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ON BOOKCHIN'S HIDDEN SPINOZISM

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1. Introduction

One of the most influential philosophers among last century's radical social theorists, Murray Bookchin was the founder of social ecology. His main philosophical effort was to show the very strict bound that ties together, on the one hand, an oppressive social system based on hierarchy (be it based on class, gender, ethnicity or religion) and, on the other hand, an equally oppressive relationship between society and nature. The main tenet of his philosophy is that environmental devastation and the ecological crisis, that is, human attempts of domination of nature, are but a result of social domination and the emergence of hierarchy at the dawn of civilization. In order to overcome the ecological problems posed by a hawkish attitude toward the ecosystems that sustain biological and social life, societies first need to solve problems of political, economic and social oppression.

Bookchin's work is heavily influenced by some key philosophers and geographers for anarchist political theory and natural philosophy, namely, Élisée Reclus and Peter Kropotkin. Their ideas concerning mutual aid are central to social ecology too, as Bookchin often emphasizes that humankind needs to develop more cooperative political and economic institutions, if it is to establish a rational, ecological society. Furthermore, the influence of Kropotkin and Reclus on social ecology shows another important aspect of the issue at hand: the problem is

not only political or institutional, but a philosophical one too. In other words, along with a new, libertarian¹ politics, a more ecological conception of nature is also needed. Building on Kropotkin's idea according to which mutual aid is «an illuminated factor of evolution» [Kropotkin 2021], Bookchin does not only advocate for a more cooperative society, but also develops a philosophy of nature that highlights the very important role played by mutualistic relations in the evolution of the species and that casts humankind back in the realm of nature. Being society nothing but a «second nature» to humanity, one that emerges from within first nature, an adequate understanding of natural processes of development is required to build rational and ecological institutions.

In this paper, I will argue that Bookchin's philosophy of nature, and in particular his conception of matter and bodies and his account of the «natural history of mind» [Bookchin 1991, 236], echoes Spinoza's view on such themes. This will allow to ground social ecology's philosophy of nature in a philosophical system that also emphasized the radical continuity or consubstantiality between humankind and the whole of nonhuman nature, conceiving societies as something that does not disturb the order of nature, but rather follows it [Spinoza 2016, 515]. I will first take into account the affinities between Bookchin's and Spinoza's conception of matter and bodies. In the second part of the article, I will read Bookchin's idea of a natural history of mind along with Hasana Sharp's renaturalization of ideology. In the last part, finally, I will consider some implications of this ecological philosophy of nature on some core themes for Bookchin's ecological thinking, namely: imagination, myth and science.

2. *Matter and bodies*

In *The Ecology of Freedom*, Bookchin argues for a notion of nature that ought to be conceived as «a developing, creative, and fecund nature that yields an increasing complexity of forms and interrelationships» [Bookchin 1991, 274]. To support this thesis, the American philosopher

¹ The term «libertarian» here is used in the same sense of Bookchin's libertarian municipalism.

needs to deny any validity to the idea of nature as being composed of inert and dead matter. It is simply not true, Bookchin argues, that biological evolution is a series of casual and punctual mutations that are selected in the interest of the survival of a species. On the contrary, Bookchin's account of matter, or physical nature, argues for the spontaneous self-organization of a manifold of different kinds of bodies that create increasing levels of complexity. The history of this process of composition is what Bookchin calls *history of subjectivity*, thus implying that the whole of nature can be considered as one large and all-embracing individual. As a matter of fact, Bookchin openly states that subjectivity does not emerge in nature with the first humans; rather, humans are the result of previous and less complex forms of subjectivity, which paved the way for the emergence of more compound bodies and minds. Thus, humankind is not radically foreign to nature, but a result of the very same natural evolution that gave birth to all life and to life-supporting ecosystems as well. There is in this sense a fundamental continuity not only between human and nonhuman life, but also between life and life-supporting ecosystems. Nature is a permanently open, constantly developing process of composition to which human societies contribute either by impoverishing and depleting the environment or by actively enhancing natural differentiation and further evolution with ecological practices.

Alongside this historical account of the emergence of complex forms of subjectivity, Bookchin also takes into consideration the composition of human and nonhuman bodies. Here, I suggest, one can find a stance that is quite similar to Spinoza's conception of bodies, as presented in the physics in the second part of the *Ethics*. Even though it would be quite difficult to argue for a Spinozist conception of the evolution of the species, it is possible to advocate for the idea of bodies as composed «of a great many individuals of different natures» [Spinoza 1984, 462]. In so doing it is necessary to drop a diachronic perspective such as that implied in the concept of natural evolution, in order to focus on a more synchronic point of view. In other words, one can only state, with Spinoza, that each body is necessarily composed of many other different bodies. To make this statement clearer and more rooted in the biological composition of individuals, one can leave aside the ontological perspective and take into account the examples that Bookchin offers in order to substantiate his stance.

In this respect, the main reference is to Lynn Margulis' theory of endosymbiosis. Bookchin writes that

Margulis has argued and largely established that the eukaryotic cells consist of highly functional symbiotic arrangements of prokaryotes that have become totally interdependent with other constituents. Eukaryotic flagella, she hypothesizes, derive from anaerobic spirochetes; mitochondria, from prokaryotic bacteria that were capable of respiration as well as fermentation; and plant chloroplasts, from "blue-green algae", which have recently been reclassified as cyanobacteria. The theory, now almost a biological convention, holds that phagocytic ancestors of what were to become eukaryotes absorbed (without digesting) certain spirochetes, protomitochondria (which, Margulis suggests, might have invaded their hosts), and, in the case of photosynthetic cells, coccoid cyanobacteria and chloroxybacteria. Existing phyla of multicellular aerobic life forms thus had their origins in a symbiotic process that integrated a variety of microorganisms into what can reasonably be called a colonial organism, the eukaryotic cell. *Mutualism*, not predation, seems to have been the guiding principle for the evolution of the highly complex aerobic life forms that are common today [Bookchin 1991, 359].

Building on Margulis' discoveries concerning the emergence of the eukaryotic cell, Bookchin thus can state that the «highly complex aerobic life forms that are common today» are the result of a cooperative composition between bodies that used to be discrete forms of life. The eukaryotic cell, that is, the most basic element in the composition of the body of any complex life form, is itself the result of the composition of many other bodies. At this point, it should be easy to see the affinity between this account and the first postulate of Spinoza's physics: «the human Body is composed of a great many individuals of different nature, each of which is highly composite» [Spinoza 1984, 462]. Even though Spinoza here is talking about the *human* body, and not any body at all, one should also take into account that Spinoza does not develop any kind of anthropology in a strict sense, that is, he does not provide a definition of the essence of humans *as such*, but only insofar as they are modes of the same substance [Matheron 1978, 176]. In his analysis of the first postulate of the physics of the second part of the *Ethics*, Matheron immediately notes that, even though Spinoza is talking about the human body, the same principle applies to nonhuman bodies as well. One could maintain that the human body is more complex than others,

but the difference would lie in the degree of complexity, so it is possible to argue that nonhuman bodies are also composed of many individuals of different nature.

Furthermore, the passage cited emphasizes another important aspect that Bookchin's and Spinoza's theories share, that is, the crucial role played by mutualism, or cooperation. This allows to take into account the supra-individual aspect of the composition of bodies. In this respect, Spinoza is quite clear when he states that when «two individuals of entirely the same nature are joined to one another, they compose an individual twice as powerful as each one» (*E IV P18 scholium*) [Spinoza 1984, 556]. Despite the emphasis on the fact that in order to be «joined to one another» individuals need to be of the same nature, the Dutch philosopher also conceives the whole of nature as one individual, thus involving individuals of different nature in the composition: «we shall easily conceive that the whole of nature is one Individual, whose parts, i.e., all bodies, vary in infinite ways, without any change of the whole Individual» (*E II lem. 7 scholium*) [Spinoza 1984, 462]. The difference seems to be that, if two individuals of the same nature are joined to one another, an enhancing of their power to act is also implied, whereas if we conceive the whole of nature as one individual, nature itself is indifferent with respect to the power of the individuals of which it is composed. As a matter of fact, the bodies that compose nature «vary in infinite ways» – thus implying that some compositions can diminish their power to act, or even destroy some of them, without any change of the individual as a whole. These two claims made by Spinoza allow to consider a political and an ecological implication of Bookchin's philosophy.

Building on the scholium of proposition 18 of the fourth part of the *Ethics*, one can consider the whole of a democratic assembly as one individual – which is what Spinoza himself does in the *Political Treatise*, in which he writes that «the body of the state must be guided as if by one mind» [Spinoza 2016, 519]. I argue that Bookchin's stance on the body politic that constitutes the democratic assembly echoes Spinoza's account of such theme, as Bookchin himself writes that «“selfhood” is not only a personal dimension but also a social one. The self that finds expression in the assembly and community is, literally, the assembly and community that has found self-expression» [Bookchin 2004, 104].

With respect to individuals of the same nature, that is, humans, cooperation is thus what allows compositions that enhance the individuals' power to act (Spinoza) and a real democratic participation (Bookchin).

With regard to the second claim made by Spinoza in the scholium of lemma 7 of the second part of the *Ethics*, according to which the whole of nature can be considered as one individual, there is a further ecological implication. As we have seen, Bookchin claims that mutualism rather than predation is what leads evolution toward more complex life forms, which is *per se* an ecological value. Indeed, mutualism fosters diversity in ecosystems [Pantel *et al.* 2023, 85], which is an important factor that contributes to ecological stability and thus to the preservation of the ecosystem itself. Insofar as, according to Spinoza, one can be considered an individual in as much as its parts contribute to the production of an effect, it is possible to argue that individuals of different nature such as plants and pollinators form one individual by fostering the stability of their ecosystem when they enter mutualist relations. As a matter of fact, Pantel *et al.* provide many examples to substantiate this claim, ranging from a microscopic to a macroscopic scale. With regard to the former, the authors focus on microbial mats, «multi-layered aggregations of bacteria that physically adhere to one another, to increase their resistance to stressors such as nutrient scarcity or variation in detrimental environmental conditions» [Pantel *et al.* 2023, 82]; on a macroscopic scale, the focus is on many instances, among which one can find the mutualist relation between plants and pollinators. This case is particularly instructive as not only does it shed light on the importance of cooperation in nature, but it also highlights how a mutualist relation between two different species is beneficial for species not involved in the relation too. Indeed,

plants with more mutualistic rewards attract more pollinators, benefit from the increased reproductive success, and in turn produce more rewards for their pollinators. The overall increase in plant biomass as a result of this feedback impacts pollinators and increases the amount of resources for herbivores and other species in the community as well. Mutualisms thus have benefits not only for the pairs of species involved in the exchange, but also for other species due to the increased biomass of plants at the base of antagonistic feeding relationships.

The models from this study that predict this overall increase in diversity, stability, and ecosystem function due to mutualisms are supported by observations in natural and agricultural systems, e.g. showing that increased pollinators diversity can enhance crop productivity [Pantel *et al.* 2023, 85].

Composition and complexity are thus at work in both the internal and the external environment of each individual. We have seen that Spinoza's claim that the human body is composed of many individuals of different nature can be supported by Lynn Margulis' discoveries in the field of biology, namely, by her theory of endosymbiosis in eukaryotic cells. Furthermore, from a Spinozist perspective, cooperation toward the production of a common effect is what allows to consider individuals of different nature as a more composite and complex individual whose power allows it «to be affected in a great many other ways, and still preserve its nature» [Spinoza 1984, 461]. This is the case of mutualisms, which foster ecological stability – defined as «the ability of a system to return to its equilibrium state after a disturbance or perturbation (and thus not collapse or experience large shifts in its state)» [Pantel *et al.* 2023, 84] – or, in Spinozist terms, the capacity to be affected in a great many ways and still preserve one's nature. I will now turn to the affinities between Spinoza's account of mind and Bookchin's natural history of mind.

3. *Natural history of mind or, renaturalizing ideology*

Building on Althusser's concept of *ideology*, Hasana Sharp maintains that not only for Spinoza there is no *ego cogito*, but that the power to think that is implied in the existence under the attribute of thought is made possible for humankind only because the rest of nature thinks as well. The second axiom of the second part of the *Ethics* reads «Man thinks», *homo cogitat* [Spinoza 1984, 447]. Given that, according to Spinoza, everything that exists is an expression of God or nature, and given that nature consists of infinite attributes which express its essence in their own kind, then everything that exists under the attribute of extension must exist under the attribute of thought too. Existence under the attribute of thought implies a power to think, so every nonhuman

body, even rocks, expresses a certain degree of power to think. Not only, then, *homo cogitat* but, as Sharp argues, *natura cogitat* as well. Furthermore, the modal nature of our minds and bodies always implies a certain degree of sociality, in the sense that no one can exist in isolation. Being our minds *composed of* rather than *sources of* ideas, we are constantly crossed by ideas of which we are not authors. Just like bodies, minds are the result of a process of composition (of ideas, in this case), rather than its starting point.

What does it mean to maintain that nature thinks? We are not used to conceive nature as something capable of thinking, as we usually identify thought with the fact that we experience our minds as discrete. Nevertheless, existence under the attribute of thought implies a mind, that is, a power of thinking. Insofar as everything is endowed with a mind, to argue that *natura cogitat* means that the difference between a human and a nonhuman mind can only lie in the degree of power, and not in the kind of *mens* with which a mode is endowed. Of course, this does not imply that the stone from the famous example from Letter 58 [Spinoza 2016, 428] is really conscious of its striving to continue in motion (there would be no way of knowing that), but it does mean that, insofar as human and nonhuman minds are of the same kind, both express a certain degree of power of thinking, one that is coherent with the power of their bodies to be affected in many different ways. To argue that nature thinks, then does not mean that nature has its own consciousness; instead, it means that nonhuman beings express to some extent a power of thinking as well as human beings. Thus, while *homo cogitat* also implies a consciousness of our power of thinking, *natura cogitat* “only” implies that nonhuman (organic and inorganic) nature has its being in and as thought as well. One major tenet of Sharp’s renaturalization is that this nonhuman power is crucial for human minds, if they are to think and achieve some adequate ideas.

Sharp argues for a transindividual character of knowledge, which is «neither accidental nor optional. It is an ontological fact, belonging to the nature of minds, along with the bodies of which they are ideas» [Sharp 2011, 68]. One implication of the transindividuality of knowledge is that, being our minds mainly composed of ideas which come from external causes, it is ontologically impossible for us to get rid of

inadequate ideas. We can certainly know some things adequately, but our mind can never be composed of *only* adequate ideas. As modes of the substance, we are just a little part of a thinking nature, that is, we are part of an assemblage of ideas that involves nonhuman nature too. The acknowledgement of this modal nature of our power to think is, according to Sharp, the first step toward a renaturalization of ideology. To renaturalize ideology thus implies that we recognize and even that we accept to some extent inadequate ideas. As a matter of fact, Spinoza maintains that inadequate ideas are only partial ideas, but not wrong as such:

when we look at the sun, we imagine it as about 200 feet away from us, an error that does not consist simply in this imagining, but in the fact that while we imagine it in this way, we are ignorant of its true distance and of the cause of this imagining. For even if we later come to know that it is more than 600 diameters of the earth away from us, we nevertheless imagine it as near [Spinoza 1984, 473].

Inadequate ideas are mutilated, and falsity does not lie in their partiality, but in the privation of knowledge involved in this partiality (*E* II P35) [Spinoza 1984, 472]. Following this example, one could argue that to renaturalize ideology does not mean that we need to try to perceive the sun at its real distance when we look at it; instead, it means that we have to try to take our finitude up in a new, enabling way.

I find this to be a crucial aspect of Bookchin's spinozism. When the theorist of social ecology writes about a natural history of mind, he states that «we may choose to confine mentality strictly to the human cerebrum [...], in which case we have committed mentality completely to the vaults of our skulls. Or we may choose to include the natural history of mind and expand our vision of mind to include nature in its wholeness» [Bookchin 1991, 236]. According to Bookchin, the whole of nature thinks, that is, to phrase it in spinozist terms, nonhuman nature (be it organic or inorganic)² exists under the attribute of thought. With respect to the notion of freedom implied in the politics of renatural-

² Jane Bennett puts into question the very distinction between organic and inorganic with her notion of *vibrant matter*, showing how subtle the demarcation line is. See Bennett 2010.

ization, Sharp writes that it is «a recomposition and reappropriation of what is given by the shared reality of *historical*, social, and *natural* life» [Sharp 2011, 77; emphasis mine]. Similarly, while arguing against the important tenet of modern science according to which nature is a blind set of phenomena that can be the object of thought, but does not think, Bookchin maintains that

what we today call “mind” in all its human uniqueness, self-possession, and imaginative possibilities, is coterminous with a long *evolution* of mind. Subjectivity has not always been absent from the course of organic and inorganic development until the emergence of humanity. To the contrary, it has always been present, in varying degrees, throughout natural history, but as increasingly close approximations of the human mind as we know it today. To deny the existence of subjectivity in nonhuman nature is to deny that it can exist either in its given human form or in any form at all [Bookchin 1991, 235-236].

By calling for a recomposition and reappropriation of a shared reality of life, Sharp argues that what is at stake here is not the search for a new object of knowledge, but rather a different relation to our thinking and to our being, that includes «relating to ourselves, bodies, and ambient beings in new ways» [Sharp 2011, 77]. I maintain that this kind of reappropriation is what Bookchin is also looking for when he seeks to place the emergence of human mind in a context of natural development that is able to find thought in the whole of nature. Insofar as, in the passage cited above, Bookchin uses the term “subjectivity” to pinpoint a power to think, one can argue that he also believes – like Spinoza did – that *homo cogitat* only because *natura cogitat*. To deny a nonhuman power to think means to deny the very possibility of human thinking too.

These accounts of human and nonhuman thought, as well as the perspectives on matter and bodies that we analyzed above, have important consequences on some core themes of Spinoza’s and Bookchin’s philosophies, namely: imagination, myth and science. In the last part of this article I will analyze these implications, in order to argue that the latter rests to a certain degree on the formers, and to show the ecological importance of a reevaluation of imagination and myth.

4. *Imagination, myth, science*

As I have argued in the first part of the paper, in both Spinoza's and Bookchin's accounts of bodies, a reconceptualization of matter is at work. Being each individual composed of many bodies of different nature, a certain agency of things is implied in every assemblage in which individuals take part. Given that individuals always participate in some kind of assemblage – a participation that is a direct consequence of their modal nature – an agency of matter is always implied. Jane Bennett describes this kind of agency as a «force of things», or a *thing-power* [Bennett 2010]. According to Bennett, there are instances of this power inherent to things, that actively influences every human endeavor. One example could be the agency of electricity, that on 14 August 2003 caused a widespread blackout in the USA and Canada. This blackout resulted from a deficit in reactive power in the American electrical grid, which caused electricity to begin «*flowing in a giant loop counterclockwise* from Pennsylvania to New York to Ontario and into Michigan», a phenomenon that occurs «when power takes a route from producer to buyer different from the intended path» [Bennett 2010, 27-28]. From the viewpoint of modern science, it would seem counterintuitive (if not openly wrong) to attribute agency to electricity. However, for Spinoza and Bookchin, this is far from absurd.

Nevertheless, by arguing for an agency of things, Bennett takes a risk from a spinozist perspective too, that is, anthropomorphizing nature. Indeed, anthropomorphization underlies many prejudices. As Spinoza argues in the Appendix to *Ethics* I [Spinoza 1984, 439-446], humans «commonly suppose that all natural things act, as men do, on account of an end». This leads them to think of nature in terms of finalism, that is, to imagine that all things exist as means toward one end: humankind. Thus, anthropomorphizing nature always implies the risk of thinking of things as if they acted in view of an end, and that end is often imagined as humankind itself. What is at stake here is the risk of falling back into an anthropocentric conception of nature. If this conceptual operation is to be helpful for ecological thinking, and not to underlie new superstitions, it must always be conscious of its imaginative status. Bennett acknowledges the risk and maintains that «a touch of anthropomorphism [...] can catalyze a sensibility that finds a world filled not with ontologically

distinct categories of beings (subjects and objects) but with variously composed materialities that form confederations» [Bennett 2010, 99]. Of course, Bennett does not argue for an intelligence or willfulness of electricity; rather, she maintains that there is something about materiality that allows to consider it «as *itself* the “active principle”» [Bennett 2010, 61]. In other words, materiality does not need an external principle to be considered active. This is consistent with Spinoza’s digression on the nature of bodies (*Ethics* II after proposition 13) insofar as to argue for an agency of organic and inorganic nonhuman bodies means to focus on what a body *can do*, rather than on what a body *is*. The risk of anthropomorphizing nature could thus be beneficial for a more global understanding of nature itself, as Bennett maintains.

But what does it mean to understand nature more globally? Bookchin provides an account of organic societies that might shed some light in this respect. Anthropomorphization is not beneficial because of innocent metaphors or myths, but because of «its hints of a more complete logic – a logic possibly complementary to that of science, but certainly a more organic logic» [Bookchin 1991, 237]. According to Bookchin, there is something about reality that mythic behavior obscures but does not negate; this kind of behavior conceals a truth without denying it. One example that the theorist of social ecology provides of this mythic behavior involves Anvilik Eskimos, among whom there are ivory carvers who do not usually try to impose a shape to the matter that they are carving, but rather believe that there are characteristics inherent in the material that they just have to reveal with their knife [Bookchin 1991, 233]. In this sense, they become part of an assemblage in which worker (the carver) and matter (raw ivory) form an organic whole. Of course, Bookchin argues, Anvilik Eskimos are wrong when they assume that inside raw ivory there is a vocal subject that needs to be revealed. However, this very mistake allows them to place themselves in an order of phenomena «that never merely “falls” together as an accumulation of “objects”, but always – perhaps even by definition – *forms* an organism or an organic totality that derives from the *nisus* of “matter”»³ [Bookchin 1991, 237].

³ The recognition of some kind of agency of things that Bookchin sees in the organic logic inherent to mythic behavior could be analogized with Deleuze and Guattari’s

This attitude toward nature, Bookchin maintains, has some very relevant ecological effects. By placing themselves in an order of phenomena, that is, an organized organic habitat, these societies think of their relationship to nature as a participative one. To them, nature is something that they take part in rather than something that gives them resources, assets or commodities. The participation of human individuals and societies in the process of natural development is a pivotal tenet of Bookchin's conception of an ecological and rational relationship between humankind and nature. The kind of participation that the philosopher from Burlington has in mind, however, is not one that conceives nature as an external habitat that needs to be preserved for instrumental purposes (i.e. human survival in a context of climate crisis). Rather, Bookchin thinks of humanity as being *in consociation* with nature:

Nature begins *as* life. From the very outset of human consciousness, it enters directly into *consociation* with humanity – not merely harmonization or even balance. [...] Nature is not merely a habitat; it is a *participant* that advises the community with its omens, secures it with its camouflage, leaves it telltale messages in broken twigs and footprints, whispers warnings to it in the wind's voice, nourishes it with a largesse of plants and animals, and in its countless functions and counsels is absorbed into the community's nexus of rights and duties. [...] Hence, the very notion of nature is *always* social at this point in human development – in an ontological sense that the protoplasm of humankind retains an abiding continuity with the protoplasm of nature [Bookchin 1991, 47-48].

Nature here is presented as something rather anthropomorphized, that gives advice and actively helps out the first human communities. Of course, Bookchin does not advocate for a quasi-animist notion of nature. Despite having a more ecological relationship with the environment that surrounds them, organic communities are still extremely tied to ancestral lineages, blood oaths and kinship. Thus, imagination and myth, without reason, prove to lack a degree of complexity and interrelationship that can easily foster parochialism and provincialism, Bookchin argues. According to the theorist of social ecology, humankind

notion of «assemblage». By arguing for an organic whole «that derives from the nîsus of “matter”», Bookchin's stance is quite similar to Bennett's idea according to which agency is distributed among actants that are always interacting.

should retrieve some ecological and social values that were widespread among organic societies not in order to regress to a past stage of civilization, but because to integrate the beneficial effects of imagination and myth with reason would allow to better understand humanity's place in nature. Just like Élisée Reclus, Bookchin maintains that «while it is neither desirable nor even possible to replicate past social phenomena, knowledge of such past achievements offers inspiration for transforming our values and for expanding our vision of human possibilities in the future» [Clark 2013, 39].

Two elements have emerged that approximate Bookchin to Spinoza: the possibility to benefit from a good use of imagination; and the idea that knowledge of humans and nature allows to better organize societies. With regard to the first point, Spinoza openly and repeatedly states that «men are guided by nature to unite in one aim, either because of a common [hope or] a common fear» [Spinoza 2016, 521], that is, because of passions. It is because of passions that humans need some kind of political order, and given that subjection to passions is an ontological fact implied by the modal nature of humans, political order is also an ontological fact for Spinoza [Caporali 2000, 120]. This very order arises from passions, so that an edifying administration of passions results in a stable and free society, whose correlate is an autonomous and powerful body politic. This is also consistent with Sharp's politics of renaturalization. Insofar as passions are not something that we can get rid of, and neither is imagination, we might as well seek ways to reorganize and reappropriate our affective nature in a way that allows us to be as free as our nature allows. To phrase it in social ecology's terms, societies should retrieve a sense of directionality in natural and social development. This directionality is always imagined, as nature does not follow any kind of preestablished teleology⁴, but it allows humankind to recover an ethical sense that should always support reason if we are not to let the latter become a blind and ecologically devastating instrumental rationality. To accompany and integrate reason with this ethical sense is the starting point for the development of an ecological society. This notion of an ethical form of reason is also consistent with a Spinoza's notion of reason:

⁴ This is a further element that Spinoza's and Bookchin's philosophies share.

Let us say, in classical (Aristotelian) terms, that he does not differentiate between the problem of “life” (*to zên*) and its “necessity”, and the problem of the “good life” (*to eu zên*). This is because, for him, *knowledge* in general is the condition as well as the result of the effort at preservation. Propositions 26 and 27 reiterate that reason cannot be separate from knowledge, which is its intrinsic power. Reason is therefore “useful”, but not “instrumental”. It cannot be rational without also being reasonable [Balibar 2020, 66].

This leads to the second element that Spinoza and Bookchin share, that is, the idea that knowledge of humans and nature allows to better organize societies. As Balibar argues, knowledge is both the condition and the result of the effort at preservation. Spinoza demonstrates in proposition 26 of the fourth part of the *Ethics* that the mind, insofar as it reasons, strives only to understanding; moreover, he also maintains that nothing is more useful (that is, helpful to self-preservation) for humans than other humans under the guidance of reason (*E IV P18 scholium*). Given these two premises what is most helpful to the preservation of each individual is to compose with others who strive to understanding. Insofar as the body politic is conceived as a composition of human individuals that are guided «as if by one mind», the promotion of reason and knowledge among them will be an important factor that will contribute to the stability and freedom of society. Similarly, Bookchin maintains that

our study of nature [...] exhibits a self-evolving patterning, a “grain”, so to speak, that is implicitly ethical. Mutualism, freedom, and subjectivity are not strictly human values or concerns. They appear, however germinal, in larger cosmic and organic processes that require no Aristotelian God to motivate them, no Hegelian Spirit to vitalize them. If social ecology provides a little more than a coherent focus to the unity of mutualism, freedom, and subjectivity as aspects of a cooperative society that is free of domination and guided by reflection and reason, it will remove the taints that blemished a naturalistic ethics from its inception; it will provide both humanity and nature with a common ethical voice [Bookchin 1991, 365].

For both authors, knowledge of nature also implies a better understanding of the laws that govern humankind, insofar as both think of humanity as a part of nature itself, rather than something that can ever

cut ties with it. As humankind's ontological condition always implies that it follows natural laws, to better understand the latter also means to be able to better organize relationships between human individuals, that is, to better organize society.

Here, one last distinction is needed: despite not being antagonistic categories, different classes of laws exist. On the one hand we have laws of nature; on the other hand, there are laws of human nature, which make positive law (laws of law) necessary. Laws of nature are those according to which God or nature acts and cannot be broken. Those are the laws that define the ontological status of everything that can be or be conceived. Laws of human nature are those which follow from the modal nature of humankind. Being humans modes of the substance, they are always to some extent subject to passions, that is, fluctuations in their power to act. As we have seen in the first part of the article, human bodies are the result of their interaction with other bodies, and this can increase or diminish their power. The passional structure of interactions is what makes laws of law necessary. However, even though it is impossible to completely get rid of passions, one can strive that «whatever is related to [...] imagination is of hardly any moment in relation to the intellect» (*E V P39 scholium*) [Spinoza 1984, 614], that is, one can strive that imagination and passions do not take on a leading role in their life. Knowledge (a mind very much conscious of God and of things), which coincides with a life under the guidance of reason, is what allows humans to most agree in nature (*E IV P35 scholium*)⁵. Thus, one can argue that Spinoza really was a philosopher who was «permanently haunted by the problem of education» [Zourabichvili 2023, 257] and that education itself takes on a crucial political and ecological role – just as it does in Bookchin's

⁵ Later in the same scholium, Spinoza argues that humans «still find from experience that by helping one another they can provide themselves much more easily with the things they require» [Spinoza 1984, 564]. The same idea can be found in Kropotkin, who maintains that mutual aid, rather than competition, is what drives the evolution of the species forward, and should be promoted in society too. With respect to humankind, Kropotkin 2021 provides examples throughout history ranging from medieval guilds and federations of cities to the first trade unions, arguing that these forms of support between humans, rather than the coercion of the State, are what allows societies to exist and flourish.

philosophy. Being imagination and passions an inextinguishable part of human nature, the heart of an ecological political project ultimately lies in the ability to understand which laws govern nature and human nature, in order to proficiently address those passionate forces that can always be socially disruptive and ecologically devastating but can also foster an imaginative power able to recover an ethical sense of interdependence between society and nature.

5. Conclusions

In this paper I maintained that Spinoza and Bookchin share a common stance on themes such as the ontological status of matter and bodies, which are conceived as active and self-organizing in more or less complex forms or degrees of power. To phrase it like Bennett, both of them conceive matter as *vibrant matter*. A further aspect that their philosophies have in common, I argued, is the idea of the complex composition of minds, which are always the result of relations with other human and nonhuman parts of thinking nature. The affinities between the perspectives of these two authors on matter, bodies and minds also allowed to take into account some ecological implications with regard to the role played by imagination, myth and knowledge in the development of a rational and ecological society. The retrieval of imagination and of its potentially beneficial effects allowed to sketch the outlines of an ecological rationality that, as I maintained throughout this paper, highlights both Bookchin's spinozism and the possible contribution that Spinoza's philosophy can give to social ecology.

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Keywords

Spinoza; Bookchin; social ecology; nature; renaturalization

Abstract

This paper argues that Murray Bookchin's conception of matter and thought aligns with Spinoza's views, particularly as outlined in Spinoza's treatment of bodies in the second part of the *Ethics*. I argue that Bookchin's redefinition of matter in terms of a dynamic interaction of self-organized organisms echoes Spinoza's conception of bodies. Both thinkers reject a fundamental separation between humans and nature, recognizing human complexity as a natural outgrowth of nonhuman organization. Furthermore, I read Bookchin's ideas on natural mind alongside Hasana Sharp's renaturalization of ideology, which emphasizes Spinoza's notion of a transindividual power of thinking involving both human and nonhuman beings. I maintain that this conception of thought challenges modern science's view of nature as an object of thought but not a thinking entity, thus theorizing a power of thinking inherent to nature. By reconceptualizing matter, rationality, and science, this approach forms the basis of

an ecological ethics that recognizes alterity as an active element in natural and social history, grounding Bookchin's theory of ecological ethics in Spinoza's philosophy.

In questo articolo sostengo che la concezione di Murray Bookchin rispetto a materia e pensiero è coerente con quella sviluppata da Spinoza, in particolare in riferimento alla discussione dei corpi che Spinoza affronta nella seconda parte dell'*Etica*. Sostengo che la ridefinizione della materia in termini di una interazione dinamica di organismi auto-organizzati operata da Bookchin faccia eco alla concezione spinoziana dei corpi. Entrambi i filosofi rifiutano una separazione sostanziale tra esseri umani e natura, rinvenendo nella natura umana una complessità che emerge da forme non umane di organizzazione. Inoltre, leggo le idee di Bookchin rispetto alla "mente naturale" in continuità con la rinaturalizzazione dell'ideologia di Hasana Sharp, che pone enfasi sulla nozione spinoziana di una potenza transindividuale di pensare che coinvolge sia l'umano sia il non umano. Sostengo che questa concezione del pensiero, che teorizza una potenza di pensare intrinseca alla natura, ponga in discussione l'assunto della scienza moderna che vede la natura come un oggetto del pensiero, ma non come un'entità pensante. Riconcettualizzando materia, ragione e scienza, questo approccio fonda la base di un'etica ecologica che riconosce nell'alterità un elemento attivo nella storia naturale e sociale, fondando nella filosofia di Spinoza la teoria di un'etica ecologica sviluppata da Bookchin.

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