

'By extrapolating from the present, futurists are denying the future's potential'

Technology an instrument of domination - author

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For a speaker with such a fiery reputation, Murray Bookchin looks considerably tired. Slouching in a chair in a downtown Peterborough, Ont., restaurant, and caught in a dangling conversation with an admiring professor, he sorts through the remainder of his meal, and rubs his eyes. When told he must leave for the lecture hall, he rises slowly, thanks his hosts, and makes his way to car.

But when he assumes the podium, Murray Bookchin becomes someone else. Although well past the age of ordinary retirement, and no doubt having delivered most of this lecture many, many times before, Bookchin speaks with a disturbing yet caring passion, his voice loud enough to make the speaker system unnecessary. His words are enveloped in a thick, brooding New York accent, and his eyes are as expressive as his restless hands and arms.

And his message is not one that most people feel very comfortable hearing.

"We have gone very seriously wrong... we've deconstructed society in the name of progress, which is structured around domination. We are creating a legacy for future generations, if there are any, in which forests will be nothing but reeds, in which soil will be turned into sand, in which cities and concrete will cover up our landscape."

Murray Bookchin is a pioneering environmentalist, an author, and an anarchist. He takes pride in calling himself a human being because he feels modern civilisation is losing touch with what it means to be human.

Bookchin is delivering the keynote address of The Price of Progress, a student organised conference held at Trent University in January. As someone who has criticised modern theories of progress for decades, Bookchin is an ideal choice to speak on the subject. As the founder and director of the Institute for Social Ecology in Rochester, Vermont, Bookchin has developed the foundation of his ecological theories as an educator, researcher, and author of books such as The Ecology of Freedom and Towards an Ecological Society.

"The modern idea of progress has tainted everything. It has tainted our relationship with other people. The domination of nature has justified the domination of human by human, woman by man, and of so-called inferior ethnic groups by other 'superior' ones."

Bookchin, who has been described as being blessed with a "span of knowledge (that) is truly encyclopedic," blames the 18th century period known as the Enlightenment for the burden of problems with which the 20th century world must cope. The notion of the autonomous individual and the shift away from faith towards reason undermined past concepts of progress.

"So here we are, all free-willing egos, wandering around this world, exulting in any type of emancipation from interdependence or inter-association," Bookchin says. Placing the individual above the tribe was "a stab against the collective ... and the tribal form of bonding, of association, of responsibility."

Bookchin says Western civilisation has lost touch with what it means to be wise. "Wisdom is not what we prize. What we prize is a balanced budget and a good standoff from the cold war."

An inheritance from the Enlightenment is the notion that science is objective, an idea which "we celebrate to this day. Let's be frank, scientists must be objective. You just can't look at something today and say this is good or that is bad.

'We must re-define progress, re-examine the factors that have brought us to a condition where reason is rationalization of efficiency, individuality is egotism, self is self interest.'

The question is how it works, not why it exist."

Bookchin maintains this cult of scientific objectivity has plagued and dominated humans rather than liberated them. Excluding ethics in the name of objectivity makes it "very uncomfortable when people 'objectively' go around building neutron bombs."

While science has been corrupted enough to dominate nature, Bookchin says technology dominates humans. "We have not only developed domination so that we can blow up the world, we have developed it to blow up every ounce of personality."

"The result of technology has not been enlightenment. It has been the control of external nature to control internal nature - our own psyches, our own personalities," he said.

Technology as an instrument of domination has also bred "a means of surveillance, a means of control, that boggles the imagination. For all we know, this speech could be picked up by a satellite in space," Bookchin says with a brief, skyward glance. "Long live technology."

While Bookchin has grim news for current civilisation, he also has a bitter forecast for the future, as long as humans continue to want to undermine it. "The association of futurism is an attempt to actually destroy the future. By extrapolating from the present, futurists are denying the future's potential."

The eternal bigger-and-better philosophy of industry and govern-

ments actually limits our potential to grow, Bookchin says. "We are in fact a futureless people because of the sense of progress that we have."

Long active with the Green ecological movement, he says a recent visit to West Germany indicated major flaws in the urban development of Western civilisation. During a train ride between Frankfurt and Hamburg, covering a distance of approximately 750 km, Bookchin saw nothing but factories, power plants, and concret. He said the trip reinforced some of his ideas about reclaiming lost principles of progress and "reexamining where we went wrong."

"We have to re-define progress, and reexamine the factors that have brought us to a condition where reason has become nothing more than rationalisation of efficiency, where individuality has become nothing more than egotism, where self is defined in terms of your self-interest, not your personality or creativity, and where science has essentially become engineering."

What was once a market economy is now becoming what Bookchin calls "a market society" where humans equate one another with the commodities they consume. "And we use the language of that society for even the most intimate of relationships," Bookchin says. "People say, 'I'll buy into a marriage,' or 'I'll invest in my child's future.' Do you recognise the language when it's put in all its absurdity? We've engaged in a social cannibalism in which we put a

price tag on ourselves, sell ourselves, mediate ourselves, and define ourselves in terms of investments or balance sheets."

Bookchin says people should define themselves simply as humans, and redefine their relationship with nature. Rather than dominate nature, people should participate with natural cycles and feel they are an active part of it. Long an advocate of alternative energy techniques including solar energy, Bookchin says he favours using the sun and wind for other reasons.

"I'm not interested in solar energy simply because it's renewable. I think it's marvelous that it's renewable, but I particularly like it because it brings us into richer contact with the sun," he said. (Bookchin is a contradiction; he claims to have started the modern interest in solar energy by himself, and although a fairly modest man, his ego is at least large enough for him to also claim spawning mass interest in ecology years before the prominence of renowned author Rachel Carson.)

Bookchin's recent work with large cities, such as his native New York, tries to integrate urban and rural areas. "Urbanization is devouring both the city and the countryside," he says. As well as encouraging cities to decentralise with more power for neighbourhoods, Bookchin also encourages projects like organic gardening.

"I like organic gardening not because the food may be better or cheaper. I like it because it brings

us into close contact with soil. It makes me a participant in nature, and gets me involved with the cycle of the forms of life."

In order to achieve genuine progress, Bookchin believes society will have to become more organic as a whole. While calling for a technology that harmonises the relationship between humans and nature, he also wants a multi-tiered approach for genuine social change.

"In restructuring society, we have to begin on the most molecular level, right up to the most political basis, to create a new type of organic society. I want to restore a science that is ethical, and to bring ethics where it belongs, among the people. It's high time that ethics was not a discipline. Ethics is a practice."

Ethical approaches to restructuring society will mean grassroots participation. "I can't stress the importance of participation enough," Bookchin says to a small audience after the lecture. "We have to keep our individuality, our personalities, and our responsibilities to each other."

At the lecture hall, Bookchin urges, "we have to sort this out, and draw upon the whole wealth of human experience to make ourselves fuller people, wiser people, moral people, more inspired people, and finally people that can deal with technology. This society is so rational, so logical, so bent on conquest, that it can literally tear down every aspect of the human spirit."

Bookchin says humans are fighting a futile, and losing battle, against nature. "Nature is not negotiable. It's not like a Russian or American president who can sit down and talk about the arms race. It can take revenge upon us, and it could be incredible."

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