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THE MODERN CRISIS  
by Murray Bookchin  

Philadelphia, New Society Publishers,  
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Reviewed by Jennifer Sells and Don Alexander  

Murray Bookchin's first book detailing the impending ecological crisis was published in 1962, six months before Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*. One would think that 24 years of seeing these prophecies come true would cause him to despair, but *The Modern Crisis* is not a pessimistic book. On the contrary, Bookchin is one of those rare individuals who is able to face the horrors of our age, trace them to their roots and propose means of restoring
an ethical and ecological balance. In the four essays which make up this book, he challenges many of our society's fundamental assumptions about economics, human nature, our way of conducting politics, and so-called "realistic" approaches to current problems.

Bookchin doesn't dwell, however, on descriptions of societal ills but rather goes further to examine the nature of the disease and the ethical imbalance in the body politic which has brought us to our current crisis. He finds particularly distressing the degree to which many opponents of the status quo seem to share many of its assumptions. He describes how, since the Victorian era, political radicalism has been permeated with a view of human nature which says that human beings act basically out of self-interest, ignoring the many instances in history when people have been motivated by the highest ideals. This theory finds its echo in the policies of various organizations — including environmental ones — which maintain a dual mentality: a "hidden agenda" of idealistic goals, combined with pitches to self-interest intended for public consumption ("environmentalism is good for the economy," etc.) Rarely do we challenge the prevailing values that fuel our materialistic culture or the harm it does to the biosphere.

For Bookchin, this derives from moral relativism — namely, that there are no ultimate truths, just each individual striving to maximize his or her own satisfaction. This moral relativism flourishes in the climate created by what he calls the "market economy" (his term for capitalism) in which all personal and social interactions are reduced to commercial ones. Thus, the values of the marketplace (with the "what's in it for me?" mentality) come to dominate how people behave and replace community and other humanistic loyalties which have an ethical base.

"Cost/benefit analysis" has similar roots. For Bookchin, this is not just an analytical "tool," it is a form of pragmatism — a way of looking at problems which says that for every "good," there must be a corresponding "evil." If you want jobs, you have to accept environmental degradation or the setting up of arms manufacturing establishments. The reason we must choose between "lesser evils" (say, unemployment or pollution) is because the interests of humanity and nature (and different groups of human beings) are seen to be in conflict. The best one can hope for is to juggle these competing interests. By accepting "self-interest," defined under the system as a given, social change activists shirk the responsibility to place society on a new moral basis, whereby these conflicts might be done away with.

But for Bookchin, this avoidance is not realistic. To be genuine realists, we must look "beyond the given state of affairs to a vision." To do this requires developing an ethics that goes beyond "what's good for you is good for you and what's good for me is good for me." It requires what Bookchin calls "objective ethics" — an ethics grounded in something universal. For Bookchin, this "universal" is nature, but he cautions his readers against seeing nature as a source of revealed wisdom. Stalin, Hitler, Plato, and Edmund Wilson (of "socio-biology" fame) have all justified oppressive practices or beliefs on grounds of "natural law." To develop an objective ethics requires a philosophical outlook which is sensitive and not overly simplistic. For instance, we can appreciate the contingency existing between nature and society, while remaining mindful of their differences.

To put things on a better footing, Bookchin advocates a new way of looking at nature and society called "social ecology." Throughout the book, he tries to give us a picture of what this philosophy looks like. Social ecology's message can be summed up in the following points: humanity is confronted by a twin crisis — social and ecological — neither of which can be solved in isolation; all forms of domination and hierarchy must be seen as interrelated; there are certain principles which promote good in both nature and society, and our current social system is retarding their implementation. These principles include: unity-in-diversity (in which different species, communities or individuals are seen as performing complementary functions), participation, co-operation, and autonomy of development. With regard to the latter, Bookchin sees both human beings and other life forms as striving for greater complexity and diversity, becoming in the process more adaptive and capable of participating in the larger whole.

Current social structures, by their bigness and their tendency to isolate individuals, violate these principles. The scale of the modern nation-state makes it almost impossible to participate in political life. The breakup of "human scale" societies (such as used to exist in rural areas), and the reduction of people to "buyers" and "sellers," retards our development as human beings by removing the supportive community networks which used to nourish our humanity. By destroying tropical rainforests, limiting seed varieties and wiping out cultures with different priorities and value systems, capitalism is literally simplifying the natural and social environment, endangering the richness of evolution and the whole planet's ability to survive.

To recover our humanity, we must become full participants in society. To do this requires reclaiming the municipality as an arena for participation. Bookchin advocates "libertarian municipalism" — activism at the local level designed to win back decision-making power for the grassroots. This requires an ability to "act locally" and "think globally." It requires changing the colour of radicalism from red to green, bringing together concerns for peace, feminism, ecology, and aboriginal rights into a "new social movement."

What's needed above all is creativity and imagination. In Bookchin's words, "It will not be for want of solutions that [our] condition will remain but rather for want of the willingness to see what has changed in recent decades that renders traditional 'isms' obsolete. The answers are gestating in our body politic; what we lack are the obstetricians who can bring them to birth..."

The Modern Crisis is Bookchin's contribution towards finding these obstetricians. Each essay is so rich in ideas, we were compelled to give an overview of the book as a whole. More accessible than many of his other writings, The Modern Crisis nonetheless demands of its readers a commitment to think things through for themselves. Those who approach it with this attitude will not be disappointed.

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