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Enclaves of Democracy

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How to defend ourselves from power and build a politics that belongs to us.

By George Monbiot, published in the Guardian 13th July 2022

Congratulations to some of Labour's leading figures, who have [begun to discover](#) some 19th Century proposals for political reform. Proportional representation, devolution from the centre, abolition of the House of Lords: a few senior Labour politicians are now taking the radical step of daring to contemplate these "radical" innovations. While I have nothing against 19th Century solutions to our 18th Century government, would it be too much to ask, at the risk of sending these bold pioneers into a dead faint, that they might also start exploring some more recent ideas?

Regardless of which creep beats the other creeps to become the next Prime Minister, inordinate power will again be granted to someone who should not be allowed anywhere near it. But even if the leading contenders to replace Boris Johnson had wings and halos, they still could not govern us well. Society is a complex system, and complex systems can never be sensibly and benevolently controlled from the centre. A centralised, hierarchical system means concentrated power, and concentrated power favours concentrated wealth. Systems like ours are easy for billionaires and their media empires to co-opt.

The human urge to take back control, loudly promised by governments that have done the opposite, is real. To a far greater extent than has been permitted in our recorded history, we should be allowed to manage our own lives.

In other words, it may be time to rediscover Murray Bookchin. Bookchin, who died in 2006, was a US foundryman, autoworker and shop steward who became a professor in the field he helped to develop: social ecology. While he has often been associated with anarchism, by the end of his life he had broken with that tradition. He called his political philosophy communalism.

His writings on this theme were published posthumously in a book called [The Next Revolution](#). You wouldn't read it for pleasure. His style is stern, clunky and verbose, without warmth or humour. But his ideas are powerful.

He makes a crucial distinction between statecraft and politics. He sees the state as a force for domination and statecraft as the means by which it is sustained. Politics, by contrast, is “the active engagement of free citizens” in their own affairs. He sees the municipality (village, town or city) as the place in which we first escaped from tribalism and parochialism and began to explore our common humanity. This is the arena in which we can now evade domination and create “a truly free and ecological society.”

Unlike classical anarchists, he proposes a structured political system, built on majority voting. It begins with popular assemblies, convened in opposition to the state, open to anyone from the neighbourhood who wants to join. As more assemblies form, they create confederations whose powers are not devolved downwards but delegated upwards. The assemblies send delegates to represent them at confederal councils, but these people have no powers of their own: they may only convey, coordinate and administer the decisions handed up to them. They can be recalled by their assemblies at any time. Eventually, in his vision, these confederations dislodge the states with which they compete.

He sees the assemblies as also gradually acquiring control over crucial elements of the local economy. Civic banks would fund land purchases and enterprises owned by the community. The aim is eventually to replace not only statecraft but also economic dominion.

Bookchin's communalism is a major inspiration in the [autonomous region](#) in

north-eastern Syria widely known as Rojava. After local people defeated the ISIL terrorists and the Syrian government withdrew its troops to fight its civil war elsewhere, the Rojavans took the chance to [build their own politics](#). Under extraordinarily [difficult circumstances](#), they have created a place in which people have more freedom and control than anywhere in the surrounding regions. It's by no means a perfect republic, but its people have made Bookchin's ideas work to an extent many believed was impossible.

This seems to be a feature of deliberative, participatory democracy: it works better in practice than it does in theory. Many of the obstacles critics imagine dissolve as people are transformed by the process in which they engage. A classic example is the [participatory budgeting](#) in Porto Alegre, southern Brazil. During its peak years (1989-2004) before it was curtailed by a more hostile local government, it transformed the life of the city. Corruption was almost eliminated, [human welfare](#) and public services [greatly improved](#). The decisions made by the people's assemblies were greener, fairer, wiser and more distributive than those the city government had made.

Why does it work better than we might imagine? Perhaps because the current system of domination persuades us of our own incapacity. It forces us into competition when we should be cooperating to solve our common problems. The horrible culture wars whipped up by governments and the media and fought between people with similar socio-economic interests are enabled by our exclusion from meaningful power: we have no opportunity to engage creatively with each other in building better communities. Disempowerment sets us apart. Shared, equal decision-making brings us together.

Even so, I don't see Bookchin's prescriptions as a panacea. I don't believe he deals adequately with the problems of global capital, global supply chains, defence against aggressive states or the need for global action on global crises. But at the very least, we can create enclaves of democracy in a landscape of domination. As the benefits of real, participatory democracy become apparent, more people will wonder why they can't have it. Given the apparent drift towards full-spectrum institutional collapse in the UK, it is hard to see how we,

the people, could do a worse job on many crucial issues than the state.

We are told that states and the dominion they impose, however dysfunctional and destructive they may be, are an inevitable and irreplaceable form of human organisation. Bookchin and those he has inspired help us to challenge this claim.

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