

Social Ecology's Australian Metamorphosis: David Wright Talks with Mark A. Schroll

Introduction

The name Social Ecology (for those of us who are familiar with it) brings to mind an immediate association with the work of Murry Bookchin. This too was my first thought when I heard about the book *Social Ecology: Applying Ecological Understanding to our Lives and our Planet* (2011), edited by David Wright, Catherine Camden-Pratt and Stuart Hill. This article provides a sneak preview of the ideas represented in *Social Ecology* that unfolded as a series of email exchanges between myself and Wright; a review of this book is planned for a future issue of *The Trumpeter* on “Ecosophies of Communication.”

This article begins with a short summary of Bookchin's perspective—and the way we have come to understand Social Ecology. Followed by a brief definition of what I mean by transpersonal ecosophy. This sets the stage for my communication with Wright, where we will begin to see how the views of Social Ecology have metamorphosed at the University of Western Sydney into a fresh multidisciplinary inquiry. An inquiry that is different only in the name with which it has chosen to identify itself, yet otherwise shares the deep ecology movement's orientation and (following Arne Naess and Alan Drengson) what I now prefer to call *transpersonal ecosophy*.

The Social Ecology of Murry Bookchin

Before I begin this brief commentary on Murry Bookchin, I want to point out that this is not intended to be a comprehensive examination of his work. It is instead a summary of Bookchin's views on social ecology that will hopefully be useful toward assisting us in distinguishing between his views and those guiding the Social Ecology program at the University of Western Sydney.

The fondest memories of the late Murry Bookchin (who passed away in 2006) are offered by Stuart Hill in Chapter 1 of *Social Ecology* (2011). Hill tells us: [Bookchin's] “central historical position was that domination of nature has its roots in the domination of humans by other humans, first on the basis of age and gender, and later also race and class” (Hill: 17-18, 2011). This is what I like to call *the benevolent Bookchin* whose views are represented in article's such as “Cities, Councils and Confederations” (1990a). According to the benevolent Bookchin:

There is a need for a new sensibility, a new feeling of care and of love for all forms of life, a feeling of responsibility, a feeling of atunement with the natural world that we are destroying today. It's terribly important that every environmental issue be examined in the light of its social causes. But I

think, too, that this involves a spiritual revolution in our outlook toward each other and toward the natural world. We need a sense of our place in the natural world such that we, as products of nature, act in the service of natural evolution as well as social evolution (Bookchin: 126, 1990a).

Bookchin's benevolent persona is his own invention of an ideal type, representative of a man profoundly concerned with helping to solve the eco-crisis threatening the existence of all Earth's creatures. Nevertheless Bookchin was also a man who wrestled with his shadow. Enter *the owly, or disgruntled Bookchin*. Hill sums up this shadow orientation, telling us: [Bookchin] "is most known for his disappointments (e.g., with ecologists) . . . and dislikes – notably hierarchical systems, mysticism, primitivism, postmodernism and deep ecology" (Hill: 17, 2011). Let me also briefly add before continuing that if anyone has memories of the benevolent Bookchin, I would welcome knowing these recollections as a further contribution toward providing a complete understanding of his life and work.

Still, in recollecting the intellectual legacy of Bookchin, the memory of his owly, disgruntled, shadow persona looms large. We need only refer to his own writing as evidence of this, such as his article "Social Ecology Versus Deep Ecology" (1987) from which I will borrow a few selected quotes that I hope will not be viewed as taking his work out of context. Bookchin writes:

The greatest differences that are emerging within the so-called "ecology movement" of our day are between a vague, formless, often self-contradictory ideology called "deep ecology" and a socially oriented body of ideas called "social ecology". . . . The love affair of deep ecology with Malthusian doctrines, a spirituality that emphasizes self-effacement, a flirtation with a *supernaturalism* that stands in flat contradiction to the refreshing naturalism that ecology has introduced into social theory, a crude positivism in the spirit of Naess—all work against a truly organic dialectic so needed to understand *development*. . . . Taoist and Buddhist pieties replace the need for social and economic analysis, and self-indulgent encounter groups replace the need for political organization and action. . . . [This indictment also includes] shamanistic eco-babble. . . . and the latent racism, first-world arrogance, and Yuppie-nihilism of post-modernistic spiritualism (Bookchin: 13-26, 1987).

In becoming aware of Bookchin's criticism (and I left out some of his more vitriolic statements), I began to understand the intensity of caustic attitudes directed toward me (whenever I mentioned the deep ecology movement) by several young activists I began meeting in 1989. My initial attempt to sort out this misunderstanding was to write a self-reflective article on what the deep ecology movement meant to me (Schroll, 2007), followed by a brief recollection of my personal encounters with Arne Naess in honor of his passing (Schroll, 2010).

More directly, one of the most thorough scholarly critiques of Bookchin is Robyn Eckersley's "Divining Evolution: The Ecological Ethics of Murry Bookchin" (1989). Summarizing her article, Eckersley tells us:

I focus only on one aspect of his work (albeit a very important one), namely, the ecological ethics derived from his nature philosophy. . . . The central question examined is whether his synthesis of biological and political ideas is a coherent and desirable one from both a methodological and normative standpoint. . . . In particular, his promising claim that his ecological ethics offers the widest realm of freedom to all life forms is undercut by the way he develops his distinction between first and second nature (corresponding to the nonhuman and human realms respectively). Indeed, I argue that there is a certain arrogance in his claim that humans have now discerned the course of evolution, which they have an obligation to further, on the grounds that it ultimately favors human attributes over the attributes of other life forms and therefore cannot deliver his central promise of freedom or self-directedness writ large (Eckersley: 101-102, 1989).

Rather than attempting additional distillation of Eckersley's comprehensive inquiry and analysis of Bookchin's work, I encourage everyone to read her article for themselves. Similarly I encourage everyone to also read Bookchin's reply to Eckersley (Bookchin, 1990b), and in particular take a deep breath as you read these articles, listen to the wind, feel the ground beneath your feet, hear the sounds of the nonhuman world, and remember that finding a path toward solving the eco-crisis is what all of us are all hoping to achieve.

What Do I Mean By Transpersonal Ecosophy?

At the 2009 Society for the Anthropology of Consciousness (SAC) conference, during the forum "The History and Future of Ecopsychology," Alan Drengson pointed out that in response to Warwick Fox's *Toward a Transpersonal Ecology* (1990) Arne Naess said a better title would have been "Toward a Transpersonal Ecosophy":

This is because Naess' view of self-realization embodies a transpersonal perspective that derives from his personal philosophical approach that he called Ecosophy-T. Ecosophy, meaning "a philosophy of ecological harmony or equilibrium. A philosophy as a kind of sofia (or) wisdom . . . The T refers to the mountain hut Tvergastein" (Drengson and Devall: 6-7, 2008). "The Deep Ecology Movement" (private distribution). "Ecosophy is [a] creation of relationships which honor all others as subjects, whether these are humans, animals, plants, or inanimate beings" (Drengson: 12, 1991). "Process, Relationships and Ecosophy" (private distribution). Transpersonal ecosophy also embodies experiential insight derived from techniques of consciousness expansion that liberate us from the "human

superiority complex . . . “ (Metzner, 1999) . . . Transpersonal ecosophy represents liberation from the paradigmatic restrictions that . . . perceive any state of consciousness that is not within the normal range of consciousness as abnormal (Tart, 1975) (Schroll: 8-9, 2009) (Schroll: 4, 2011).

Understanding Social Ecology's Metamorphosis in Australia

In late June of 2011 the seeds of this article were sown when I happened to read a post by David Wright on Liam O'Sullivan's Ecopsychology Facebook page, prompting me to post a reply; what follows is Wright's and my ongoing communications.

Mark A. Schroll: I briefly glanced at your books listing and look forward to learning more how you've combined shamanism, the deep ecology movement, etc, with social ecology. Robyn Eckersley and Murry Bookchin had a quite lively discussion in *Environmental Ethics* years ago regarding their differences; did any of this come up for you? I am just now in the process of sending to press a paper originally written by Alan Drengson and (the late) Bill Devall that I revised with Alan's assistance on the history of the deep ecology movement (Drengson, Devall and Schroll, In Press). A further bridge with social ecology has been needed which is why I am writing. I look forward to your thoughts.

David Wright: Social Ecology as we have worked with it here integrates the personal, social, environmental and dreaming/imaginative/spiritual relationships. As such deep ecology and shamanism (and catholicism and surfing culture and more) are viewed as both personal experiences and social phenomena. As such they are negotiated in the construction of knowledge and experience rather than challenged as philosophical systems. It is therefore the experience of deep ecology [and these other areas I listed] rather than the ideology that contributes to our social ecology. [I'm] not sure how this squares with Bookchin and Eckersley.

Schroll: This clarifies how you've framed Social Ecology, and you have created several valuable bridges. You have also saved or freed yourself from previous entanglements that resulted in the Bookchin and Eckersley debate. Based on what I have learned so far your vision of Social Ecology seems closer or consistent with what I (following Arne Naess and Alan Drengson) have referred to as "transpersonal ecosophy." I often cringe at the proliferation of names that continue to spring up, and sometimes feel the wrangling involved in sorting it all out detracts from why we are doing all this in the first place--which is to solve the eco-crisis. Still it is important to know where people's heads are at and how this influences the way they put their feet on the ground. Thank you for the time and effort you have put into our exchange, David, and for taking on the task of writing your book.

Liam O'Sullivan: Mark, I was very lucky to be guided through my educational journey by David. Social Ecology at the University of Western Sydney represents a very special place. I did the Undergraduate degree before finishing up with the Post Grad thing before my interests transformed into education. Information about the program Social Ecology at the University of Western Sydney can be found at http://www.uws.edu.au/future-students/postgraduate/postgraduate/postgraduate_courses/social_science_courses/arts_social_ecology

Wright: Thanks Liam. To further the conversation with Mark. I think with idea systems such as those we are discussing there is a lot to be said about the context of their occurrence. In our book Stuart Hill engages more substantially with Bookchin than I do. He has taught with him and worked for a long time in North America. My relationship to Bookchin is less tangible. I have read some of his work and am aware of him as a mythic figure. I also know of him as major contributor to debate on Social Ecology. I see his work as emerging from a combination of agrarian socialism/anarchism (drawing on the Russian traditions), responses to the excesses of industrial capitalism and American rural idealism. Here influences range from Thoreau and Emerson to the religious communities that arrived in the early years of US settlement to set up faith based rural settlements.. There is another tradition of Social Ecology. This arose in the UK, and key figures include Emery and Trist (1973). They also responded to the excesses of industrial capitalism by searching for forms of organisational change that were and are deeply democratic. This tradition was also influenced by psychotherapeutic movements, particularly group therapies. There was some conversation across the Atlantic between these groups, but it was probably more one way than two way (i.e. US > UK). This is discussed at greater length in the Introduction and Chapter. 1 of our book.) The Social Ecology program we run at UWS, which emerged in the 1980's draws on both the US and UK approaches. In practical terms it emerged from the interaction of agricultural extension movements and Heron's co-counselling (fuelled also by a little post-hippy idealism). It quickly developed a systemic orientation, and Gregory Bateson and Humberto Maturana became very influential in the work being done (primarily, the construction of democratic pedagogy, driven by radical constructivism and self organising systems theory).

Since our program's inception issues of *place* have become influential, as have the issues of *learning*, *transformation* and *sustainability*. This is driven in part by the requirements of the university structures we are required to fit in and teach through. Your identification of my description as transpersonal ecosophy is something with which I agree, but it may not be an appropriate description for all who work or have worked in or through our model. The context of our practice differs considerably from that in other places and so does our practice. Agrarian socialism has a long history in Australia but less

so religious fundamentalism. The Australian land, soil, water, sun, fauna and flora, etc., differ incredibly from that elsewhere and this serves to define understanding of social-ecological relationships differently. The greatest value for me in the term "social ecology" is as a descriptor that enables deeper and more effective engagement with the breadth of relationships that determine consciousness. I (perhaps unlike some of my colleagues) do not relate to it as an ideology. Clearly, this is a big conversation and it is nice to be invited into it by Liam.

Schroll: These last two comments add considerable clarity, David; learning now there is direct engagement with Bookchin's ideas in your book. I am glad Stuart Hill engages with Murray's work. This peaks my interest more to learn where Bookchin's thinking is at these days, since in 1991 he sort of sought reconciliation with the deep ecology movement with his conversation with Dave Foreman in their book *Defending the Earth*. I would have rather seen a conversation between Bookchin and Michael Zimmerman, or Arne Naess, or Alan Drengson, but because this did not happen, it leaves us with the task of sorting all this out. The importance of Social Ecology's roots in an agrarian/socialism and anarchism movement is a practical one that tends to get left out of the deep ecology movement, humanistic and transpersonal perspectives, and ecocriticism and/or literary ecology (even though literary ecology includes Thoreau and Emerson). Somehow within this we need to add Wes Jackson's practical development of "sustainable agriculture" through his creation of "perennial seeds" (Jackson, 1991, 2009).

I also gained considerable interest in your book with your mention of Bateson (and Maturana and Varela did flesh out Bateson's ideas). Nora Bateson (Gregory's youngest daughter wrote today) as I am assisting her with a screening of her film *An Ecology of Mind* in the San Francisco Bay Area in spring 2012. I am also Co-Editing a Special Issue of *The Trumpeter* on "Ecosophies of Communication/Ecology of Mind: Exploring the Worldview of Gregory Bateson & Arne Naess." I am also reaching the conclusion that a review of your book on the way you have framed "Social Ecology" would fit the theme of this Special Issue. I would have to run the idea of including a review of your book by Michael Caley. I also agree with you that it is important to move beyond religious fundamentalism, or any rigid ideological system of thought where self-correction and revision of fundamental assumptions is prevented. Scepticism can be a very valuable tool up to a point. You are also right that this is a big conversation, and I look forward to continuing this discussion with you.

Wright: Thanks Mark, a review in *The Trumpeter* would be welcome. I will see if the publisher can push a copy your way. I had a piece published in *The Trumpeter* (Wright, 2001), and would welcome an opportunity to contribute again. The themed issue sounds interesting. Just a few things: our book is an edited collection. 27 chapters by authors from Australia, Canada and New

Zealand. The invitation was offered to those who have '*influenced or been influenced by*' the program we have run since the 1980's. So inspiring North American educators like Edmund O'Sullivan and Jack Miller are included alongside recent graduates. It is in some respects an eclectic collection of deeply engaged pieces of writing. It includes works of intellectual analysis alongside personal narratives. This link is an activist one - built around 'learning'.

Overview of the Social Ecology Program at the University of Western Sydney

Wright: In an attempt to sort of sum up our conversation, there are a few things I want to say about the Social Ecology programs that we have run here at UWS for over 20 years... mainly because I see differences between philosophy and site-based practice. The first is that my teaching (and learning) here is situated in a mainstream university with a rapidly growing, ethnically diverse and traditionally under-educated enrolment base. UWS is not a niche-based or specialist university. Its function is mass education for professional life – for employment. So, the programs we offer, at undergraduate and postgraduate level, are radical, imaginative and transdisciplinary in a university that is constructed and managed around strong disciplinary boundaries. This does not mean compromise, but it does mean our work is always political. We need to – and do -- reflect on and make meaning from our experience here constantly. So we are required to both teach our subject matter and use it to function in an environment that is not of our making, but one that we are required to participate in, and serve in the co-creation of, constantly.

Second, our courses have always identified learning as their principal focus: 'learning about learning'. We have sought to inculcate a reflective meta-analysis: an observation of self in context as a base for theory. This means we have required self-consciousness, reflection, observation, vulnerability and creative communication, and while some staff have had qualifications in psychology (principally archetypal, process-based and Buddhist psychology) and while the self in context has always been our subject matter, and while our students have often been counsellors and psychotherapists and teachers of these practices, our programs have never sought to train counselling or psychotherapy. . Counselling professionals have come to us lamenting the lack of breadth in their training, seeking deeper and more absorbing conversation, rather than specific vocational insights. Our social ecology program, with its focus on the construction of knowledge through conscious awareness of participation in relationship, has been the attractor. This experience of practice emerging out of, then feeding back into theory – and our students leveraging this alongside staff -- has been our history. This has always made assessment a confronting, though deeply absorbing, process. It has also been the means by which we have

engendered powerful commitment from our students and long standing peer-relationships, in the years following graduation.

Also, after reading your article on Ecopsychology and Naess (Schroll, 2007), I wanted to mention that we have taught Ecopsychology in undergraduate and postgraduate programs since the early nineties. I taught the undergrad version for several years. It drew heavily on the writers you mention -- Roszak, Gomes, Kanner, Metzner, Fox, Abram -- in those years. Over the course of the years we have generated more of our own subject matter. Much of this was done through a focus on 'Sense of Place' and an inchoate search for an eco-spirituality. This, in a land inhabited by indigenous culture for 60,000 years and a Westernised culture for a little over 200, is a troubled and troubling search. The inquiry into sense of place, led by John Cameron, held site-based colloquiums in the centre, on the urban fringe, in the extreme south and within the controlled aesthetic of the national capital. In the centre we joined traditional custodians, feral white fringe-dwellers, scholars and story-tellers of various persuasions with a harsh, dry, seemingly barren land. And we came to know it through ritual, myth and absorbed attention, as intricate and fertile. We witnessed and wondered about our social ecology – as a community of initiates - our transpersonal eco-intelligence, our ontological coming-to-know in this remote location. And we took it home with us, to the edges of the city.

Now I am fixed on 'ecological understanding' - the reflective consciousness of inter-relatedness - and systems of learning. That systemic positioning is an essential part of the equation. I also like the term 'learning ecology' for the inflections it creates. This is an interpretive exercise of finding meaning in experience that is now languaged differently. And, as we know, languaging changes understanding and initiates renewed processes. The impulse is from Bateson (1972, 1979), Maturana and Varela (1987) and more recently O'Sullivan (1999, & Taylor 2004). It is also, and perhaps more importantly, from observation and experience of day-in day-out on the ground practice in schools and universities.

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