on nationalism it seems to me that, rather than adopting the Kurdish cause as his own, Bookchin may well have distanced himself from it. Just as he had told Leftists in the 1960s to stop 'hiding under Ho's and Mao's skirts,' he may well have told those who have decided to champion the Kurdish cause to stop hiding under Ocalan's skirt. Instead of looking to an ethnonationalist struggle for inspiration, he may have told them that their 'real job is to overthrow domestic capitalism by dealing with the real possibilities of an American revolution!'

### Assessing Bookchin's anti-nationalism

An assessment of Bookchin's overall thought cannot be attempted here, but a critical light must be shone on his position on nationalism. To begin with, whatever their limitations may have been, the anti-colonial mobilizations of the twentieth century brought the downtrodden – the hungry, the poor, the women, the low-castes – into the field of struggle against their oppressors. These movements challenged not only imperialist domination but also traditional hierarchies, from gender-based oppression to landlordism. Through the struggles for national liberation, the longing for freedom – that most beautiful of human strivings – was given material shape.

But because these movements had their basis in national identity and sought to capture state power, Bookchin was not willing to extend his support to them. Indeed, as we saw above, Bookchin believed opposing imperialism by supporting struggles for national liberation was akin to the kind of lesser evilism that led to the rise of Hitler. In the case of Vietnam,

for instance, Bookchin opposed both American imperialism and the Communist-led liberation struggle.

Bookchin did not seem to realize that in the Vietnam of the 1960s Hitlerism was not on the way, it was already present in the form of the American assault on the country. The American intervention, with its *de facto* 'kill anything that moves' policy,<sup>40</sup> could hardly have been outdone by a Hitler. Short of its nuclear arsenal, the US deployed practically every kind of conventional and chemical weapon available to it against the Vietnamese. The outcome was the erasure of millions of lives and the utter devastation of the countryside. Strikingly, the American intervention in Vietnam also happened to feature support for a military dictator who openly revered Adolf Hitler.<sup>41</sup>

Bookchin's anti-nationalist outlook led him to find no hope in the heroic struggle of the Vietnamese against foreign and domestic Hitlerism. Rather, he placed his hopes in the rebellious youth culture that was developing in the 1960s United States. Not the wretched of the Earth who were actively trying to reconfigure the global order, but discontented youth 'who smoke pot, fuck off on their jobs, drift into and out of factories, grow long or longish hair' were Bookchin's revolutionary agents of choice in the 60s.<sup>42</sup>

As the rebelliousness of the 60s gave way in the following decades to a more-or-less apolitical countercultural outlook, Bookchin distanced himself from the lifestyle anarchism that he had at one time supported – he became a champion of 'social anarchism.'<sup>43</sup> In the last years of his life, he decided that the anarchist label was not for him and opted for calling himself a 'communalist.'<sup>44</sup> Despite going through a number of changes in outlook over the course of his life, Bookchin did not find reason to reevaluate his position on nationalism. If anything, as the fall of the Eastern Bloc in the 1990s precipitated the rise of reactionary nationalisms, Bookchin became all the more adamant that Leftists should, on principle, be anti-nationalists.

In response to Bookchin's anti-nationalism, it should be pointed out that not all nationalisms are alike. Knowing that a movement is nationalist is hardly sufficient for arriving at an understanding of its specific content. The fact that the Kurds of Turkey and Iraq have produced rival nationalist movements, varying greatly in content, could hardly be made sense of if Bookchin's outlook was to be accepted. The nationalism promoted by the Turkish state, to cite another example, is not the same as the nationalism taken up by the Kurdish movement in Turkey. To condemn both of these equally is hardly defensible from a moral standpoint. Nationalisms of the oppressed can often enough be mobilized as forces for progressive social change. The PKK's efforts to achieve women's liberation is a case in point.

Bookchin was willing to admit that the state, for all its faults, had played a historically progressive role: 'national consolidation of peoples along territorial lines did produce a social sphere that was broader than the narrow kinship basis for kinship societies because it was obviously more open to strangers.'<sup>45</sup>

But looking to the present, he could see no means by which the state could contribute to human progress. 'Frontiers have no place on the map of the planet,' Bookchin noted regarding the present, 'any more than they have a place on the landscape of the mind.'<sup>46</sup>

Whatever Bookchin may have thought, it is not clear that the state has exhausted its potential to serve as a means to achieve social progress. Indeed, it hardly seems plausible that the kind of transformational changes Bookchin saw as necessary could be brought about without capturing state power. How would we, for instance, confront capital without having the power of the state at our disposal? What is more, it is not clear that Bookchin's libertarian municipalism offers a route that would remain, to the end, anti-statist. For what is a federation of municipalities if it is not a kind of state?<sup>47</sup>

### Concluding remarks on the enduring power of nationalism

In his four-volume history of the European revolutionary tradition Bookchin argued that, in contrast to the great revolutions in Europe, the 'ideological impact' of the national liberation struggles in the Global South 'has been very limited.'<sup>48</sup> It turns out, however, that the paradigm of national liberation has been so impactful that, in the form of the Kurdish struggle for self-determination, it has managed to appropriate the political project of a rabid anti-nationalist like Bookchin.

It is quite ironic that the political outlook Bookchin worked all of his life to develop and propound has come to be associated with a nationalist movement. White notes that Bookchin has acquired a 'new life' by having been linked with the Kurdish struggle.<sup>49</sup> Indeed, in the hands of Kurdish nationalism, Bookchin's thought has acquired a political life far more vibrant than it achieved while he was alive. As Biehl highlights, in his final years Bookchin lived with a dejected state of mind, having resigned himself to the view that the political project he had hoped to bring into being would remain unborn.<sup>50</sup> Nationalism, a creed Bookchin had no time for, has managed to deliver the baby!

Yet, the legitimacy – if not the salience – of traditional struggles for national liberation does seem to be on the decline. Otherwise, why would a group like the PKK seek to present its struggle in the garb of an anti-nationalist political outlook? That the PKK has adopted a political outlook which would appear to be unsuitable for its purposes is certainly of interest. Though, we should not find it to be all that puzzling. It seems to me that the PKK's turn away from Marxism to a decentralist, anarchist-inspired ideological orientation is hardly out of the ordinary. The PKK appears to be following a global trend that has been in motion for a number of decades.<sup>51</sup> Öcalan, who used to be regarded as a Castro-type figure, stands in today as a Middle Eastern Subcomandante Marcos.

By way of concluding, it will be worthwhile to make note of, and attempt to partially fill, a gap that has opened up as a result of what I have presented. I have demonstrated that Bookchin was an anti-nationalist. I have also argued that, despite having taken up Bookchin as its theorist of choice, the PKK has not abandoned nationalism. The following question, therefore, necessarily arises: if Bookchin's thought is unsuitable for the PKK's nationalist purposes, how exactly has the organization managed to make it fit?

A sufficiently rigorous answer to this question cannot be attempted here. It will have to be left for a later time. It should be possible, however, to outline the most basic feature of Öcalan's appropriation of Bookchin. While claiming to offer a non-nationalist political agenda, Öcalan has in fact placed Kurdish nationalism on a refurbished basis: with Bookchin's help, he has invented new nationalist myths.

Öcalan has, in particular, reworked the myth of Kurdish origins. Kurdish nationalists have traditionally claimed that the origins of the Kurds can be traced back to the ancient Median civilization.<sup>52</sup> Today, Öcalan would have us believe that Kurdish origins extend back much farther to the pre-civilizational era. Indeed, even modern-day Kurds apparently remain pre-civilizational – 'the society I was born into,' Öcalan maintains, 'has not really progressed beyond Neolithic culture.'<sup>53</sup> In other words, the Kurds approximate to Bookchin's 'organic society.'<sup>54</sup>

National myths of origin are, invariably, just that: myths. Yet they play an important role in forging a collective consciousness and mobilizing nationalist projects.<sup>55</sup> Even as he claims to no longer be a nationalist, Öcalan's recasting of the Kurdish myth of origin serves to animate the Kurdish nationalist movement. But we need not, I think, see Öcalan as engaging in conscious duplicity. We can take his attempt to fashion a non-nationalist political project as being sincere enough. The failure of his attempt would seem to highlight the enduring power of nationalism. Nationalism appears to work through even those who would try to escape its grasp. It moves, to borrow a phrase from Marx, behind the backs of men.

## Notes

1. The tribute was forwarded to Janet Biehl, Bookchin's partner. The full text is available at PKK Assembly, "2006: PKK's salute to Bookchin."
2. The original edition of the book was published under the pseudonym Lewis Herber. The revised 1974 edition appeared under Bookchin's name. Bookchin, *Our Synthetic Environment*.
3. Bookchin, *The Third Revolution*, 18.
4. De Jong, "Stalinist Caterpillar."
5. Gunter, *Out of Nowhere*, 122–4.
6. White, *The PKK*.
7. White, "Murray Bookchin's New Life."



8. Biehl, "Bookchin, Öcalan, and the Dialectics of Democracy."
9. Ibid.
10. Biehl, "Thoughts on Rojava."
11. Bookchin, *Post-scarcity Anarchism*, 208.
12. Bookchin, *The Next Revolution*, 31.
13. Bookchin, *The Ecology of Freedom*, 110.
14. Bookchin was adamant that the development of gerontocracy preceded the development of patriarchy – the old came to dominate the young before men dominated women. For our purposes, whichever form of hierarchy Bookchin believed developed first is not important. (I am actually not sure if the order is all that important even for Bookchin's purposes.)
15. Bookchin, *The Ecology of Freedom*, 165.
16. Ibid., 215.
17. Ibid.
18. Bookchin, *The Next Revolution*, 47–8.
19. Ibid., 171.
20. Ibid., 136.
21. Ibid., 117.
22. Ibid., 134.
23. Ibid., 136.
24. Ibid., 133.
25. Ibid., 133–4.
26. Bookchin, *Post-scarcity Anarchism*, 206.
27. Bookchin, *The Next Revolution*, 129.
28. Ibid., 128–9.
29. Bookchin, *Post-scarcity Anarchism*, 257.
30. Ibid., 261.
31. Bookchin, *The Next Revolution*, 135.
32. Ibid., 136.
33. Akkaya and Jongerden, for instance, offer that the PKK has opted for 'a radical conception of democracy aiming at the dissociation of democracy from nationalism.' Üstündağ similarly maintains that the organization is beholden to "democratic autonomy" against nationalism.' Indeed, according to Üstündağ, Öcalan had been 'contemplating' a non-nationalist position 'since 1993.' Bozarslan goes further still: in light of Öcalan's apparent turn away from nationalism, he seems to have made the discovery that nationalism has not ever had a secure place in the Kurdish movement. Bozarslan's, especially, is a rather bold effort in reading history backwards. It exemplifies rather well the 'anachronistic fallacy' that Stephen Jay Gould warned against: 'No error of historical inquiry can match the anachronistic fallacy of using a known present to misread a past circumstance that could not possibly have been defined or influenced by events yet to happen.' In our case, in fact, scholars have rushed to misread the past before they have even come to terms with the 'known present' – that is, they have failed to critically assess Öcalan's claims about being a non-nationalist. I offer a tentative critical assessment of Öcalan's claims in the concluding paragraphs of the present essay. Akkaya and Jongerden, "Reassembling the Political"; Üstündağ, "Self-defense"; Bozarslan, "'Being in Time,'" 65–6; Gould, *The Richness of Life*, 179.
34. McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds*, 430.

35. In response to my decision to point to only the demographic issue as the source of the PKK's abandonment of separatism, a reviewer has noted that a number of other reasons could also be seen as contributing factors, including military attrition and the altered horizons of the post-Cold War era. The reviewer is completely correct, and has saved me some embarrassment by forcing me to add some nuance to this paragraph. I have, nonetheless, chosen to highlight the demographic issue because I think it, even absent all other reasons, makes the demand for a separate Kurdish homeland no longer a sensible one.
36. I think there are reasons to be sceptical about the PKK's earnestness in taking up libertarian municipalism, though the present essay is not the place to deal with this issue. I also happen to think there are reasons to be sceptical about the effectiveness of libertarian municipalism even if the earnestness with which it was taken up was not in question.
37. ANF, "Bayık"; "Karayılan."
38. As Vijay Prashad points out in his history of 'the darker nations,' post-war nationalist movements across the Global South – 'from Indonesia to Guatemala' – have tended to be inclusionary (or, as he terms it, 'multinational') in character. Prashad, *The Darker Nations*, 84–5.
39. Bookchin, *The Next Revolution*, 133. My emphasis.
40. Turse, *Kill Anything That Moves*.
41. Moynahan, "Our Ally," 49.
42. Bookchin, *Post-scarcity Anarchism*, 211.
43. Bookchin, *Social Anarchism or Lifestyle Anarchism*.
44. Bookchin, *The Next Revolution*, 24.
45. Ibid., 132.
46. Ibid.
47. Bookchin would no doubt have finessed this question by highlighting his respective definitions of the state and government:

While the state is the instrument by which an oppressive and exploitative class regulates and coercively controls the behavior of an exploited class by a ruling class, a government – or better still, a polity – is an ensemble of institutions designed to deal with the problems of consociational life in an orderly and hopefully fair manner.

- According to Bookchin, then, a libertarian federation of municipalities would be a government and not a state. Bookchin's is not, however, a widely accepted definition of the state. If we are to regard the state as the holder of the monopoly on violence – Weber's widely accepted definition – a Bookchinian federation of municipalities would indeed be a state. Bookchin, *The Next Revolution*, 13.
48. Bookchin, *The Third Revolution*, 17.
  49. White, "Murray Bookchin's New Life."
  50. Biehl, *Ecology or Catastrophe*.
  51. The intellectual expression of the global trend I am referring to is, of course, post-modernism. Its political expression includes a retreat from the state and the spread of particularist forms of identity politics. It should not surprise us that Bookchin believed the increasingly common politics of identity represented 'a decivilization of humanity.' Akkaya and Jongerden situate the PKK's ideological reorientation in the context of the same global trend as I do. Though, unlike Bookchin, they see it as something to be celebrated.

Bookchin, *The Next Revolution*, 111; Akkaya and Jongerden, “Reassembling the Political,” 2–5.

52. Edmonds, “Kurdish Nationalism,” 88.
53. Öcalan, *Manifesto for a Democratic Civilization*, 24.
54. For Bookchin, the non-hierarchical structures of ‘organic society’ began to be dissolved by the late Neolithic. But Öcalan is not a particularly close student of Bookchin’s, and he seems to associate the traits Bookchin finds in ‘organic society’ with the (supposedly-Neolithic) Kurds.
55. As McDowall reminds us, “There is a danger of outsiders dismissing such myths as worthless; they are valuable tools in nation building, however dubious historically, because they offer a common mystical identity, exclusive to the Kurdish people.’ *A Modern History of the Kurds*, 4.

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## Notes on contributor

**Umair Muhammad** is a PhD student in Political Science at York University, where his research focuses on nationalism. He is the author of *Confronting Injustice: Social Activism in the Age of Individualism* (2013), a book that challenges us to move beyond individualist and lifestyle-centric forms of activism.

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