

INTERVIEW

Satish Kumar

with

MURRAY BOOKCHIN

A Green Course

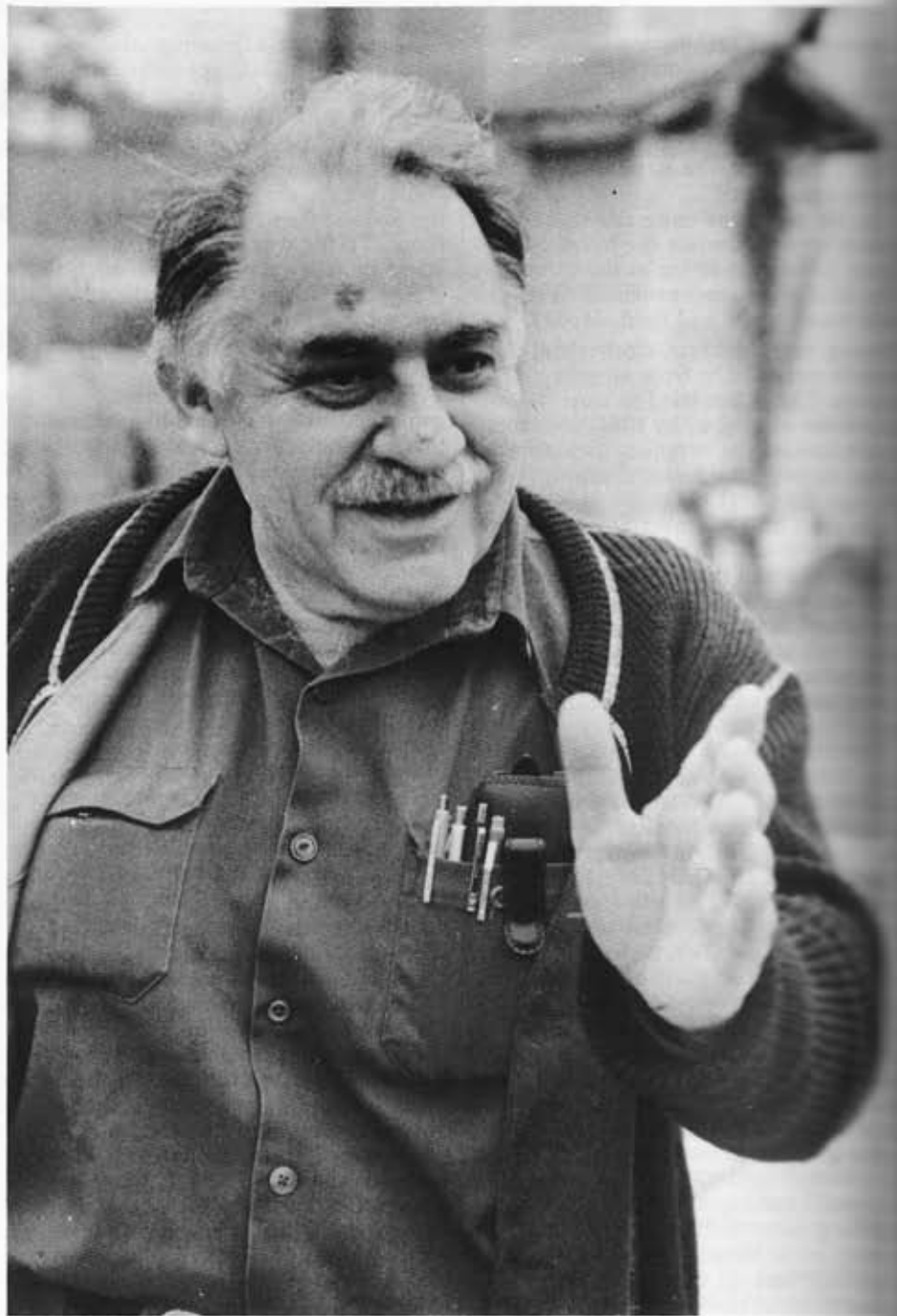
Satish Kumar: You have been critical of people who have taken the cause of environment, ecology and green politics, but have made compromises. I have always seen you as the conscience keeper of the Green Movement. But what is it that worries you?

Murray Bookchin: I have been a student of nature philosophy all my life. I have seen how nature philosophy can be gravely abused. For example, it is only too well known that biological explanations or even ecological explanations have been used to support fascism. Hitler, for example used biological analogies, notably those of race, soil, homeland, folk, blood, to underpin his viciously racist imperialistic theories. He spoke about the homeland almost in an ecological sense which supported his nationalist aspirations and led to imperialist conclusions.

So you are worried that the present ecological movement could be exploited for the wrong ends?

Yes, even on scientific grounds. In many universities, people speak of the morality of the gene as though war, egotism, competition, rivalry were genetic problems. We have a number of very well-meaning scientists who whilst trying to educate society in an ecological direction utilize the concept of nature in a necessitarian and utilitarian fashion which tends to invade the all important notion of freedom. Consequently I have been obliged to take a critical stance however unwelcome it has been and however knowledgeable I am of the good intentions of the people I sometimes criticise.

I don't believe that nature is the realm of necessity. Most people believe that nature is an overbearing master that has to be dominated and that the progress of human 'civilization' is the conquest of nature. I don't believe nature can be conquered; it is all around us, we are part of nature. But the idea of conquering nature has its insidious origins in the idea of dominating human beings.



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It is important to find the truth in ecology that the price we pay for dominating nature is dominating people. Domination of people is linked with the domination of nature.

Are you implying that some ecologists are concerned with nature, but not concerned with people?

Well, I think that the themes have separated in their minds. They see nature as being one sphere and human society as being another. A division — the famous dualism that goes back to the days of Descartes and even Plato. People assume that either humanity must subjugate itself to nature or nature must subjugate itself to humanity. The

so-called anti-humanists tell us that we are merely specks in the natural world which is as invalid as saying that nature is merely, as so many socialists tell us, a resource to be dominated. I don't see why it is necessary to create that dualism. I believe that human progress, in a moral sense, in a spiritual sense as well as in a physical sense can be achieved in harmony with nature and by enriching nature, not by conflicting with it. Natural law theorists seem to imply that we must obey slavishly the laws of nature and that the only way we human beings can live with nature is by subordinating ourselves to nature. I emphasise that we are products of nature, we are neither predicates of nature nor subjects of nature. We are

embedded in nature all the time. The real question is whether or not we and the natural world can live in creative harmony with each other. We can use technology to help us to live in harmony with our environment.

Is there any criterion by which we can judge whether a particular technology is appropriate technology? How can one know whether a particular technology can help to establish a right relationship with nature?

Here I have to fall back on what Rudolph Bahro would call a sensibility, or a spirituality. In other words we have to develop an ecological mentality in order to formulate these criteria. Well, what would that ecological mentality be? First of all it would involve a tremendous respect for life and I don't mean human life alone, we have to respect everything that is alive even though we have to live off living things. We have to have a reverence for the food that we eat. We have to grow that food to understand that we are part of the cycle from the earth to us and back to the earth again. We have to have the appropriate rituals, that would respect the world of life. Eating and food cultivation are ecological acts which imply a sense of respect for what we are eating and growing. That ecological sensibility has to be structured around an emphasis on differentiation and participation. These are my two great ecological criteria.

Can you explain differentiation and participation?

The whole thrust of animal and plant evolution is based on the ever greater differentiation of life forms which has made it possible to create inter-locking eco-systems. Through differentiation, through variety, we achieve greater ecological stability as almost any gardener and any agriculturalist knows. The greater the variety of life-forms that we have in our eco-systems the more stable they are likely to be. But not only do we have greater stability, we also have greater fecundity. In the rich warmth of life nature begins to produce and reproduce through the process of billions of years and begins to open alternative pathways of evolution. Living forms themselves participate in that process. A century ago we were satisfied with the idea of the survival of the fittest. We accepted passively that the life forms which would survive and the life forms which would perish were selected only through competition in a so-called struggle for existence. This reflects a typical market-place mentality, which points to the fact that many of our conceptions of nature are really social conceptions.

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what I find striking about this conception is that it completely cuts against the conventional notion that nature is the realm of harsh necessity.

Now I come to participation, where species co-operate with each other whether knowingly or not, or intuitively or not, or instinctively or not, they begin to participate in their own evolution. At that particular point the realm of nature ceases to be as 'lawful' as we assumed it to be and we begin to see the elements of freedom in the natural world.

Hence, when I begin to consider what are the technologies that I would regard as ecological, I ask what are the effects of these technologies in terms of differentiation, participation and ultimately freedom.

What you are saying is that natural ecology should go hand in hand with social ecology and if you have a right mix of these two ecologies, you will get a right kind of technology.

Right, the goal of technology is not only to satisfy human needs but to remain within the differentiation and participation patterns of the natural world. When we find that these technologies bring us to co-operate with the natural world instead of opposing it, I would call them eco-technologies.

Natural ecology cannot be separated from social ecology. Every vision we have had of the natural world has been a social vision. For example, the American Indians thousands of years back and even to this very day have taken their tribal forms of organisation from the natural world. We, however, developed notions of kings of the beasts because we had monarchies in society. We speak of queen bees as though there are monarchies in the insect world. Such notions are merely projections of the social world onto the natural world. Today we emphasise cybernetics, because the cybernetic theory is very congenial to corporate theory. The corporations think cybernetically, they speak of input, output and feedback. In Darwin's day we had the allegedly free market economy, then we spoke of nature as being a market. We described it in terms of a competitive jungle because enterprises competed with each other for profit and for control over the market. I would like to think that if we have a free society it will be an

ecological society and we will be able to look at the natural world for what it truly is.

You talk about freedom, which is very important, but what about relationships? In relationship a certain amount of freedom is given away.

In relationship there are two sides: the *I* and the *other*. Now when it comes to the *I* and the *other*, western civilisation has created an antagonistic relationship. The *other* is always to be dominated. The relationship of the *I* to the *other* is always one of subjugation, and command. This has entered so deeply into our modern psyche that whenever we see differentiation or variety we order it hierarchically in the order of one to ten. We speak of this person being inferior or superior to that person as though differences necessarily have to involve superiority and inferiority. Ecological thinking will fundamentally alter this notion. The *I* and the *other* will cease to be antagonistic. The two sides will complement each other in relationships. I would never call that a *law* of complementarity, because that word *law* implies the very opposite of what complementarity stands for. Complementarity is a relationship of mutuality in which there is a mutual giving and taking without even a recognition that you are giving and taking but that you are really interdependent. The one is not above the other and consequently the other is not below, but rather in the wealth of our differences we enrich ourselves. So relationship is not opposed to freedom. On the contrary, it is the fulfilment of freedom, because the richer the relationship the greater the degree of freedom. In relationship and freedom we begin to see a moral basis for an ecological society.

You talk about the moral basis. The ecology movement is failing because it is giving only an environmentalist message, it is talking about protecting the trees and soil and rivers and so on, but there is a lack of spiritual message which gives meaning to life. How can the ecology movement incorporate that message?

I think Satish, you are touching upon one of the most important problems we face in America and I believe, in other parts of the world. Millions of

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Americans are looking for a moral meaning to life. I doubt if any green movement can emerge today that does not have a spiritual or moral message. I would prefer to use the world moral because my libertarian beliefs emphasize ethics over anything else but it makes no difference. What really counts is that life should have meaning, that life should have a purpose other than material gain. I think that the great failing on the part of radical movements for social change in America is that they tend to emphasize the material benefits rather than the moral meaning. But a large number of Americans today are looking for a meaning for life. Needless to say there is a substantial number of Americans who are living below the poverty line and who need all the material assistance they can possibly get. I am not trying to denigrate their needs, but I believe that a vast number of Americans are looking for a meaning to their lives, a sense that they are on this planet not merely to produce and consume, but also to enrich it

spiritually. Tragically, the right-wing elements are cashing in on it, they are exploiting it extravagantly. Reagan gives us little moral homilies all the time! If people who call themselves green and radicals do not recognise that they have to fulfil that need among Americans I am very much afraid and deeply concerned that reactionary elements will fill the vacuum.

On the one hand we have a small number, maybe 10% or 15% of people who are concerned with ecology and on the other hand we have states, multi-national corporations, the arms race, star wars. Everything. Is there a hope?

When I first began to write on ecological subjects in 1952 nobody knew what the word ecology meant except a few exotic scientists. Even biologists had doubts as to what the meaning of the word was. So when I first published *The Problems of Chemicals in Food*, and I am speaking of almost 33 years ago, I felt that nobody was listening. Today

ecology is on everybody's lips and I can't help but recognise that we are undergoing a tremendous revolution in our thinking. Maybe a little over 10% of people are becoming aware of the green message. But remember well that when I began writing there was far less than 1%. People are becoming aware of this message and are willing to translate it, in many cases, into their lives.

In a society that you have just described, notably, that the state is becoming overpowering, where bureaucracy seems to manage all our affairs, where people are stripped of their autonomy and their relationships are now permeated by purely monetary prize, I believe, people feel a desperate need to recover some form of community, some form of caring and it is on the strength of this compulsion, always revived with each generation and persisting throughout all classes that I basically hope that ultimately we with our 10% minority are already touching the deepest nerves of the 90% majority. My one hope is that the ecology movement and the Greens can realize that their goal is not simply to get into parliament. We have to develop an ever-growing constituency of people and not so much an ever-growing electorate. Green Politics has to be qualitatively different. The German Greens leaped ahead too quickly into too many powerful positions. They gained 5% or more of the vote 2 years ago and 27 deputies in their Bundestag with the result that they have become dazzled by what I call the 5% solution. Many readers of *Resurgence* will remember that there was a motion picture in which Sigmund Freud was supposed to cure Sherlock Holmes of the 7% solution of heroin that he keeps taking and so the movie was called the *7% Solution*. Well, that addiction appears in some way in many well-meaning greens who are more concerned with the amount of votes they are getting than the number of people they are educating. For me genuine politics as distinguished from statecraft is educational, in the Greek sense of the word, the management of the polis, which meant the city state of the city. And consequently the Greek concern with politics was to develop an educated citizenry, not simply a voting electorate. I would like to see Greens as well as ecologists, insofar as they echo into the political sphere and not the state sphere, work within their communities to develop an ecologically educated citizen. The perfect basis for the Greens on which to function is the locality, neighbourhoods and towns. We must work in the councils and governments of the cities, villages, townships, rural districts as well as urban districts rather than in national parliaments. What is the point of talking about an ecological politics without thinking of one's politics as being ecological? How could we advance ecological programmes, etc.



Photo: Waterfall by Paul Nash

anecological grounds? So an ecological politics would be an organic politics and then organic politics would mean that people, not voters would be educated into those principles of self government and self management that I would associate with ecology. Organic politics must be grass roots politics. It must be as grass roots as one speaks of grass itself, a pasture being the beginning of the food chain. In my political food chain the most fundamental is the community itself at its most elemental level. The relationship between men and women as gender groups. The relationship between young and old as age groups, the relationship between neighbours in various communities, the relationship between country people and townspeople and so forth. An ecological politics would be an organic politics structured around an organic ethics and rooted in organic relationships between people as well as between people and nature.

Talking about the German Green Party. If they don't get their 5% and if they don't get into the Bundestag, they fear that their influence will never be felt. But once they are in the parliament and winning in every state their influence will be greater. Do you not agree with that?

At first it seems very plausible. They themselves are very confused and divided. There are two major factions right now; the Realists who believe that the Greens should make compromises with the social democratic party and are concerned with parliamentary coalitions rather than ecological education. They are engaged in power struggles. But in order to meet the imperatives of the power struggle on a parliamentary level I find that they are giving up their important principles; for instance, they want to abandon the two-year rotation which would have made the Green Party a truly democratic and non-hierarchical party. A second thing the Realists have done is to form a coalition with the Social Democrats in Hessen which has benefitted the Greens very little. Because, although, now they have a Green Minister of the Environment he has no control over the energy policy of the state of Hessen. So despite the Green Minister the government can produce nuclear power. So what authority has he? In fact he may be obliged to send lots of toxic wastes from his own state of Hessen to some other state where his fellow Greens are fighting against these very wastes. So here they find themselves in a position in which Greens will be fighting with Greens on how to dispose of wastes. This of course is very convenient for the Social Democrats who were losing ground in Germany because they were not responsive to anything environmental as well as the spiritual issues which made people vote for the Greens.

So what are the Greens benefitting by

being Realists and by these coalitions? They have gained titles, but they haven't gained power. In the meantime they have disenchanted many thousands of their supporters who originally felt that they should vote Green because Greens will not compromise with their principles to gain power and control. I think there is much to be learnt from that experience. Then there is the other group of Fundamentalist Greens who are opposed to coalitions and compromises to get into the government. They are radical ecologists, who are really concerned with the integrity of the Greens.

Are you saying that the Greens should not go into the parliament at any cost and should always work at grass roots level?

I do not believe that parliamentarianism is in the best interest of the Greens. One becomes transfixed on power and power just screws up life's simple pattern. That is what has happened in Germany. Green Politics must be built

from below. We should develop a strong base within the community, the municipalities and townships. I believe that it is perfectly consistent with ecological beliefs that communities, towns, villages and cities should confederate in an on-going struggle to reduce the power of the centre. This idea of libertarian municipalism is the only political alternative I see and the only type of politics compatible with the principles of ecology. This will mean grass roots power located and confederated, let me stress the word confederated, against the centralised states that exist in London, in Washington and in Bonn. At that particular point we will have a chance to have the support of a great majority of people and make much more basic transformations than by going into parliament. □

*Murray Bookchin lives in Burlington, Vermont, USA. His latest book is **The Ecology of Freedom**. £6.95 + £1 p&p. Available from Schumacher Book Service, Ford House, Hartland, Bideford, Devon.*

