

## Social Ecology as an Ethical Foundation for Ecological and Community-Based Education

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### Abstract

This article briefly examines and explains the theory of social ecology and the political theory of *libertarian municipalism* as developed by the late Murray Bookchin (1921-2006) as a possible comprehensive framework for a secondary curriculum centered upon an anarchistic and ecological ethics. The author first offers an investigation of the philosophical foundations of social ecology and the political theory of libertarian municipalism and their implications for how we think about and practice education. Next, the author shares findings from an empirical study conducted at a small charter high school in a large metropolitan area that utilizes social ecology and community-based education to move its students toward enhanced self-actualization through active participation in nurturing greater community autonomy and in addressing social and environmental injustice. The aim of sharing these findings is to provide insight into how social ecology is understood and used by teachers and students within a school to foster social and ecological responsibility and activism on the community level.

### Introduction

The aim of this article is to briefly examine and explain the theory

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of social ecology and the political theory of *libertarian municipalism* as developed by the late Murray Bookchin (1921-2006) as a comprehensive framework for a secondary curriculum centered upon an anarchistic and ecological ethics. I first investigate the underlying philosophy of social ecology and its translation into a political theory and set of practices intended to foster sustainability, democracy, and human freedom. Next, I share some of the findings from an empirical study at a small charter high school in a large metropolitan area that utilizes social ecology and community-based education to move its students toward enhanced self-actualization through active participation in nurturing greater community autonomy and in addressing social and environmental injustice. The aim of sharing these findings is to provide insight into how social ecology is understood and used by teachers and students within a school to foster social and ecological responsibility and activism on the community level.

A number of educational scholars have examined the relationship between hierarchy and domination within human communities (based upon race, social class, gender, and sexual orientation, amongst others) and the increasing exploitation of the non-human natural world (Gruenwald, 2003; Kahn, 2010; Martusewicz, Edmundson, & Lupinacci, 2011). In his articulation of ecopedagogy, Kahn (2010) draws from the work of Herbert Marcuse and Ivan Illich to develop a radical critique of modern industrial civilization and the alienation and destruction it has wrought upon human and non-human life. Ecojustice education, in the words of Martusewicz, Edmundson, and Lupinacci (2011), “insists...that there have been both serious social injustices that result from [age-old] cultural assumptions as well as serious environmental damage, and that these should be seen as intertwined and bound to the same belief system” (p. 15). The goal of this approach is to provide a framework for teachers and teacher educators “to assume the responsibility for preparing citizens ready to create democratic and sustainable communities in an increasingly globalized world” (p. 18). I hope to build upon this work by explaining how social ecology both situates humans back within the intricate interdependencies of the material Earth (as opposed to having dominion over it) and, at the same time, foregrounds the necessity of the human species to respect and sustain their reliance upon other living and non-living systems.

The primary claim around which the theory of social ecology revolves is that domination and hierarchy within human social relations and within the human psyche itself emerged slowly and unevenly over time and eventually led to a hierarchical mentality regarding the relationship between human beings and the natural world (Bookchin,

1982/2005; Bookchin, 1990). Utilizing some of the fundamental principles of anarchism—including resistance to hierarchy, horizontal decision making, cooperation, and mutual aid—social ecology advances the idea that directly democratic, face-to-face decision making within communities by the individuals that inhabit them can help eliminate some of the feelings of alienation and disempowerment that give rise to the disconnection between humans and the natural environment and the resulting disregard for the biosphere. In short, directly democratic social relations on the level of the municipality can foster recognition of the mutualistic relationship between humans and the non-human natural world, make for more ecologically sustainable human activity, and create movement toward greater community autonomy and freedom from hierarchy (Best, 1998; Biehl & Bookchin, 1998; Bookchin, 1982/2005; Bookchin, 1992/1995; Bookchin & Eglad, 2007).

### Philosophy and Politics of Social Ecology: Dialectical Naturalism and Libertarian Municipalism

Bookchin's life, work, and the development of his theory of social ecology were deeply enmeshed with a number of the radical left social movements of his time. The late nineteenth and early twentieth century social anarchist movements were to have a profound impact upon the way he conceived of social change toward a more equitable and ecological society free of domination and hierarchy. Several of the major tenets of social ecology are specific articulations of anarchist principles within the realms of philosophy, politics, and social relations. Briefly, these principles include: a dynamic view of human nature; the importance of non-hierarchical, non-coercive relations; radically democratic, participatory decision-making; decentralization of institutions and decision-making processes; and the direct self-management of community issues and institutions by the individuals that inhabit those communities (Aragorn, 2012; Crow, 2011; Gordon, 2007; Graeber, 2004) While a number of scholars have examined the concrete implications of anarchist principles for educational endeavors (e.g., Amster, DeLeon, Fernandez, Nocella, II, & Shannon, 2009; Avrich, 1980/2006; DeLeon, 2006; DeLeon, 2008; Spring, 1998; Suissa, 2001; and Suissa, 2010), the articulation of these principles in Bookchin's social ecology seem to have particular relevance for an educational model aimed toward direct democracy and ecological sustainability.

In particular, Bookchin develops the philosophical basis of social ecology in 'dialectical naturalism,' or philosophy of nature, that expands upon the work of 19th century anarchist Peter Kropotkin. As Matt Hern

(1997) explains, dialectical naturalism suggests that “the example of an endlessly diverse, self-organizing, and mutualistic ecosystem should be the model for human society, rather than the simplistic and falsifying projection of nature as a brutal, competitive hierarchy, a misinterpretation that obscures the natural world’s inherent cooperativeness” (p. 64). From this perspective, social ecology advances the notion that the homogeneity, top-down decision-making, and competitiveness that characterize much of modern Western society actively work against the health and sustainability of communities, both human and natural, and, by extension, the educational communities developed within them.

Bookchin tended to view nature and natural evolution as an unfolding process toward greater differentiation and diversity (Bookchin, 1982/2005). However, human activity—in the form of destruction of natural habitats, monocrop agriculture, over-fishing of the oceans, and pollution of air and water, amongst others—has resulted in the mass extinction of species, loss of biotic diversity, and the undermining of complex ecosystems (Bookchin, 1980, 1987). In light of this tenuous relationship between humans and the natural world, Bookchin asked the following questions: “What is nature? What is humanity’s place in nature? And what is the relationship between society and the natural world?” (Bookchin, 1995). It was really this interface, the relationship between humans and the non-human natural world, that Bookchin sought to think through and analyze and out of which he sought to develop his ecological ethics and the political vision that emerged from these ethical principles.

Building upon the above-mentioned anarchist principles, social ecology and libertarian municipalism claim that replacing the State, urbanization, hierarchy, and capitalism with directly-democratic cooperative institutions relies upon developing a particular notion of citizenship (Biehl and Bookchin, 1998). Connected to this, the politics of libertarian municipalism assumes that every citizen has the potential to participate directly in democratic politics. However, there is a recognition that specific characteristics of citizenship must be taught and nurtured, according to Biehl and Bookchin (1998), “through a specific political education, which includes character formation” and direct participation in the polis (p. 88). This type of citizenship education, argue Biehl and Bookchin (1998), cannot be confined to the schoolroom but must be fostered through the political realm itself, “during the course of democratic political participation, amid a plentitude of discussion and interaction that engender knowledge, training, experience, and reason”—in other words, in the very process of decision-making and political processes (p. 89).

In articulating the political theory of libertarian municipalism,

Bookchin (1992/1995) makes clear distinctions between politics and statecraft; between the city as a democratic public sphere and the phenomena of urbanization characterized by bureaucracy, centralized decision-making, and impersonal, market-driven interactions; and between the notions of citizen as 'constituent', 'taxpayer', or 'consumer' and citizen as an empowered and active participant in the development and decision-making processes within the communities in which she/he lives. In elaborating these distinctions, Bookchin makes an argument for the gradual reclaiming of power and decision-making from the centralized, hierarchical, and bureaucratic state apparatus by citizens situated within specific municipalities and, by extension, the schooling and educational opportunities within them.

In summary, Bookchin viewed the ecological crises we face as the focus for a potentially trans-class movement bringing together people from a variety of backgrounds, races, ethnicities, and cultures to reverse the suicidal course of global capitalism and a market-centered society which have commodified human and non-human life as well as the biosphere itself. Social ecology suggests that, based upon an ecological ethics rooted in place and guided by the principles of decentralization, non-hierarchical structures and relationships, and direct democracy, we might regain some modicum of control over the decisions that most directly affect our lives (Bookchin, 1992/1995; Bookchin & Eglad, 2007). It also suggests there are forms our interactions should take that would allow for all voices to be heard, for all to be empowered with a sense of agency over the direction in which their community will develop. Finally, it prompts us to consider the characteristics of the citizen that need to be introduced, developed, and nurtured in order to provide every person the opportunity to take part in decision-making and managing the community.

### Social Ecology from Theory to Practice: The Puerto Rican High School

How might a school organize around social ecology and provide a civic education rooted in direct democracy, an ecological ethics, and an ideal of citizenship that brings these forces together? I had the unique opportunity to explore these questions through my study of The Puerto Rican High School.<sup>1</sup> The Puerto Rican High School (PRHS) is a community-based charter school situated on the west side of a large metropolitan area in the Midwest United States. The school serves approximately 175 students in grades 9-12.<sup>2</sup> In response to a 70 percent dropout/push-out rate amongst Puerto Rican youth in the city, the school was established in 1972 by parents, students, teachers, and community activists. The school's

use of social ecology as the conceptual centerpiece of the curriculum across subjects is the aspect of the school upon which my research was focused. The investigation and exploration of the use of social ecology as a curricular framework in this small, urban alternative high school provided an opportunity to observe the real-life application of particular principles such as resistance to hierarchy, horizontal decision making, cooperation, and mutual aid. As PRHS explicitly utilizes social ecology as the foundation for its curriculum, an exploration of administrators' and teachers' pedagogical thinking and practice provides vital empirical insight into the integration of social ecology in an educational setting.

### ***Methodology***

Two central questions guided this study. First, what ideal of citizenship is established within the theory of social ecology? Second, how would a school using the theory of social ecology as a curricular centerpiece foster this ideal of citizenship within students? I generated data by observing classrooms within the school to learn about the direct implications of social ecology for curriculum and instruction. I also collected and analyzed historical and archival materials (i.e. brochures, newspaper articles, curricular documents, course syllabi, etc.) to learn more about the development of the school's philosophical vision, funding and accreditation, and operation within institutional and community-based contexts and their relationship to social ecology. I documented student work and the school environment through photographs and audio recordings. After receiving IRB approval and having participants sign consent forms, I conducted informal, semi-structured interviews with one of the school's founders, the school principal, three teachers, and four students regarding the conceptualization, implementation, and outcomes (i.e. students' experiences and understanding) of social ecology as a curricular centerpiece.

Below, I focus primarily upon the ideas, perspectives, and practices of school administrators and teachers. My purpose for doing so is to illustrate for other teachers, administrators, and teacher educators how social ecology can be utilized within a school to foster social and ecological responsibility and activism on the community level. In developing our understanding of how this can be done successfully, the insights offered by student participants are vitally important. However, I believe it is critical to begin with the thinking and work of those actively implementing social ecology as the school's organizing framework.

I audio-recorded, transcribed, and read all participant interviews. Based upon my central research questions, I developed the following

conceptual phrases to utilize for structural coding of interview transcripts (Saldana, 2009): (1) the particular ideal of citizenship held by each participant; (2) their understanding/interpretation of the ideal of citizenship espoused and articulated by the school community; and (3) the degree to which they feel the school is successful in fostering and furthering this ideal within students. I grouped participants' responses according to the three conceptual phrases, analyzed the data, and created themes. Finally, I engaged in further analysis, interpretation, and description of the themes I created.

While I had previously taught in the public school system in the same large, Midwest urban center, I was an outsider to this particular school and community. Therefore, it was a priority to earn the trust of school faculty and students. I spent approximately four months visiting the school on a bi-weekly basis. During each of my visits, I sat in and observed classes in nearly all of the subject areas and took field notes on topics discussed, teachers' pedagogical methods, classroom settings, and student interaction. Each of the teachers I observed was comfortable not only with having me in the classroom as an observer but also with inviting me to participate in classroom discussions and activities and to ask questions of students. In addition to observing in classrooms, I attended meetings of the entire staff that occurred on a weekly basis as well as meetings of staff subcommittees such as those of the social-emotional learning team and curriculum and instruction team. Additionally, I attended some of the school's extracurricular activities and community events in which students and/or faculty were involved. In short, I was able to involve myself and directly participate in both life inside the school and within the broader community in which it is situated.

### Applying Social Ecology to Foster Community Interdependence and Individual Agency

Through social ecology, the administrators and teachers work to promote students' understanding of the interrelationship of environmental, political, cultural, and economic aspects of community; they also work to show how these pieces interact with and influence one another to produce certain conditions and the extent to which these conditions are susceptible to change through human agency. The core of the school's Mission and Vision statement are the values of Self-Reliance, Self-Actualization, and Self-Determination.<sup>3</sup> While these characteristics may appear to reinforce or uphold dominant Western notions of hyper-individualism, observation and interview data show that within the context of the school these ideas are firmly embedded in a community-centered paradigm and need

to be interpreted through the lens of Puerto Rican culture and history and an anti-imperialist and anti-colonialist perspective.

In carrying out this research, it was vitally important to understand exactly how the various members of the school community—administrators, teachers, and students—defined and understood social ecology. As the term has come to be used rather widely as a means of examining the interrelationships within a group of people living together, I asked the principal, Marcos, if the school's use of the theory was, in fact, based specifically upon the work of Murray Bookchin and how the concepts were introduced as a potential organizing framework for the school. He shared that one of the school's founders had suggested the work of Bookchin as a provocative lens through which to advance the mission of the school. Through a collaborative examination and discussion of some of Bookchin's work, administrators and teachers began to view social ecology as a clear articulation of many of the ideas the school was already promoting. As Marcos explained:

The school always had...a mission and vision that's conceptually linked with this idea of social ecology and how human beings exist in ecosystems. ...the idea of interdependency, the idea of self-reliance, self-determination, self-actualization. I don't think that there was a crystallizing moment to say that social ecology is the way to go because it has always been what our school has done.

In conversations with the school leadership and teachers I learned that the purposeful exploration of social ecology as an organizing framework for the school really began in the early 2000s in response to state and federal efforts to standardize the curriculum. As these efforts moved forward and materialized in the *No Child Left Behind Act*, those involved in the school felt compelled to actively resist this standardization and to define a set of expectations, foci, and approaches to curriculum that were relevant and responsive to the community within which the school was situated and the students the school was intended to serve. According to Marcos, school leaders and teachers were motivated by a series of questions:

How do you establish a sense of self-reliance as a community? How do you ensure that your problems as a community can be solved by those who are here and not depending on somebody to come from the outside in a sort of altruistic or paternalistic method to say, "We have the answer, take it"? We're going to say, "No, we have the answers to our own issues and we're going to struggle to establish them as we go."

Teachers and administrators with whom I spoke explained that the introduction of questions and ideas linked to social ecology was an organic



process based upon dialogue and discussions amongst school leadership, teachers, students, and community members. As has been discussed, to move toward more human-scaled (of a size individuals can comprehend, interact with, and shape) institutions and more directly democratic forms of decision-making and management of community life, non-hierarchical dialogue, discussion, and debate amongst stakeholders is vital. According to Marcos, the principal of the school, the human members of the school community also worked to consider the non-human natural communities in their discussions and decision-making. In other words, they viewed human well-being and community prosperity as inseparable from the well-being and prosperity of non-human communities. These discussions within the school revolved around some central questions that all stakeholders were encouraged to ask themselves:

What kind of world [do] we want to have, to be able to establish? It's one where people are able to be proud of who they are...and don't have to depend on big corporations to provide food. We don't have to depend on big corporations that guzzle diesel fuel to transport goods from one location to the next. We have a threat to our natural resources which include our air, it includes our water, it includes our land. How do we conceptualize a world that is sustainable within the limits of those very crucial natural resources for the survival of the people?

Addressing these questions involved re-imagining what a school and curriculum would look like that would help support and realize the vision that began to materialize—a vision of a community in which the health of the whole was dependent upon the health of its constituent parts. Of course, in carrying out this work, teachers have been and continue to be vital.

Amongst the three teachers I interviewed (of 15 total teachers in the school) there was a consistent understanding and definition of social ecology that was used to guide curriculum development and pedagogy. Emiliana, in her fourth year of teaching US and World History at the school, defined social ecology as the “the direct relationship between people and their environment and the man-made manipulation that exists within the environments that we live in.” Based upon this, Emiliana described how helping students develop an awareness of their surroundings and of different forms of oppression become central objectives in her teaching of social studies.

Similarly, Zuri, the Integrated Science teacher for grades 9-12, defined social ecology as “the whole system of interactions and linkages in relationships between different pieces of life that share space together...whether it's plants and animals or the water and the earth and the air or humans. I think social ecology is just about how we live

together and affect one another, as people, but also as a broader system of interdependent living beings.” These definitions suggested that teachers were developing curriculum and teaching methods that would encourage students to understand natural systems as well as the capacity for humans to alter and manipulate these systems toward increased health and harmony or disequilibrium and degradation.

In my analysis of participants’ descriptions of the evolution of the school and its incorporation of social ecology as an organizing framework, I recognized some intentional principles which guided their work. Importantly, these principles appeared to be both a result of the on-going critical reflection and dialogue the school community engaged in as well as manifestations of the principles of social ecology as a coherent theoretical framework. In other words, social ecology was not first identified as an organizing framework that the leadership then attempted to fit their work within. Rather, the re-development of priorities, objectives, and work of the school and its utilization of some of the concepts of social ecology occurred organically and simultaneously. Each of these pieces informed and mutually supported the others.

First, the school retains its commitment—established from its inception—to remaining small, intimate, non-bureaucratic, and decentralized. Second, the curriculum is deeply rooted in and customized for the cultural background and lived experience of the students and is directly and purposefully connected to the community outside the walls of the school. The focus is on connecting learning to the traditions, strengths, limitations, and problems faced by the communities in which students live. All the while, there is an effort to help students understand the connection between their lived experiences within particular communities and the broader social, political, historical, and economic structures and systems that influence them. Third, frequent and sustained dialogue between all stakeholders in the school community is prioritized as the means by which to identify the community’s strengths, limitations, and processes for continuing development. This dialogue is sustained through classroom discussions, whole-school meetings, community events, and partnerships the school has created with community businesses, organizations, and cultural institutions. From all of this emerged a re-articulation of a mission and vision and curricular framework, which school faculty continually examine and re-imagine, centered upon a particular set of values, an ideal of citizenship rooted in the theory of social ecology, and a pedagogy through which it aimed to realize this ideal.

One important component of how dialogue was encouraged and shared by all stakeholders involved the necessary inclusion of students into these conversations. Each of the teachers and administrators I

interviewed highlighted the centrality of directly involving students in identifying issues and problems the community faced, uncovering the reasons at the root of these problems, and actively working to develop ways of addressing them. Manuel, the urban agriculture teacher and assistant principal, encapsulated the process and its relationship to social ecology this way:

Social ecology... [suggested] that we need to take a look at the community as an ecological system. That the health and well-being of the community is dependent on the health and well-being of its residents. We know the assets that we have in our community and in our students... [but] what is getting in the way of a truly effective, healthy, harmonious ecological system? To what extent is poverty decimating the health and spirit of our young people? To what extent is being members of oppressed peoples, being schooled in a colonial mentality, to what extent is the pressure of overcrowding and the pressure of poverty, the pressure of being deemed as *less than*, the poor treatment by police, being criminalized, impacting the health of our community? All of these [questions] become fertile ground for our curriculum.

It was obvious that these types of questions and viewing the community as an interdependent system were not simply matters of theoretical discussion. They have been used directly to guide what is done in classrooms on a daily basis.

One notable example of this dialogical process occurred in a social studies classroom. Through a community research project, students learned the school neighborhood was considered a food desert. This discovery on the part of students ultimately resulted in the establishment of the school's urban agriculture program and rooftop greenhouse. In reflecting upon the development of this aspect of the school, Marcos explained that students were central to its fruition:

The students were part of thinking about this [in asking], "How do we establish some sustainability in this neighborhood?" Students thought about it, community leaders thought about it [and asked], "If we have an issue with this being a food desert then we have to establish our own source of goods." How do we do that with concrete surroundings? We do so on our rooftops. How do we do it year-round? We do so in a greenhouse. How do we do it without depleting our water resources? We do so hydroponically. How do we do it while maintaining our cultural identity? We do it by growing *sufrito* [traditional Puerto Rican dish requiring a variety of fresh produce].

Marcos continued to explain that the goal across the content areas is to create participatory projects where students have opportunities to clearly articulate challenges that they see in their neighborhood, to

engage in collaborative problem-solving, and to develop specific courses of action for addressing these challenges. Emiliana noted that there is an incalculable benefit for students in seeing these projects materialize. An idea generated by students, developed by students, and fulfilled by students, in the words of Emiliana, “brings about hope.”

While Marcos provides guidance and educational leadership, this inquiry and project-based approach to education also requires a high degree of teacher autonomy and collaboration. Based upon the shared vision of citizenship and the commitment to directly involving students in naming and addressing community issues, I observed that teachers often build flexibility into their curriculums. This ensured that student voice could continually be incorporated into the course of study and help guide the direction of the curriculum.

### Social Ecology and Education: Building a New World in the Shell of the Old

Following an overview of the theory of social ecology and its implications for educating toward direct democracy and ecological sustainability, findings from the research study provided a bridge between what is primarily theoretical with the concrete, day-to-day reality within a school. It is important to make clear that both anarchism and social ecology are not intended to be prescriptive or universalizable. Of course, each philosophy has certain foundational principles but these principles are such that their application will vary significantly across social and cultural contexts. The principles are intended to be debated, discussed, and re-interpreted by real people living in community with one another in local contexts. An individual or group of individuals need not label themselves ‘anarchists’ or ‘social ecologists’ in order to live out these principles (see Ward, 1982). By living and working at the grassroots level in mutually supportive and cooperative ways, free of domination and hierarchy, people anywhere can begin to re-gain control over their own lives and the decisions that most directly affect them while expanding the potential for increasing freedom, self-actualization, and creative thriving within both the human and non-human worlds.

It is not difficult to imagine how a movement toward schooling based upon the philosophy of social ecology might impact teacher education. In many ways, the structure and content of teacher education for those interested in these pursuits would mirror some of the qualities described above. That is, instruction in content and pedagogy would be firmly rooted in the local cultural and environmental settings where pre-service teachers intended to teach. Pre-service teachers interested in

working within this model would pursue intimacy and familiarity with the physical, cultural, and historical make-up of the place in which their students are embedded. Getting to know a place would require spending time in it, talking to its inhabitants, and studying its physical geography. This would not necessarily preclude study and exploration of other topics traditionally associated with teacher education such as theories of human development, the historical and philosophical foundations of education, and teaching methods specific to particular content areas.

It could be argued that focusing solely on local context in the teaching and learning process would be difficult, if not impossible, in our globally interconnected world. Ironically, it is this very 'global interconnectedness' and the processes of globalization that are largely responsible for undermining the fabric of community and subsequent disregard for one's surroundings, be they natural or social (Esteva & Prakash, 1998). It is quite difficult to completely disentangle the local from the global. Nor is that the goal. Beginning within the local context, it is possible to expose students to their community's connections to the global landscape—through exploration of where things, people, and traditions within the local environment intersect with global phenomena. Additionally, efforts toward greater community autonomy and self-determination do not necessarily preclude building connections with other surrounding communities through cooperative relationships centered upon sustainable cultural and economic development. In short, these efforts are not aimed at fostering isolation or parochialism, but rootedness in place, relationships free of hierarchy and domination, and sustainable ways of living accompanied by understanding and empathy with others, human and non-human alike.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> The name of the school and all participants have been changed to protect anonymity.

<sup>2</sup> At the time of the study, the school served approximately 175 9<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> grade students of Puerto Rican, Mexican, African-American, and multiple other ethnicities. Roughly 95% of the students were people of color.

<sup>3</sup> See <http://pachs-chicago.org/about/mission/> for a fuller description of these core values.

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