

## **Understanding Bookchin's Laws:**

The manufacture of senseless work and the inexorable onward march of hierarchy

A paper prepared for a conference of Research Committee 51 (Socio-Cybernetics) of the International Sociological Association, held in Krakow, 24-28 June 2024.

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Version date: 14 June 2024

Currently 8201 words.

### **Abstract**

In the course of our research into the educational system we noted that the sociological function of producing and legitimising hierarchy contributed markedly to the network of social forces driving the nurturance of diverse talents out of schools. Likewise, in our research into the network of social forces contributing to the destruction of the planet, we noted the role played by the creation of endless senseless work. Bookchin had earlier captured these processes in his references to (1) "the inexorable onward march of hierarchy" and (2) his law that, in any context of a surplus of labour, society somehow manages to create endless, hierarchically organised, senseless work. Crucial though they are to the survival of our species we have not found much work seeking what might be termed a sociocybernetic account of these processes. In the hope of provoking interest in such a quest, this paper summarises, and hopefully extends, Bookchin's observations.

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This paper is more a request for help than a presentation of work done.

In the course of our research into the educational system we noted that the sociological function of legitimising and enforcing hierarchy contributed markedly to the network of social forces driving the nurturance and recognition of pupils' diverse talents out of schools (Raven, 1994).

Likewise, in our research into the network of social forces contributing to the destruction of the planet as we know it ... carrying ourselves as a species with it ... we noted the role played by the creation of endless senseless work ranging from the construction of pyramids to the manufacture of junk toys, junk "education", junk foods, and, most importantly, endless bureaucratic activity (Raven, 1995). None of these contribute much to quality of life, although engaging in them does help to give meaning to the lives of those involved. But they do contribute enormously to the destruction of the planet.

Bookchin (2005) captured these processes in his references to what might be termed two laws: (1) The inexorable onward march of hierarchy. This continuously undermines the establishment of what might be termed "organic" social arrangements i.e. social arrangements having multiple and interacting feedback loops analogous to those which

govern the internal functioning of animals; (2) The, seemingly equally inexorable process, whereby, in any context of a surplus of labour, society somehow manages to create endless, hierarchically organised, senseless work.

Crucial though they are to the survival of our species we have not found much work seeking to understand the social forces that lie behind these processes. Bookchin attributed them to self-organising processes. Unfortunately, this is not sufficient from the point of understanding, let alone intervening in, the processes.

### **The Manufacture of Hierarchy**

In preparing this article, I have found it convenient to cannibalise an earlier article (Raven, 2008), which incorporated many direct quotations from Bookchin. These are drawn from both the archaeological and current ethnological record. My hope is that a greater familiarity with them will contribute to the formulation of some kind of sociocybernetic explanation going beyond saying that these processes acquire a self-reinforcing and self-extending life of their own.

More than anything else these selections reveal that the processes he is writing about are complex, pervasive, and coordinated across many different sectors of society over several millennia. They are not, therefore, “easily” accounted for in terms of simple progressive elaboration of the kind that might appear to account for phenomena like those described by Graeber below.

#### *Mapping the Social Forces Which Lie Behind our Seemingly Inexorable Plunge to Extinction*

Bookchin begins by arguing that human societies were initially, and, to the surprise of many people, in some cases still are, structured *organically*, ie as in the internal functioning of animals. Roles within them were/are *differentiated and complementary*. Coordination was/is achieved through many non-hierarchical feedback processes – as is also the case within any organism.

Such an arrangement is anything but “primitive”, and referring to early societies in this disparaging way belies our own predisposition to think in ways which blind us to the importance of certain aspects of reality. We fail to see what it is of value in other ways of doing things. Worse, for many people, the very notion that organisations might be organised organically is, literally, unthinkable.

In contrast, the dominant types of social organisation that have emerged over the millennia are perhaps best characterised as *hierarchical*. They have centralised, dominance, and command-and-control oriented, structures.

As has been repeatedly noted throughout history, these societies are deeply destructive both of the average quality of life of those who live in them, and, much more importantly, their habitats. The destruction of habitat has enormous implications for their future. This has never been more serious (nor more widely recognised) than it is today.

But what is most disturbingly documented by Bookchin is that the trend from organic to hierarchical has persisted inexorably despite not only the observations of acute observers but also numerous experiments demonstrating the viability of alternative ways of doing things. (The latter have included, not only within-organisational demonstrations, but also the remarkable Greek enactment of participative democracy which was, apparently, deliberately introduced to stem the rise of an hierarchical command-and-control oriented society.)

Bookchin himself accounts for each transition (each of which itself often took thousands of years) in social organisation in terms of (i) the constellation of historical factors that came into play at the time and (ii) a network of “self-organising” processes.

## *The Emergence of Domination and Hierarchy*

Bookchin argues that the origins of hierarchy and the mythology needed to support it lie, not in the economic, but in the social realm. Differentiation of roles is entirely compatible with organic society.

He suggests that old age was the source of one of the problems that led to the emergence of hierarchy. Old age is a time of *dependency* rather than contribution. How to secure continued welfare? Answer: by forming a pressure group of elders and generating a mythology to legitimise it. Their need for social power, and hierarchical power at that, is a function of declining biological power. Claiming wisdom facilitated a claim to magical power: the power to intervene in extra-human processes on behalf of the tribe and the power to orchestrate social rituals to the same end. Thus the elders/shamans first crystallised *professional* power .... professional power linked to political power, linked, in turn, to the manipulation of *fear*.

“Incipient, potentially hierarchical, elites gradually evolve, each phase of their evolution shading into the succeeding one, until the first firm shoots of hierarchy emerge and eventually mature. Their growth is uneven and intermixed. The elders and shamans rely on each other and then compete with each other for social privileges, many of which are attempts to achieve the personal security conferred by a certain measure of influence. Both groups enter into alliances with an emerging warrior caste of young men finally to form the beginnings of a quasi-political community and an incipient State. Their privileges and powers only then become generalised into institutions that try to exercise command over society as a whole.”

And so on to institutionalised control.

Contractual relations – or, more properly, the “treaties” and “oaths” that give specifiable forms to community life – initially served humanity well. But the more demanding the environment became, the more preliterate peoples had to explicate the ways in which they were responsible for each other and how they must deal with exogenous factors – particularly nearby communities – that impinged on them. Sexual, kinship, reciprocal, federative, and civil areas of community life had to acquire greater structure. The need to formalise and structure was reinforced by individuals who felt that they carried heavier burdens and responsibilities than the rest of the community.

The early priesthood emerged from a reworking of shamanism. By freeing itself from the social vulnerabilities of the shaman, whose body constituted a mere vessel for spirits, the priestly corporation acquired the role of a cosmic brokerage firm between humanity and its increasingly anthropomorphic deities – deities no longer to be confused with the nature spirits that peopled the environment of organic society. Theology began to gain ascendancy over divination. Seemingly rational accounts of the origins, workings, and destiny of the cosmos – laden with an epistemology of rule – tended to replace magic. By emphasizing the “guilt” of the human “wrongdoer” and the “displeasure” of the deities, the priestly corporation could acquire an immunity to failure that the shaman had always lacked. The technical failures of the shaman, which typically rendered his social status insecure, could be reinterpreted by the emerging priesthood as evidence of the moral failure of the community itself. Drought, diseases, floods, locust infestations, and defeats in warfare – to cite the biblical afflictions of ancient humanity – were reinterpreted as the retribution of wrathful deities for communal wrong-doing, not merely as the dark work of malevolent spirits. Technical failure, in effect, was shifted from the priestly corporation to a fallen humanity that had to atone for its moral frailties. And only priestly supplications, visibly reinforced by generous sacrifices in the form of goods and services, could redeem humanity, temper the punitive actions of the deities, and

restore the earlier harmony that existed between humanity and its gods. In time, sacrifice and supplication became a constant effort in which neither the community nor its priestly corporation could relent. When this effort was institutionalised to the extent that the episodic became chronic, it created the early theocracies that go hand-in-hand with early cities, whose foci were always the temple, its priestly quarters, its storehouses, craft shops, and the dwellings of its artisans and bureaucracies. Urban life began with an altar, not simply a marketplace, and probably with walls that were meant to differentiate sacred space from the natural, not simply as defensive palisades.

Like the priestly corporation, the clan was transformed into an economic corporation. Community, once conceived as the vital *activity* of communizing, became the source of passive communal labour, a mere instrument of production. Communal traits were valued insofar as they lent themselves to technical coordination, exploitation, and rationalization – a very ancient commentary on the exploitative nature of a communism structured around hierarchy. Hence clan society, far from being initially effaced, was used against itself to produce a wealth of material objects. The priestly corporation, in effect, had become a clan unto itself that raised itself above all other clans. It had become something quite new: a *class*.

Accumulated wealth, now conceived as the sum of humanity's material sacrifices to the deities, was divested of the demonic traits that organic society had imputed to treasure. The wealthy temples that emerged in both the Old World and the New are testimony to rendering sacred the accumulated wealth; later, of booty as the reward of valour; and finally, tribute as the result of political sovereignty. Gifts, which once symbolised alliance between people in dual support systems, were now transformed into tithes and taxes for supernatural and political security. This steady reworking of the communal clans into labour forces, of communal lands into proprietary estates, of conciliatory myths into repressive religious dramas, of kinship responsibilities into class interests, of hierarchical command into class exploitation – all were to appear more like shifts of emphasis in traditional systems of right rather than marked ruptures with hallowed customs. Leaving the catastrophic effects of invasions aside, primordial society seems to have been seduced into the new social disposition of class society without clearly departing from the outlines of organic society.

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That hallowed process called Reason, of generalization and classification, appears very early in an involuted and contradictory form: the *fictive* manipulation of nature begins with the *real* manipulation of humanity. Although the shaman's efforts to give greater coherence to the world will become social power that confers upon humanity greater control over the external world, the shaman and, more precisely, his successor – the priest – initially divides this world to manipulate it. In either case, early hunter-gatherers projected the social structure of secular power onto the supernatural just as other groups do: later religions merely reflect the then contemporary social structures.

### *The Emergence of the State by Force and the Role of Mental Transformation*

The state's capacity to rule by brute force has always been limited. The myth of a purely coercive, omnipresent, State is a fiction that has served the state machinery all too well. It has done this by creating in the oppressed a sense of awe and powerlessness which ends in social quietism. Without a high degree of cooperation from even the most victimised classes of society (such as chattel slaves and serfs) its authority would eventually dissipate.

In seeking an explanation of how the State emerged one has, therefore, above all, to explain how this subjective, mentalised, view of the world gradually evolved.

In seeking this it is important to bear in mind that there has, in reality, been an immense variety of state forms that have been subject to varying amounts of public control. These have included the early Sumerian state, in which the military overlords were repeatedly checked by popular assemblies; the Aztec state, which was faced with a tug-of-war between the *capulli* and the nobility, the Hebrew monarchies, which were repeatedly unsettled by prophets who invoked the democratic customs of the “Bedouin compact”, and the Athenian state, institutionally rooted in direct democracy.

How has it come about that these have been eliminated and the modern state, with its pervasive invasion of community life, its mass media, its highly sophisticated surveillance systems, and its authority to supervise almost every aspect of personal life has come into being?

To get from stateless societies to the modern state a whole network of developments were required. Modern states could only emerge after traditional society’s customs and sensibilities had been so thoroughly reworked to accord with domination that humanity lost all sense of contact with the organic society from which it originated.

One important component in this transition is increased bureaucratisation. But, as is usual in social systems, there is a recursive cycle whereby bureaucratization promotes the anonymity and power of elites and these promote the growth of bureaucracy. More than likely, both are promoted by a network of social forces that has yet to be mapped and made explicit.

Bureaucratic relationships, unlike those that preceded them, are notoriously rigid, sclerotic, and intentionally divested of all personality. They tend to be self-perpetuating and self-expansive. As mere instruments of rule, bureaucratic structures are quintessentially hierarchical; indeed, they are the political expression of objective power, of power that “merely” happens to be executed by people who, as bureaucrats, are totally divested of personality and uniqueness. Accordingly, in many areas of the modern world, such people have been turned almost literally into a State technology, one in which each bureaucrat is interchangeable with another and, in due course, with mechanical devices.

### *Diversity, Freedom, and Justice*

Much of Bookchin’s book is devoted to elaborating, and exploring the implications of, an interesting paradox: The drive toward hierarchy, domination, and centralisation has been accompanied by its opposite – more and more explicit discussion of, and legislation for, freedom and justice.

The concept of freedom was unformulatable in most preliterate societies. Lacking any institutionalised structure of domination, they had no way of defining a condition that was still intrinsically part of their social lives.

Unfortunately, the absence of an appropriate conceptual framework for thinking about issues like freedom and domination exposed the community to manipulation. The elders and shamans, and later the patriarchs, priestly corporations, and warrior chieftains who corroded organic society, needed only to produce shifts in emphasis from the particular to the general – from specific animals to their spirits; from deities built around animals and spirits to deities built around a human image; from the ownership of land and tools being held by those actually using it/them (usufruct) to communal property; from demonic treasure to kingly storehouses; from gifts to commodities; from mere barter to elaborate marketplaces – to gain more and more control.

Articulation of the concept of freedom proceeded hand in hand with the emergence of the concept of justice, producing many paradoxes.

Societal concern with justice and laws to promote it was prompted by the arrival of strangers (non-kin) into traditional societies. How to think about them? How to deal with them? What kind of treatment to accord them?

The problem became progressively more acute with the development of city life and trade. The strangers who leveraged the development of judicial arrangements for asserting their rights often serviced the city with craft or commercial skills. They were helped in their campaigns by other oppressed groups who could hope to escape the whimsies and insults of arbitrary rule only by getting their rights and duties inscribed in an inviolable, codified, form. Thus progress toward justice was, in large part, a product of the social and ethnic outsider.

But, although prompted by the need to deal explicitly with diversity, justice renders equal – discounts, ignores, renders invisible – endless fundamentally important considerations that are in fact relevant, such as differences in financial and social situation. To assume that everyone is “equal” is patently preposterous when it is taken to include such things as strength, intellect, training, experience, talent, disposition, and opportunity. Such “equality” scoffs at reality and denies the commonality and solidarity of the community by subverting its responsibilities to *compensate* for differences between individuals instead of, to emphasise the point by repetition, treating unequals equally. This specious concern with “equality” thus yields a very real inequality, in the end negating equality on its own terms.

So, in progressively elaborating codes for equalising unequals, society renders a great deal of diversity undiscussable – and thus restricts freedom – whilst, at the same time, codifying rights to certain freedoms.

The subversion of organic society drastically undermined authentic freedom. Compensation was restructured into rewards, gifts were replaced by commodities. Cuneiform writing, the basis of our alphabetic script, had its origins in the meticulous records the temple clerks kept of products received and products dispersed, in short, the precise accounting of goods, possibly even when the land was “communally owned” and worked. These accounting records therefore prefigure the moral literature of a less giving and more despotic world in which the equality of unequals had given way to mere charity. Thereafter “right” was to supplant freedom. No longer was it the primary responsibility for society to care for its young, elderly, infirm, or unfortunates; their care became a “private matter” for family and friends – albeit very slowly and through various subtly shaded phases. On the village level the old customs still lingered on, but this world was not part of “civilization”; merely an indispensable but concealed archaism.

With the coming of warriors and their manorial economy, a new social disposition arose: the warrior code of might. But mere coercion alone could not have created the relatively stable, largely feudal, society that emerged. Rather, it was the *ethos* of coercion – the mystification of courage, physical prowess, and a “healthy” lust for combat and adventure. It was not might as such, but the belief in the status, indeed, the *mana*, that might, conferred on the individual, that led to an ideology of coercion, which both the victor and his victim mutually acknowledged and celebrated.

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At this point I would like, once again, to draw attention to the fact that what we are getting from Bookchin, fascinating though it is, is a description of (some of) the factors operative at each successive transition in history. What we don’t get is a feel for what is leading, or pushing, the process in a single direction. As a result, we have little guidance as to what to direct our attention to *now* ... How to intervene in this organic evolution toward our own extinction, carrying the planet as we know it with us.

## *The Emergence of Aggressive Individualism*

There were other supportive developments. To the extent that organic society declined, so did the intense sense of collectivity it had fostered. A new context had to be created for the individual that would render it functional in an increasingly atomised world – an atomised world that eventuated in the random, isolated, socially starved monads who people modern capitalist society. The waning of primordial society placed a high premium on a new type of individual: A resourceful, comparatively self-sufficient, self-reliant, ego that could readily adapt itself to – if not “command” – a society that was losing its human scale and developing more complex political institutions and commercial ties.

Such individuals had always existed on the margins of early collectives. Tribal society made allowances for aberrant sexual behaviour, exotic psychological traits, and personal ambition – allowances that find expression in a high degree of sexual freedom, shamanistic roles, and an exaltation of courage and skill. From this marginal area, society recruited its priests and warrior-chieftains for commanding positions in later, more hierarchical, institutions.

This development had both personal and social components. At the personal level, the arrival of such individuals panic the more composed, tradition-bound, collectivity. The arrival of individuality is stridently announced by the warrior, whose “ego boundaries” are established by transgressing the boundaries of all traditional societies. Valour, rather than lineage, marks his myth-beclouded personal traits.

But mercenary warriors were only one of the groups now emerging. There were also merchants who lived by their wits and cunning. Their self-possession and libertarian spirit stand in marked contrast to the disciplined lifeways of manorial society. They are the harbingers of the intensely individuated rebel who is destined to “turn the world upside down”. But their fortunes depend upon their reception from the, often inert, mass of people. Increasingly, society needs autonomous egos who are free to undertake the varied functions of citizenship. The development of the individual on this social level, in short, is not an isolated, idiosyncratic personal phenomenon; it is a change in the temper, outlook, and destiny of the millions who are to people civilization for the centuries to come and initiate the history of the modern ego up to the present day. Just as the contemporary proletariat was first formed by severing a traditional peasantry from an archaic manorial economy, so the relatively free citizen of the classical city-state, the medieval commune, and the modern nation-state was initially formed by severing the young male from an archaic body of kinship relationships.

### *On the abdication of power to “authority”.*

“To delegate power (upward, which is central to the operation of states) is to divest personality of its most integral traits; it denies the very notion that the individual is *competent* to deal not only with the management of his or her personal life but with its most important context: the *social* context.”

### *The Recent Evolution of Destructive/Exploitative Societal Management Arrangements*

Institutional technics first emerged in the form of the priestly corporation and the slowly emerging bureaucracies that surrounded it. They were later developed by monarchies and military forces. Religious and secular bureaucracies were ever more technically authoritarian. They mobilised the population and directed their energies toward authoritarian

ends. But, most importantly, they facilitated the development of a *belief system* that validated the entire hierarchical structure.

According to Bookchin, the most signal achievement of these bureaucracies was not the coordination and rationalization of a newly developed human machine to achieve socially unnecessary ends ...and, still less, to enhance public welfare through, for example, the production of food. It was the effectiveness with which they reduced their vast armies of peasants and slaves to inanimate objects. The main effect of this was to validate hierarchy.

Hierarchies and ruling classes stake out their claims to sovereignty not only by a process of elevation but also by a process of debasement. The vast armies of corvee labour that dragged stone blocks along the banks of the Nile to build pyramids (i.e. to undertake tasks that were not needed for any reason other than inflating the egos and hopeful longevity of rulers) provide an image of inanimate objects upon whom their foremen and rulers could exercise their sense of power.

From the New World to the Old, the stupendous elaboration of centralised states and the proliferation of courts, nobles, priesthoods, and military elites was supported by a highly parasitic institutional technology of domination composed of armies, bureaucrats, tax farmers, juridical agencies and a septic, often brutal, belief system based on sacrifice and self-abnegation. Without this political technology, the mobilization of labour, the collection of vast material surpluses, and the deployment of a surprisingly simple “tool-kit” for monumental technical tasks, would have been inconceivable.

Bookchin’s basic claim here is that it is the psychological “needs” of progressively emerging power groups ... shamans, priestly corporations, and “bureaucracy” ... that leads to the progressive development of a social machine that objectifies labour.

Here he implies that it was the former that produced the latter. And that may indeed have been the case historically. But, as explained earlier, it seems to me more likely that both are outcomes of a poorly understood autopoietic, even organic, process that not only perpetuates itself but even tends toward its elaboration. It seems unlikely that priestly corporations *set out* to objectify labour. Objectifying labour, including the bureaucracy in the term, may have been a process, discovered serendipitously, which, when articulated, enabled them to solidify their position. But, bearing in mind the extent of social mobility, the amplification of social division seems to be what might be considered some kind of teleological “aim” of an autopoietic, or, probably better, organic, system.

Bookchin writes:

“Beyond the responsibility of massing huge numbers of human beings into regimented tasks, this system (i.e. the network of armies, bureaucrats, and tax farmers) had three essential goals: to intensify the labour process, to abstract it, and to objectify it. A carefully planned effort was undertaken to piece work together so that the State could extract every bit of labour from the “masses,” reduce labour to undifferentiated labour-time, and transmute human beings into mere instruments of production.”

I have many difficulties with this statement: Firstly, I am not sure what the first two of the “essential goals” refer to. Does “intensifying the labour process” mean generating more and more senseless work for the idle hands that the devil might otherwise have deployed in activities designed to bring about social change? Does it mean driving out time for socialising, haircuts, thinking, or participating in activities directed toward social change? Second, what is the evidence that this process was carefully planned? Was there really a plan to reduce labour to a dehumanised condition? Or were these things some kind of epiphenomenon emerging from the spontaneous, autopoietic, even organic, operation of social processes? And, third, what is this about “production”? Production of what? It seems to me that much more important than the reduction of human beings to cogs in a machine that produced material goods and delivered crude services was the invention of new goods and



services that were to be produced: junk foods, junk prices, junk econometrics, junk “market” theories, junk marketing, junk security (insurance), junk defence, junk “education”, junk research. Differential access to the products of this work itself legitimised hierarchy and a scramble to get out of cog-like roles. Still more important (so far as I can see) was the progressive emergence (invention?) of insecurity and anomie. Means isolation and disconnection Security became individualised. The community as a source of security was disbanded. One had frenetically to attend to networking to try to be sure that one would have a job tomorrow. And, in the context of the so-called emancipation of women, personalised career paths led to the break up of the family as a source of security. (One might include junk social prestige in the list of junk products produced.)

And there is something else: many of these jobs were not as soul destroying as is often claimed. The invention of new products (including insurance and “educational” packages), new services, new marketing arrangements, and new organisational arrangements often called for considerable ingenuity, creativity, initiative, and social contact. Perhaps the most creative of these inventions was the invention of busyness – senseless work produced and legitimised by mythology (e.g. “The efficiency of the market” ... when the market is, in fact, the least efficient way of doing anything, instead creating endless senseless work demanding frenetic activity for its conduct.)

As to the suggestion of a deliberate proliferation of laws and the legal system, a succession of laws was presumably introduced, as in today’s world, as expedient measures to tackle a series of immediate presenting problem. Admittedly many of these so-called “problems” were only problems for, and only visible to, the ruling class. And many of the others were largely mythical problems semi-dreamt up by do-gooders to justify their existence.

But the point is that virtually all these laws seem to have unexpected, counterintuitive, and even contradictory effects. Well-intentioned public action seems almost inevitably to have the opposite effect to that intended. Thus the introduction of laws to guarantee “rights” to “strangers” highlighted and legitimised certain aspects of diversity ... but simultaneously rendered others not only invisible, but even “deliberately” designated them as “irrelevant” (to justice). Thus it is hard to believe that the system was in some sense designed as a whole by malicious rulers. It looks much more like a succession of expedient decisions taken to deal with emergent problems and alarming situations.

In the end, to reiterate the point, it seems more appropriate to view the overall process as “autopoietic” or “organic” rather than planned by some demons. Social processes, like biological processes, are not merely self-perpetuating. Belief systems do not merely have “self-fulfilling propensities”. Both are also self-elaborating. They contain elements which lead to the next stage in their evolution however dysfunctional this may be. Things develop further as a result of a constellation of factors that exist at a particular time. Contrary to the current quest for pre-programming in the genes, what happens in organic development is dependent on developments in distal parts of the developing organism and seems to possess, perhaps does possess, properties which draw it toward the end-state to which it is developing, that is to say, teleological properties. Dysfunctional organisms are not always de-selected by natural selection.

Insofar as, at any point in time, the powerful make laws in their own interests, the fact is that those people have been selected and promoted for their role in a system ... in which case these powerful people cannot meaningfully be said to be responsible for the laws they enact.

But even these comments do not seem to me to reflect the main problems with what Bookchin has written here. It seems to me that two much more basic things are missing from the account. These include a description of the socio-technical *process* that led to these

visible epi-phenomena that reveal its existence and operation ... How and why was a network of essentially meaningless laws generated “in order” to create work for the “middle classes” ... i.e. to legitimise their creaming off wealth from the rest of the community ... whilst subjecting that community to increasingly long and demeaning work against the threat of further humiliation, degradation, and imprisonment? How and why were labour intensive arrangements developed to provide “security” ... pensions, etc? How and why were endless, senseless products – in insurance, entertainment, tourism, elitist “art” – invented and promoted?

How and why were social arrangements to trap more and more people into frenetic activity invented? How was the notion of debt transformed into a means of trapping people into demeaning and unethical activity against their will invented: debts for education, mortgages, and the purchase of furniture? How was the longing to exercise initiative and creativity harnessed in the service of torturing concentration camp prisoners, or designing attractive and enticing brochures, generating new fashions, selling junk foods, junk toys, junk education, and junk security? How were these potentialities harnessed to create ever more destructive unthinking “education”?

Did those “with power” plan all these things? It seems unlikely, especially given that those occupying positions in which they are said to have “power” are continually changing.

But Bookchin is right: No “revolution” in tools, machines, or scientific understanding was needed to produce these developments. He claims that they “stemmed primarily from the genesis of an institutional technics”. But, again, the kind-of autopoietic nature of this process seems to pass unnoticed. Each phase seemed to evolve with a sense of frightening inevitability out of the last. All components ... the bureaucracy, the creation of senseless work, the compelling social division ... seem to “just grow” of their own accord – growing in the sense in which plants grow (although one has to be careful with the analogy because people these days tend to assume that the growth of plants is pre-programmed by information contained in their genes).

### *The Way Forward: Design Specifications for a Sustainable Society*

Bookchin’s discussion of the way forward is much thinner than one might have hoped for on the basis of what was said earlier in the book.

There is, for example, virtually no discussion of how to intervene in the socio-cybernetic processes he has been at pains to describe ... or even much discussion of the forces that are operative *now* and how one might intervene in or harness them.

Likewise, while he hints at some of the features to be possessed by the kind of free, anarchistic, society he is obviously advocating, there is little discussion of how to get from here to there. Clearly, he advocates the abolition of private property and its replacement by usufruct, the encouragement of a vastly widened concept of diversity of the kind he claims is characteristic of organic societies, the replacement of competition by compensation and complementarity, acceptance of the notion of equity in diversity (the equality of unequals) in place of our emphasis on the inequality of equals, the promotion of participative democracy, a focus on *ethical* decisions grounded in contact with mind and reason *in* nature on the one hand and rational consideration of the long-term consequences of actions on the other, freedom to choose which of our needs we are to satisfy (which means creating niches where satisfaction of those choices is possible) and freedom to work at things of one’s choice (such as the improvement of the community through involvement in participative democracy or research) or to connect with other human beings and life more generally.

In connection with the last two, he notes that, while we have become thrall to the notion that freedom consists in having a choice of which *material* needs we wish to satisfy, it could and should consist in a choice of life style, of living, working, and social arrangements ... indeed of arrangements for being in touch with the cosmos. But such choice can only become meaningful if the options are articulable and the individual has the autonomy, moral insight, and wisdom to choose rationally. Further, these wider choices are, in fact, rendered invisible, and therefore un-enactable, by pervasive thoughtways ... thoughtways embedded in virtually everything in our culture but especially amplified and exacerbated by the mass media and advertising. However much the consumer is deluded into the belief that he is choosing freely, he is under the sway of contrived necessity.

But how are all these developments to be brought about? How are we to understand and intervene in the sociocybernetic processes which lead us all to go in another direction?

Bookchin has little to say on these matters. Perhaps this stems from a reluctance to engage in instrumental reasoning ... On the other hand, he clearly and repeatedly implies that one of the most important things for us to do is to apply mind ... reason ... to the enormous problems we face as a species.

As far as the scale of the management operation is concerned, he is at pains to emphasise that, contrary to what many have argued, our problems do not stem from the scale of technical machinery. Rather, they stem from the progressive transformation of *society* into a technical machine for producing, not (unnecessary) technical goods and services, but social division.

The function of most goods and services is not to satisfy human needs but, on the one hand, to make social division visible (and thus fuel competition) and, on the other, to create work to occupy hands that might otherwise have become involved in social transformation.

The question we have to face is how the social technics we have evolved are going to be modified, absorbed into, and used to promote the development of, an emancipatory society. Some of the most dehumanising and centralised social systems were fashioned out of very “small” technologies which bureaucracies, monarchies, and military forces deployed as brutalizing agents to subdue humankind and, later, to try to subdue nature itself. We need to focus on creating liberatory or libertarian, as opposed to authoritarian, arrangements.

A liberatory technology presupposes liberatory institutions; a liberatory sensibility requires a liberatory society. By the same token, artistic crafts are difficult to conceive without an artistically crafted society. It makes no sense to speak of “appropriate technologies” without *radically* challenging the political technologies, the media tools, and the bureaucratic complexities that have turned these concepts into elitist “art forms”.

The questions we can reasonably ask, and which might guide our actions, include: How can we nourish social freedom as a daily activity? How can the design imagination foster a revitalization of human relationships and humanity’s relationship with nature? How can it help lift the “muteness” of nature – a problematical concept that we, in fact, have imposed on ourselves – by opening our own ears to its voice? How can it add a sense of haunting symbiosis to the common productive activity of human and natural beings, a sense of participation in the archetypal animateness of nature?

We share a common organic ancestry with all that lives on this planet. It infiltrates those levels of our bodies that somehow make contact with the existing primordial forms from which we may, originally, have derived. Beyond any structural considerations, we are faced with the need to give an ecological meaning to these buried sensibilities. In the case of our design strategies, we may well want to enhance natural diversity, integration, and function, if only to reach more deeply into a world that has been systematically educated out of our bodies and innate experiences. Today, even in alternate technology, our design

imagination is often utilitarian, economistic, and blind to a vast area of experience that surrounds us.

It is possible to infer that Bookchin may see the way forward as involving the use of the freedom (and time) that could come from an ethical choice of needs to be satisfied, the dissolution of hierarchy, the contraction of senseless work, and security provided by the guaranteed minimum to connect with the wider aspects of mind, life, and reality mentioned earlier. Yet this looks remarkably like the kind of “spirituality” he critiques.

In the base article from which most of the above material has been extracted I go on to discuss how, given the above context, sociocybernetics might be applied to discern a way forward. It has been omitted here since that is not our main concern.

Instead, I will offer a few reflections on the use of the word “organic”.

### *The word “organic”*

To all intents and purposes, the destructive drift from “organic” to hierarchically-organised social institutional frameworks *has itself many, if not all, of the defining features of an organic process.*

Organic processes are those that constitute and recursively define life itself.

It is this organic – life – process which has overcome entropy – that is to say, it is this process which has overcome the tendency, codified in the second law of thermodynamics, for organisation to degenerate into chaos.

According to the laws of physics life should never have happened.

What if *this* organic process – this plunge toward destructive, centralised, command and control organisations – is going to overcome the organic process which created our world-with-life in the first place and thus, in the end, contribute to the enactment of the laws of physics.

This process might be characterised as *Thanatosian* in contrast to *Gaianian*.

How are we to map the socio-cybernetic forces and feedback loops that contribute to the autopoietic/organic processes which head us toward dominance, hierarchy, and self-destruction?

Examples of the kind of thing one might have in mind can be found in Morgan (1986), Raven (1995), and Raven & Navrotsky (2001) or by activating the following links to diagrams in our “eyesociety” website:

[http://www.eyesociety.co.uk/resources/Figure%201%20\(formerly%2023.1\)%20rev.pdf](http://www.eyesociety.co.uk/resources/Figure%201%20(formerly%2023.1)%20rev.pdf)

<http://www.eyesociety.co.uk/resources/diagram%2020.6.pdf>

<http://www.eyesociety.co.uk/resources/flpadwc.pdf>

Unfortunately, besides the problems discussed by Raven & Navrotsky, it has since become more and more apparent (see e.g. Raven 2009) that we still have a long way to go in bringing about the kind of transformation in the concept of *social* forces that Newton effected in relation to physical force (see Raven & Gallon, 2010).

Furthermore, it has also become apparent that what we thought was a solution to the question of how to harness the social forces driving down the quality of education (Diagram 20.5 as a “solution” to the problem posed by Diagram 20.4 in my *New Wealth of Nations*) was *not*, in reality, an example from the socio-cybernetic field paralleling a diagram showing how to harness the forces acting on a sailing boat in order to drive the boat *into* the wind instead of allowing it to crash the boat against the rocks.

It had more in common with trying to design an outboard engine.

And now, it seems, our task has become significantly more complicated because, it appears, we need to include representations of the life force itself – and, indeed, its opposite. This *really* brings us up against the frontiers of science because, so far as I know, no one,

other than perhaps Maturana, has come anywhere near understanding the *productive/elaborating* capacities of the organic.

### **The Manufacture of Senseless Work: “Bullshit jobs”.**

The term “Bullshit Jobs” comes from Graeber (2013).

Graeber discovered that very many people are employed in jobs that not only could be seen to be un-necessary by an outside observer but were actually felt by those employed in them to be un-necessary. No one would suffer if they were not done. Further, this often resulted in a profound sense of discomfort in those concerned.

The sub-title of his later book (2018) suggests that he will propose a theory as to how this has come about. This would have been of very great interest to us here, but, unfortunately, I cannot discern this.

Instead, we have fascinating accounts of how the situation developed and plays out in such areas as academe, finance, banking, the film and entertainment industry – and, of course, government bureaucracy.

There is little point in summarising these here. Instead, I will content myself with offering a personal account of a drama that has played out over my lifetime.

When I was a boy there were just schools with teachers and head-teachers and the occasional Child Guidance Officer who somehow assisted with difficult children and, in the distance, a government who decreed that there should be three types of school (reminiscent the Greeks’ three types of mind) that catered for three types of pupil. In practice this turned out to be three levels “ability” explicitly defined by our Local Authority and many others as scores on an “intelligence” test. Hence, in the distance, there was someone who developed “intelligence” tests and a bureaucracy to oversee their administration and scoring.

But then our local council decided to appoint a “Director of Education”.

People wondered what he was going to do.

Now his office employs more people than there are teachers in the system. And central government employs vast numbers of people to generate a National Curriculum, manuals telling teachers what to do every minute of the day and an army of inspectors to ensure that they follow the rules, tests to assess pupils’ progress on a regular (“High stakes testing” [note the term]) basis (many generated, incidentally, by a vast and obscenely profitable American/international testing corporation), professionals to distinguish between, diagnose, and offer remedial services for numerous types of “disability” (Adverse Childhood Experiences, dyslexia, ADHD, and endless others). [In connection with the latter, Haslam (2016, 2021) has coined the phrase “concept creep” to draw attention to the ever-extending range of illnesses subsumed into the concept of “mental illness” and the level of disorder required to generate a diagnosis of any one of them.]

We may note in passing that this movement has virtually eliminated teacher-generated, community-oriented, programmes that nurture pupils’ diverse talents. (A brief account of some of these will be found in *Managing Education*.)

All of this has been conducted against a background of a public outcry about, and campaign for, “equality” expressing itself as a demand for Comprehensive Schools and mixed ability teaching ostensibly designed to counter sorting to hierarchy.

The process plays out in other areas. Bureaucrats have developed a 600-page manual telling social workers what to in every conceivable circumstance - so that they now spend more time interrogating their computers than relating to their clients. Then the bureaucrats generate vast mandatory training programmes (to be run by themselves) to familiarise those concerned with the regulations they have developed.

This applies everywhere – to doctors, plumbers, and those who dig holes in the road.

Those who write the Manuals are not held accountable – as doctors, plumbers, and hole-diggers would be – for the consequences of their actions.

Paradoxically, the existence of the manuals then enables doctors, plumbers, and hole-diggers to deny their very professional responsibility. Responsibility is transferred from people to seemingly impersonal rule books (computers).

We may note in passing the pervasive usurpation of professional competence and responsibility from subordinates by managers who then seem to have a remarkable talent for evading accountability for the effects of their actions.

Those drafted into these mandatory “training” programmes (designed to teach the rules rather than nurture professional competence) are required to complete paper and pencil assessments. This further reinforces hierarchy since many people, despite endless effort and attendance at demeaning remedial programmes, still have difficulty reading, writing, and counting.

I can perhaps conclude by noting that Lockdown *really* sorted out people possessed of one or other of the three types of mind: those who were needed to drive trains, make deliveries, and provide personal care (badly paid), those who could sit at home, play with their computers, make regulations, and push paper (well paid), and the rest (who were “furloughed”, mandated to stay at home, and fill up forms to claim “benefits”).

Incidentally, Graeber includes a discussion of the inverse relationship between the value of work and remuneration offered.

## Conclusion

I have summarised such information as I have available to me to contribute to understanding the forces and processes that lie behind Bookchin’s laws. We would greatly welcome any pointers to other material which would help us move forward.

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