

HIERARCHY IN SOCIETY, AND WHAT ABOUT NATURE?

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The paper examines the book *Martin Buber's Theopolitics* and analyzes the conflict between the hierarchy in nature and in human society. Buber qualifies our relations to nature and to other non-living objects as darker than human relations. This creates an imbalance between the human *You* and the other type of *You*. This reflection allows us to think about the meaning of the principle of humanity in relation to personhood, and in relation to different forms of communities (natural, or inorganic communities). It is an important question in the light of “conflicts” and tensions created by the environmental crisis we are facing today. The paper explains how to use the word “conflict” in this context and whether it is justified.

Keywords: Buber – Hierarchy – Conflict – Humanity

In the book *Martin's Buber Theopolitics* Brody aims to analyze the political and theological position of the German philosopher Martin Buber. The main thesis of the book is very original. It explores Buber's affiliation with anarchism, which is usually not studied in secondary literature because Buber can be very often seen as a purely theologically oriented, conservative Hasidic writer or some kind of obscure mystical thinker. However, these interpretations are based only on a selective reading of certain texts and ignore his personal history. Moreover, the philosophy developed in the book *I and Thou* has consequences that go beyond theology and beyond its mystic foundation. The book has the potential to speak to readers today who do not necessarily need to share his theological standpoint. The same could be said about Emmanuel Levinas. Both authors, but I would say mostly Buber, are quite often studied in Jewish or religious research communities, and they are perceived as purely Judaic thinkers. In the case of Levinas it is, for example, *L'Institut des études lévinassiennes* in Paris, which is in large part focused on Judaism and the reading of the Bible, and their thinking does not have any original consequences for people who are not religious and are interested in Levinas's work.

Moreover, as I suggested elsewhere (see Kuchtová 2022 and 2023), Buber's and Levinas's thinking could be fruitful for environmental philosophy. The question of nature in Levinas was already developed by other authors (see Chalier 1993, Edelglass 2012), but Buber's views on nature have not been interpreted yet.

The interpretation of Martin Buber's philosophy proposed in *Buber's Theopolitics* is completely new, and it does justice to the philosophical core of his thought. Most of Buber scholars do not look at him as a political thinker, let alone an anarchist. However, there was a shift in Buber's political thought, and he also defended the position of nationalism but abandoned it later, as Šajda (2020) underlines. Buber's work, especially in *I and Thou*, is often understood as utopistic and too idealistic. Brody says that Buber was never a liberal thinker. He defines Buber as a political theologian. The book places his thought in the context of Weimar political theology, which provides a different view of his intellectual path and its shifts. The book adopts a historical point of view and focuses on other texts than the famous *I and Thou*, for example, the text *Kingship of God*.

In this paper, I will first explain the main point defended by Brody and then offer my point of view. Brody claims that Buber's theory proposes a critical account of hierarchy in society, but I claim that his critique does not go far enough. I will refer to the anarchist Murray Bookchin, who defends the claim that if we want to get rid of the hierarchy in society, we also have to take into account our relations with nature because these spheres are interconnected. And these two spheres are in conflict today, or it seems so to us. I will refer to Bookchin, who claims this conflict is an anthropomorphic injection projected onto nature. I will use his theory of social ecology to show that the claim that hierarchy in society is connected with the hierarchy in nature is not fully taken into account by Buber, and so his critique of hierarchy is not consistent enough.

I. Buber's Anarchism

The first chapter of *Martin's Buber Theopolitics* examines Buber's close relationship to Landauer, a German anarchist, and then continues with an analysis of Buber's position regarding the Weimer Republic in the second chapter. The argument is that even if we do not see Buber as an anarchist, according to a wider definition of anarchism, he is one. Buber himself refused to be called an anarchist, but as the author says, "disavowed anarchism is declared to be anarchism" (Brody 2018, 20). Brody highlights that Buber studied anarchist literature, including authors such as Godwin, Proudhon, Bakunin, and Kropotkin, as we can see in *Paths in Utopia*. In *Kingship of God* (and as I will show later, he claims the same in *I and Thou*), Buber argues that people have a direct relationship to God and need no intermediary. No human

institution can pretend to usurp the sovereignty of YHWH. He distinguishes here between “prestate” and “postmonarchical” conceptions of divine kingship:

Before the institution of a human monarchy, the divine melekh (king) demands of his subjects unconditional devotion, of which the ritual symbol is sacrifice. With the founding of the monarchy, however, the divine demand is compromised by the demands of the human monarch, from tithes to military service; the result is a kind of secularization, a separation of the religious from the political. Buber thus has a low opinion of King Solomon, despite his status as folk hero in most Jewish literature (Brody 2018, 86).

In Buber’s opinion, YHWH does not want to be the sovereign and guarantor of a human monarch. He distinguishes political theology from theopolitics. The first one is linked with Messiah and monarchy, the second one to the “anarcho-theocratic” ideal of the reign of God without any intermediary. In *Kingship of God*, Buber examines the history of the ancient Israelites, for whom theopolitics probably meant a compromise between familial tribal homes and collective existence; they were guided by an invisible king. However, Brody does not claim that Buber wished for a return to tribal existence. Instead, he imagined that Landauer’s vision of decentralized democracy (local councils) could be a modern version of Jewish theocratic politics. Brody resumes Buber’s theopolitics in the following way: freedom is characterized by the direct relationship of every individual to God. “Overness and aboveness” are reserved for YHWH, while they are prohibited for humans. However, this does not mean that the relationship with YHWH is only defined by his superiority. YHWH is freedom, and he guarantees the freedom of people of Israel.

Brody also mentions the discussion between Gershom Scholem and Buber. Buber was accused by Scholem of not being true enough to Hasidism and of not being a true historian of Hasidism. For Scholem, Buber is a religious anarchist who distorted the texts in order to promote his views (although Scholem also says he is an anarchist, which, according to Brody, he is not).

However, it seems that Buber thinks that a non-hierarchical society could come true in Israel, because Brody does not forget to focus on Buber’s Zionism. Buber shares the idea of Israel which is tied to a geographical territory, but he insists on voluntary religious socialism and on the coexistence of Israel with the Arab communities (binationalism). This would lead to the abandonment of failed Western ideologies worldwide. Brody claims that according to Judith Butler, Buber’s Zionism is rather “post-Zionism” or rather “anti-Zionism.” However, Butler mentions that Buber failed to criticize Israel as a form of colonialism and normalizes the injustice narrative (the taking of Palestine’s land by the Jews). Butler claims that we should not take Buber’s

binationalism as an alternative to the Israeli political project. The problem is that Buber imagines his anarchist project, but he fails to see that its conditions presuppose settler colonialism.

II. The Nature as You

What strikes the reader the most is the central idea of *Buber's Theopolitics*. Brody seems to suggest that Buber's theopolitical history of Israel aims to explain the transition from noncoercive power to coercive power. The question in the background is: What is the cause of the domination (see Brody 2018, 274)? Brody suggests that in Buber, there is an image of Jewish divinity that is masterlike, but at the same time, this divinity suspends the idea of sovereignty itself. He claims that this is how Buber follows contemporary French Theory and its critique of hierarchy.

However, in *I and Thou*, Buber distinguishes several types of relations humans can have with their environment. Buber differentiates three levels of I-Thou relationships. Firstly, one can have relations to nature, secondly to the forms of spirit, and thirdly to persons (see Buber 1970, 56 – 57). All types of relationships are infinite in the sense that they are directed towards divinity. In *I and Thou* Buber denies that we need any mediator in our relationship with God, as is the case in *Kingship of God*. If we are in the relationship I-Thou, we are directed towards God, and this is valid for any relationship of the type I-Thou. Therefore, even when we are in a I-Thou relationship with an object or an animal, we are directed towards God. And this God has no other meaning than the exclusiveness of the I-Thou relationship. Buber also says that all types of I-Thou relationships converge in one point, which is the eternal You (God).

In every sphere, through everything that becomes present to us, we gaze toward the train of the eternal You; in each we perceive a breath of it; in every You we address the eternal You, in every sphere according to its manner (Buber 1970, 57).

Buber highlights that the relationship to God would not have any sense without passing through the material I-Thou relationship. Should not this mean that all three types of relationships are different but not in any hierarchical relationship to each other? However, according to Bizoň (2017, 96), Buber also says that the first and second type of relations are not entirely reciprocal. However, Bizoň says that there is some kind of mutuality (*vzájomnosť*) in these relations, and this concept of mutuality explains very well the complicated kind of reciprocity implied there. Another reason why these relations are not entirely reciprocal is the language. Buber says: “The first: life with nature. Here the relation vibrates in the dark and remains below language” (Buber

1970, 56 – 57). It is because neither objects nor animals can communicate the way the humans do. According to Buber, then, the relations with animals are darker than the relations with humans.

The question is: is Buber really an anarchist, even if he still maintained some hierarchy in the different relationships of I and Thou? Does this mean that Buber presupposes some sort of hierarchy anyway? Buber's thinking is anti-hierarchical in the sense that he would not wish for any kind of superior ruling in society. However, I claim that in his idea of the *Gemeinschaft* (true society), Buber might seem to suggest some kind of hierarchy. I think Brody seems to forget that the political sphere is not a purely human problem; but it concerns animals, plants, rocks, and machines. If there is to be a hierarchy in the order of the world itself, then there is to be a hierarchy in the political thinking that is dealing with it. Brody does not question this dimension of the problem at all in his book. As he himself admits, "having bracketed the philosophy of dialogue [in *I and Thou*] for the purposes of elaborating the theopolitics, it remains to be seen what might result from a thorough and conscientious remelding of the two" (Brody 2018, 295).

Bizoň claims, that according to Buber, the relationship with things or animals is not the same as the relationship with humans (see Bizoň 2017, 96). Brody also does not forget to mention that Buber uses the concept of covenant in *Kingship of God*; however, it is a very specific concept of covenant:

The covenant at Sinai signifies, according to its positive content, that the wandering tribes accept JHWH "for ever and ever" as their King. According to its negative content it signifies that no man is to be called king of the sons of Israel (Buber 1990, 136).

One might ask: Does this covenant imply that humans have the right to treat nature as if they were its masters? This is the case, for example, in Catherine Chalier, an author focusing on Judaism and Levinas's thinking, and she also examines human relations to nature. In her book *The Alliance with Nature*, she develops the concept of a covenant with God, according to which humans are responsible for saving nature and protecting it because they made a deal with God. She relies on Genesis and Noah's story. This is problematic because to think that humans can save the planet is an anthropocentric presupposition, as environmental philosopher Callicott claims in *Thinking Like a Planet*. Callicott argues that according to scientific knowledge, the planet will survive even without us. He perceives this kind of attitude as patronizing (see Callicott 2014, 236). Also, Murray Bookchin, to whom I will refer in the second part of this text, claims that we should not see nature in terms of governance and dominance, or, as one could say, guidance. But I would say we should not see it in terms of animosity or conflict.

Bookchin claims that we should rather work together with nature because there is no truth behind the myth of a pure, inaccessible nature that would possibly terrorize us and inspire its own submission.

III. The Question of Hierarchy in the Social and Natural World: Bookchin

The relationship between hierarchy, politics and ecology was more closely examined by Bookchin. He supports the claim that the domination of humans over humans implies the domination of humans over nature, which leads to a hierarchy in the world and in nature. His theory is called eco-anarchism, or social ecology. In his opinion, we will never get rid of the hierarchy if we still count on it in the world and in nature. Bookchin also mentions that Kropotkin, to whom Brody refers in his interpretation of Buber's anarchism, was also a naturalist (Bookchin 2020, 279). He proposes a critique of Marxism, claiming that nature was not given to humans in order to satisfy their needs equally, so they can use it for their egalitarian satisfaction. The equal satisfaction of our needs is simply not enough because it implies that humans are somehow above nature, which they perceive as a tool. Bookchin rather highlights the self-organizing power of nature, which he does not fail to conceive in its totality as inorganic and organic at the same time (see Bookchin 2020, 274). He refers to Hans Jonas in that matter. According to Bookchin, freedom cannot be limited only to humans and should be rethought in a larger context. Ethics, then, is not human invention; but nature constitutes its own ethics. Social ecology is concerned with the separation of humans from nature and criticizes this separation, which it aims to overcome. Homo sapiens have transformed the natural environment so it is possible to construct the social environment. These two domains interacted during the evolution of the human species, together with other species. During this evolution, the human species has formed hierarchies, classes and cities and states. Bookchin refers to E. A. Gutkind who says that social ecology is a science studying the natural and social relations in communities and ecosystems in a holistic way.

The word "holism" gains here a whole new meaning: to think holistically does not mean to think of the natural world in some kind of non-differentiated totality, but to think of the social and natural order as intertwined and interconnected. Their interconnectedness is based on a mutual interdependence within their differences. The concept of community is not only applied to humans, but to different elements of the planet. Bookchin therefore presupposes the concepts of natural and social community. This holistic approach, however, does not imply that there is no difference between different communities; but there is unity and diversity at the same time (see Bookchin 2020, 60). The argument for this position is simple but clear: human society could not exist without the natural environment, and so it is wrong to think of them separately.

The natural environment is also not developed ahistorically, and it should not be studied as a given, rigid fact from a neutral point of view (see Bookchin 2020, 76). The same thing is highlighted by Callicott, who points out that the idea of “virgin nature,” purely separated from culture in, for example, America before colonization, is not accurate. The Amazonian forests were carefully managed by native inhabitants throughout the years (see Callicott 1999, 340).

IV. Conclusion

Bookchin claims that the argument that hierarchy is already implied in nature is not true. He maintains that the hierarchy seen in nature is an anthropomorphic projection of humans, and he cites studies that prove the contrary. Most importantly, he highlights cooperation and symbiosis as also present in nature, not only predation. He does not fail to mention the trees and the ways in which they have some kind of, as we humans would put it, “solidarity.” Contemporary forest scientists Peter Wohlleben and Suzanne Simard claim that the paradigm in forest sciences in the past was one of predation or competition. However, the paradigms or metaphors Wohlleben proposes to use, based on the newest scientific discoveries, are cooperation, social security, etc. These metaphors are, of course, very anthropomorphic, which can be problematic. Wohlleben and Simard also show that the metaphor of the static nature of plants or trees is wrong because they do indeed move. They communicate in such a way that it forces Wohlleben and Simard to use the metaphor of the internet. They say the mushrooms create a communication system through which the trees are sending some messages about dangers and diseases. They describe the trees as altruistic because they help older trees by sending them sugar so they can live longer, etc., which leads Wohlleben to say they have some kind of “social security system.” Buber himself proposed a description of a tree that is more literary and metaphorical, but not in contradiction with what is mentioned above.

I contemplate a tree. I can accept it as a picture: a rigid pillar in a flood of light, or splashes of green traversed by the gentleness of the blue silver ground. I can feel it as movement: the flowing veins around the sturdy, striving core, the sucking of the roots, the breathing of the leaves, the infinite commerce with earth and air – and the growing itself in its darkness. I can assign it to a species and observe it as an instance, with an eye to its construction and its way of life. I can overcome its uniqueness and form so rigorously that I recognize it only as an expression of the law – those laws according to which a constant opposition of forces is continually adjusted, or those laws according to which the elements mix and separate. I can dissolve it into a number, into a pure relation between numbers, and eternalize it.

Throughout all of this the tree remains my object and has its place and its time span, its kind and condition. But it can also happen, if will and grace are joined, that as I contemplate the tree I am drawn into a relation, and the tree ceases to be an It. The power of exclusiveness has seized me (Buber 1990, 57 – 58).

Buber describes the tree here as something that is not static, as a movement, as something unique. In this description, we do not see what could be the difference between a relation to a tree and to a human being, because as a person, the tree can cease to be it and it becomes you. However, there is a difference. Buber says in *I and Thou* that this difference is marked by the darkness and lack of a language. But this difference is not the correct one, as the contemporary sciences tell us, because the difference is a difference in the means of communication that trees and humans use. There is a qualitative difference, but it cannot be defined in terms of clarity or darkness, as Buber claims. The communication between trees has different axioms than the communication between humans, but that does not mean there is no communication at all.¹

I have shown by means of an example of a tree that Buber fails to acknowledge this, and, therefore, he establishes a hierarchy between different relations in the world. For this reason, his anarchism is not free of hierarchy, contrary to what Brody suggests. Brody completely omits this dimension of hierarchy in his analysis of Buber's theopolitics. Any theopolitics should also include a theopolitics of nature, because the question of nature is very present in the Torah and in the Jewish scriptures. As Chalier highlights, the problem of nature is present also in the narrative of Genesis, and it is included in the question of the covenant of humans with YHWH, in which humans take responsibility for nature as its masters and dominators. This paper analyzed the conflict between the hierarchy in nature and in human society. Buber qualifies our relations to nature and to other non-living objects as darker than human relations. This creates a conflict between the human *You* and the other type of *You*. It allows us to think about the meaning of the principle of the human community in relation to a

¹ Maybe it could be useful to use Derrida's definition of communication from *Limited Inc.*, because he extends here the concept of communication to non-semantic phenomena: "For one characteristic of the semantic field of the word *communication* is that it designates nonsemantic movements as well. Here, even a provisional recourse to ordinary language and to the equivocations of natural language instructs us that one can, for instance, *communicate a movement* or that a tremor [*ébranlement*], a shock, a displacement of force can be communicated – that is, propagated, transmitted. We also speak of different or remote places communicating with each other by means of a passage or opening. What takes place, in this sense, what is transmitted, communicated, does not involve phenomena of meaning or signification. In such cases we are dealing neither with a semantic or conceptual content, nor with a semiotic operation, and even less with a linguistic exchange" (Derrida 1988, 1).

natural, or inorganic community, as Bookchin reminds us. This question is important in light of the “conflicts” between humans and non-humans, created by the environmental crisis we are facing today. However, as Bookchin says, we should not see nature as our adversary or enemy, because it is only an anthropomorphic projection if we say we are in some conflict with nature.

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