

# Murray Bookchin and the value of democratic municipalism

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## Abstract

Recent debates about the most appropriate political agents for realising social justice have largely focused on the potential value of national political parties on the one hand, and trade unions on the other. Drawing on the thought of Murray Bookchin, this article suggests that democratic municipalist agents – democratic associations of local residents that build and empower neighbourhood assemblies and improve the municipal provision of basic goods and services – can often also make valuable contributions to projects of just social change. I identify a long-term and a more short-term argument for the value of democratic municipalist agency in Bookchin’s thought and claim that the latter provides a compelling case for the valuable contributions this form of action can make to the achievement of a wide variety of visions of social justice. This provides a useful partial corrective to recent political theorising about the nature of the partisanship and trade unionism necessary to secure social justice.

## Keywords

Murray Bookchin, political agency, municipal politics, partisanship, trade unionism, new municipalism

Much contemporary political theory focuses on examining and constructing abstract principles of social justice or defending the specific institutional arrangements and policies that could put these principles into practice. However, the successful implementation of these principles and these institutional changes clearly depends on many questions

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of political strategy and tactics, which exist in the realm of non-ideal theory. In particular, the successful transition to a more socially just order seems to depend heavily on identifying the agents well-placed under present political circumstances to carry out the actions necessary to establish these changes. Call this *the question of appropriate political agency*.

The many issues surrounding ‘the link between principles and agency’ – as Lea Ypi (2012: 35) has put it – have thus far received relatively little attention in the voluminous literature on social justice.<sup>1</sup> But where political theorists have begun to turn their attention to these matters, they have thus far tended to highlight the potential value of two kinds of collective agents: national political parties on the one hand (Dryzek, 2015; White and Ypi, 2016) and (to a lesser extent) trade unions on the other (O’Neill and White, 2018). In what follows, I want to suggest that there are further useful resources for this unfolding debate about appropriate political agency in the thought of American philosopher Murray Bookchin (1921–2006).

Although Bookchin’s thought has been fairly influential across a range of activist movements (Tarinski, 2021), his thought is only rarely the subject of extended discussion among contemporary political theorists (Brinn, 2020; White, 2011). This is unfortunate, I will claim, because there are valuable resources in his work for contending that *democratic municipalist agents* – democratic associations of local residents that build and empower neighbourhood assemblies and improve the municipal provision of basic goods and services – can often also make valuable contributions to the political project of just social change, alongside trade unions and national parties.

Murray Bookchin’s published writing touches on a very wide range of issues, including debates in ecology, anthropology, and human nature (Biehl, 2015). This paper thus certainly does not attempt a summation of Bookchin’s philosophical thought. Rather, my focus is – more modestly – on isolating just a few strands of Bookchin’s multifaceted output that I claim can provide some valuable but overlooked resources for the contemporary debate about political agency. I begin in the next two sections by setting down some conceptual parameters, first offering brief definitions of national political parties and trade unions, and then moving on to highlight how democratic municipalist agents can represent a distinct agential form, irreducible to these other, more familiar forms of political agency.

The following two sections then introduce what I take to be Bookchin’s two main arguments for the value of municipal political action: Bookchin sees this form of action as, first, necessary for the eventual arrival of a completely non-hierarchical society at some point in the future, and second, as well-placed to help foster a more politically aware and active citizenry in the here-and-now. Although Bookchin’s long-term argument is likely to be convincing only to those who already share in the specifics of his utopian vision, I argue that his more short-term case can be endorsed by those holding a fairly wide range of ultimate normative visions and also aligns much more closely with a range of empirical findings from the social sciences.

In the final section, I then describe what I take to be the central implication of the Bookchinian theses I reconstruct for the emerging debate on political agency. I claim that because of the ability of democratic municipalist agents to contribute to combatting

political disengagement in the way Bookchin convincingly describes, many proponents of greater social justice ought to view these agents as able to make valuable contributions to projects of just social change, albeit usually alongside other, more commonly discussed political agents such as national parties and unions.

## **Parties and unions as agents of social justice**

What I am calling the national political party will likely be the most familiar form of political agency to many readers, so I begin my definitions here, before extending my focus outward to other agential forms. Inspired by White and Ypi's (2016: 21–26) influential work, we can state that there are three crucial conditions that typically need to be met for a national political party to be said to exist.<sup>2</sup> First, there must be a number of individuals that share a series of broad political aims. Second, these individuals must together be involved in a formal association of some kind. And finally, this association must make regular efforts to control or maintain control of existing national political decision-making institutions, in order to advance these shared aims.

The first condition insists that several individuals exist who are united by a series of broad political aims, rather than by (for instance) common hair colour or a common desire to play football. White and Ypi state that these broad political aims should amount to a relatively all-encompassing 'interpretation of how power should be exercised' in society (White and Ypi, 2016: 21). This interpretation of how political power, in general, should be exercised need not be completely rigid and uniformly shared: every political party tends to exhibit at least a degree of transformation in its aims over time, as well as a fairly large amount of internal disagreement. But the basic idea is that the individuals that together make up a party typically need to share at least the central components of a series of broad aims in order to constitute a collective of the right kind.

The second condition insists that these individuals not only share political aims but also be collectively involved in a formal association with one another. As White and Ypi note, this usually means that there are a set of documents created by the group that set down 'a system of rules' of some kind (White and Ypi, 2016: 104). These rules typically set out the procedures determining how the like-minded individuals that make up the party can attain and lose the various roles or offices within the party (such as leader, electoral candidate, or spokesperson), and what powers and responsibilities are attached to these offices, as well as general guidelines about how the various kinds of work the party is required to undertake ought to be divided and conducted. Of course, party members may associate with one another on the basis of a deeply hierarchical or a directly democratic set of rules and procedures, so this condition does not prejudice the specific questions of party organisation and professionalisation. Rather, it merely states that the association must be organised by a formal set of rules of some kind.

The final condition insists that this relatively formalised association of individuals with shared political aims regularly acts to further its goals in a specific set of ways. Members of national political parties must make attempts to gain or maintain control of national-level political decision-making institutions – what White and Ypi call the 'executive body able to make authoritative demands' over the entire territory of a

nation – usually through contesting elections of some kind (White and Ypi, 2016: 187–189). It is this third condition that most clearly distinguishes the national political party from related agential forms such as the social movement: a movement like *Black Lives Matter* is a relatively formalised association of individuals united by a series of broad political aims, but it does not make regular collective attempts to gain control of existing political decision-making institutions in order to advance these goals, tending instead to exert pressure on these institutions from outside in various ways.<sup>3</sup>

Why might formal associations of individuals making regular attempts to control national decision-making institutions to advance their shared aims be valuable agents for realising just social change? Agents of this sort are primarily seen as valuable because when members share political aims compatible with what justice demands, the national political party is perfectly positioned to ‘influence primary agents of justice such as the state’, partly through exerting pressure on other political parties, but primarily through coming to occupy the state itself (Dryzek, 2015: 381). The basic idea here is that, assuming you live in a country where the locus of political power remains with the centralised state, then national political parties are often the most appropriate agents for coming to manoeuvre the levers of power in a society such that it more closely approximates a given set of principles of justice.

Parties in fact appear particularly well-placed to achieve the changes required to realise social justice, because they occupy a relatively unique intermediary role between individual citizens and the state apparatus. These agents can not only enact social change through alterations to state policy mechanisms but can also articulate and sculpt shared interests in civil society (White and Ypi, 2017: 448). White and Ypi also claim that political parties offer particularly desirable vehicles for the maintenance and consolidation of citizens’ motivations to participate in political activity: formal and ongoing collective associations with a chance of coming to manoeuvre the levers of state power can often incentivise greater political participation than more informal and spontaneous forms of collective action with a less clear route to the alteration of national public policy (2016: 87–89).

A further important type of political agent is the trade union, which Sidney and Beatrice Webb famously define as an ‘association of wage-earners for the purpose of maintaining or improving the conditions of their working lives’ (Webb and Webb, 1920: 1). We can translate this definition into the format followed above fairly easily, such that the three defining conditions of the trade union are as follows: first, there must be a number of wage-earners each with the aim of maintaining and/or improving their working conditions. We can construe conditions of employment broadly to encompass everything from wages, health and safety protections, sexual harassment policies, termination of employment and redundancy policies, pension, holiday and sick pay entitlements, and so on. Although this will sometimes amount to a fairly all-encompassing interpretation of how power should be exercised in society, it need not do so. Second, these wage-earners must be involved in a formal association with one another of some kind (as with a political party, this usually means that there are a set of documents created by the group setting down rules and assigning offices and again, these rules may be hierarchical or directly democratic). And finally, this association must make

regular attempts to influence the various decision-making institutions which together determine the group's working conditions, in order to advance this aim.<sup>4</sup>

A whole range of institutions – workplace management committees, national regulatory bodies for employment practices, global trade arrangements, etc. – collectively help to determine conditions in the workplace and my definition insists that trade unions engage in attempts to influence at least some of these institutions. Beyond specifying the necessity of influencing what we might term workplace-defining institutions, however, I leave the range of activities the union might pursue very open: they might engage in collective bargaining, the provision of work-related training, employee representation in workplace tribunals, the funding of national political parties, strike action, appeals to international courts, and so on.

Although trade unions have been the subject of less extended discussion than the national political party, a number of authors have recently highlighted the potential value of this particular agential form in realising greater social justice. For example, O'Neill and White claim that strong trade unions can help ensure that national parties continue to effectively represent the interests of the communities with which they have historic ties, even when these parties are faced with incentives to no longer do so, through the exertion of political pressure (funding, threats of strike, and so on) (O'Neill and White, 2018: 255–60). Gourevitch and Robin have also recently contended that because the workplace is often experienced as an 'institution of domination', trade unions are particularly well-placed to motivate political participation. Although national political parties will sometimes appear distant and unconnected from the daily experiences of many individuals, active trade unions can appeal to the lived experience of many citizens in such a way that can successfully persuade them to get involved in social justice activism (2020: 394–5; O'Neill and White, 2018: 255).

## What are democratic municipalist agents?

There are many other forms of collective political agency which currently exist or have previously existed that do not fit neatly into the two camps described above, including social movements (Deveaux, 2018), which I have already briefly mentioned. But the additional agential form which interests me here, and which will be the focus of the remainder of the paper, is what Murray Bookchin and others have termed *democratic municipalist agents* (Bookchin 2006, 107; 1992, 238; Cumbers and Traill, 2021: 254; Kioukiolis, 2019: 106; Parson, 2018: 223).<sup>5</sup> The term 'municipality' – derived from the Latin *municipium* – refers to a geographic subdivision within a nation state that governs some of its own affairs. Sometimes this subdivision will be a major city, and at other times, it will be a much smaller town, or even one borough or ward within a larger city: this depends on the extent and nature of political devolution in the country in question. But the basic idea is that it is a term which refers to some organised locality or community within a state that exercises at least a degree of self-government, such as over matters of public transport or waste disposal.

There are several fairly well-known examples of democratic municipalism, including the Italian democratic municipalism of the 19th and 20th centuries (Kohn, 2003) and the

use of ‘popular planning’ and other democratic measures by the UK’s Greater London Council in the 1970s (Brownill, 1988). More recently, commentators have pointed to a wave of so-called ‘New Municipalist’ agents inspired by this historic tradition, including contemporaneous efforts in Jackson, Mississippi (Akuno, 2017; Guttenplan, 2017), Messina, Italy (Alagna 2018), and Rosario, Argentina (Rushton 2018). Perhaps the most noteworthy example of this ‘renascent global movement’ (Thompson, 2021: 334), however, is *Barcelona en Comú* (*BenC*), which swept to power across the Spanish city in 2015, with its leader, Ada Colau, winning the mayoralty (Gilmartin, 2019).

Since gaining office, Colau and her team have overseen a number of municipal reforms including, most prominently, the launch of a municipally owned renewable energy company, which supplies electricity to all city council buildings, as well as to a growing number of citizens’ homes. *BenC* also mandated that 30% of all newly built homes in Barcelona are to be rented or sold at affordable rates, which has resulted in a substantial increase in the quantity of Barcelona’s affordable housing stock. They have also sanctioned banks for the vacant housing they own and closed over 2000 illegal tourist apartments (Russell and Reyes, 2017). Although *BenC*’s loss of its majority in the mayoral elections of 2019 has slowed the implementation of its reform agenda somewhat (Vázquez 2019), another policy to have been passed in recent years is the creation of a series of ‘superblocks’, which cut through-traffic in congested, highly polluted areas of the city by heavily restricting car use and opening up roads for novel green space, cycle lanes, and public squares (Burgen, 2020).

*BenC* have also organised biweekly neighbourhood assemblies in each district of Barcelona since their inception. These regular meetings discuss issues of concern for residents and steps the platform ought to take in order to alleviate them (Islar and Irgil, 2018). The electoral program of *BenC* was in fact itself assembled through a process of voting in assembly meetings among residents. And to supplement face-to-face deliberation, *BenC* have also created the ‘Decidim Barcelona’ web-based virtual democratic assembly (Thompson, 2021: 329).

Building on the definitions of national political parties and trade unions offered above, I propose that we understand democratic municipalist agents such as *BenC* as: *democratic associations of local residents that both build and empower neighbourhood assemblies and make improvements to the municipal provision of basic goods and services*. As with national political parties and trade unions, this means there are three central defining features of this agential form.

First, there must be a number of local residents that share the twin aims of *democratising* municipal governance to some extent on the one hand and *improving* the municipal provision of certain goods and services on the other. This first aim entails wishing to shift the locus of power within a given municipality somewhat, away from a traditional hierarchical city council and its bureaucrats and rooting it in local residents themselves. And the second entails wishing to enhance what Bookchin calls ‘access to the resources that make daily life tolerable’, such as ‘shelter or adequate park space and transportation’ (2006: 114). Different democratic municipalist agents will clearly disagree about exactly what ‘improving’ the provision of certain basic goods and services of this kind

will look like, and what precise form the increased influence of local residents over municipal decision-making ought to take. But this defining condition tries not to overly pre-determine the specific ideological content of the municipalist group and is compatible with a wide range of shared aims that fit these broad types.<sup>6</sup>

Second, the individuals sharing these aims must together be involved in a formal *and democratic* association of some kind. This condition leaves the exact nature of the rules and procedures governing the association largely unspecified but is still more restrictive than the definition of national parties and unions mentioned above.<sup>7</sup> There must not only be rules and procedures of some kind governing the association but these procedures must also ensure that those occupying positions of authority within the association are accountable in various ways to other members of the group.

Finally, this association must make regular efforts to *both* control or maintain control of municipal decision-making institutions *and* to build and empower neighborhood assemblies, in order to advance its shared aims. Pursuing this dual set of actions is arguably the crucial defining feature of democratic municipalism. Traditional political parties, as White and Ypi recognise, can also seek to enter decision-making institutions at a 'local [...] or federal' level and make improvements to the provision of goods and services (White and Ypi, 2016, 201). But formal associations pursuing only this first act do not count as democratic municipalist agents, on my definition.

Consider, for instance, Murray Bookchin's fascinating critique of Bernie Sanders' tenure as mayor of Vermont. Bookchin (1986a) chastises Sanders and his team for making positive noises about giving local residents an 'appreciable share in the city's government' but in fact practicing only a form of 'managerial radicalism' with a strong 'technocratic bias'. What distinguishes municipalist managerial radicalism from *democratic* municipalism, Bookchin notes, is that the latter set of agents either use 'what real power their offices confer to legislate popular assemblies into existence' or grant existing neighbourhood assemblies greater influence over municipal decision-making (2006: 115; Biehl, 2015: 147).

Of course, there is no one way to combine the two central activities of the democratic municipalist agent in practice, and there will often be tensions resulting from the simultaneous pursuit of both.<sup>8</sup> But again, I seek a fairly broad definition, that captures a range of specific forms of municipalist practice: as with our accounts of parties and unions, our definition ideally needs to be sufficiently expansive to account for at least some of the inevitable disagreement among participants in these agents, rather than insisting that only one very specific combination of activities and procedures counts as a 'real' instance of the association.

Because democratic municipalist agents are seeking not merely to influence decision-making institutions from the outside, but to actively *control* them, they are, as should be clear, fairly distinct from trade unions and social movements. Additionally, because they are not attempting to gain control of *national* decision-making institutions, but only municipal ones (and because they have a less broad, more targeted set of political aims) they are also distinct from national political parties. And because they are not solely seeking to control *existing* municipal institutions but also to create and empower *new* decision-making assemblies (and are organised on the basis of not just any set of

formal rules, but a democratic kind), they are also not reducible to traditional electoralist local parties. My claim is that, as a result of these contrasts, democratic municipal agents represent a distinct agential form, irreducible to the various familiar forms of political agency discussed above.

With these conceptual parameters in place, I now want to consider whether democratic municipalism might play a valuable role in bringing about just social change. Murray Bookchin is unquestionably the political thinker that has done the most to flesh out a case for the potential value of municipalist agency, so the next two sections summarise two relatively distinct arguments found in his work. First, there is a claim about the role that municipal political agents can play in achieving Bookchin's ultimate utopia: a completely non-hierarchical, stateless society. Second, there is a claim about the role that democratic municipalist politics can play in overcoming political disengagement in the here-and-now. Having reconstructed and summarised these claims, I then turn in the final section to what I take to be the central implication of these claims for the contemporary debate about appropriate political agency.

### **Bookchin's case: The long-term view**

The case that Bookchin most frequently makes for the value of democratic municipalism concerns the role that this form of agency can play in bringing about what he calls a 'non-hierarchical society' (Bookchin, 1982: 340). The basic idea is that the radically egalitarian forms of political consciousness necessary for such a society to come into existence 'can be raised' among residents most effectively by democratic municipalist agents (Bookchin, 2015: 100). The argument typically has a tripartite structure, running something like this: (1) the most ethically desirable kind of society is one free from hierarchy, (2) the most important precondition for stably realising this kind of society is a radical transformation of political character, and (3) the political actors that can most effectively deliver this gradual process of character transformation over the long term (and thus further the chances of realising Bookchin's ultimate goal) are democratic municipalist agents.

Concerning (1), Bookchin's ultimate normative vision is to eradicate all forms of hierarchy from contemporary societies. A society is non-hierarchical, in Bookchin's view, when everyone has roughly the same amount of power to coerce others as everyone else, that is, when there are no salient *rankings* with respect to this capacity (Bookchin, 1982: 74; 1980: 29; 49). Coercion happens when an individual has the will of another imposed on them and is forced to act in a way contrary to their wishes solely because others want them to (Bookchin, 1980: 121).

Our own societies, Bookchin claims, are currently highly divided, even 'pyramidal' in form with respect to this metric (Bookchin, 1982: 338; 1980: 60): a few individuals possess large amounts of power to coerce others, whilst most people exist at a much lower ranking, spending much of their time being commanded and with little power to coerce others. Bookchin holds that a society is only *truly* non-hierarchical when: the class structure is abolished (removing the tendency of the owners of productive property to exert greater coercive power over the propertyless than the propertyless exert over



them), state bureaucrats and political elites do not exert greater coercive power over the citizenry than the citizenry exerts over them (i.e., when the state as traditionally conceived has been abolished), men no longer exert greater coercive power over women than women exert over them (when patriarchy has been abolished), one racial group no longer exerts greater coercive power over other racial groups than these other groups exert over them (when white supremacy has been abolished) and when the old no longer exert greater coercive power over the young than the young exert over the old (when society is no longer 'gerontocratic') (Bookchin, 1980: 29; 63; 95). A less negative way to put Bookchin's ultimate vision is thus as a society of maximal 'personal empowerment', in which everyone retains roughly the same amount of power to decide for themselves how they wish to act at all times, regardless of the productive resources at their disposal, their race, gender, or age, or whether they happen to be a professional politician or civil servant or not (Bookchin, 1980: 121).

Concerning (2), Bookchin claims that a non-hierarchical society of this sort can only be reached and endure over time if the citizens of present hierarchical societies engage in a prolonged process of re-socialisation. Coercive hierarchies are currently so deeply rooted in our sensibilities and the 'orientation of our psyches' (1982: 340), according to Bookchin, that the arrival of a non-hierarchical society is politically impossible over the short or medium term. The socialisation of contemporary citizens into a 'hierarchical mentality' (Bookchin, 1980: 60) is currently so extensive, in Bookchin's view, that without radically reconfiguring everyday interactions and thought patterns at a fundamental level, these various undesirable hierarchies will continue to reproduce themselves *ad infinitum*. Engendering a deep and enduring preference for non-hierarchy and self-government at a 'molecular' level, therefore, is a crucial precondition for the eventual arrival of Bookchin's preferred future society (1980: 76).

Concerning (3), Bookchin claims that democratic municipalist agents are particularly well-placed to effectively deliver this gradual process of character transformation over the long term. One important reason for this is that municipal agents can set up and empower the kinds of neighbourhood assemblies where Bookchin envisions this desired process of re-socialisation most effectively playing out. Bookchin understands participation in a local 'discursive arena in which people can intellectually and emotionally confront each other, indeed, experience each other through dialogue, body language, personal intimacy, and face-to-face modes of expression in the course of making collective decisions' as the perfect 'educational and self-formative' or 'character-building' process for gradually eroding hierarchical sensibilities (1992: 249–251).

This character-building process, which Bookchin sometimes also calls – drawing on classical Greek thought – *paideia*, plays out as people confront their relative powerlessness through extensive democratic discussion, gradually coming to understand the source of their problems to be the pyramidal hierarchical structure of present society, and thus shedding their attachment to hierarchies of all forms. Once a social group experiences a taste of directly discussing and mandating all exercises of coercive power over others, Bookchin suggests, they will come to prefer this mode of self-government and self-empowerment to present arrangements that involve being commanded by others (1992: 249–251).

Another important reason for holding that democratic municipalist agents are well-placed to aid this long-term process of character transformation relates to their tendency to incur the wrath of the various beneficiaries of present hierarchical societies. The forces of the state and its bureaucracy, and others who benefit from society's pyramidal form, Bookchin claims, are inherently opposed to relinquishing their power (2015: 18). Wishing to maintain power over the vast bulk of the citizenry, these agents will make concerted attempts to co-opt and crush democratic municipalist initiatives at the local level as they gain in popularity and influence. An important part of the gradual process of character transformation that democratic municipalist agents can affect thus concerns the potentially radicalising effects on citizens of seeing in a particularly visceral way the hostility of certain privileged sections of society to direct democratic rule. Bookchin's hope here is that as participants in neighbourhood assemblies come to see the state and the broader ruling classes' attempts to quash them, they will ultimately learn that a society of maximal personal empowerment and direct democratic rule is incompatible with the continued existence of the state, and a capitalist class (2015: 18). Bookchin thus envisions the power of society's elites gradually slipping away as the long-term process of *paidea* in neighbourhood assemblies eventually leads more and more citizens to reject traditional forms of political and economic authority and come to prefer local self-government.

That then, is Bookchin's primary argument for the value of democratic municipalist agency: achieving a completely non-hierarchical society depends on the radical transformation of citizens' political character, and the empowered neighbourhood assemblies constructed by municipalist agents are well-placed to organise this process of re-socialisation. What should we make of this case? One fairly uncontroversial desideratum for any answer to the question of appropriate political agency is surely that the causal claims it makes be characterised by a high degree of empirical plausibility. Although a degree of empirical speculation is unavoidable, we should insist that contributions to the appropriate agency debate nonetheless do not require excessive leaps of the imagination to be found plausible and be compatible with at least some existing findings from the social sciences. Bookchin's long-term case, however, arguably does not satisfactorily meet this desideratum. Can a completely non-hierarchical, stateless and classless society really be considered a feasible political goal, for instance, reachable from where we are now? And what reasons are there to think that participation in neighbourhood assemblies can radicalise real-world participants to the extent that they come to reject each and every form of political, economic and other hierarchy in society? Why should we expect the specific causal pathways related to character transformation that Bookchin discusses to play out in exactly the way he speculates? Bookchin's long-term case, as it currently stands, arguably does not provide particularly compelling answers to these questions.

An additional desideratum for a compelling answer to the question of appropriate political agency is surely that it be capable of accommodating at least a degree of reasonable disagreement about the ultimate shape of a socially just society. The intuition behind this standard is that, in severely unjust societies at least, we should be able to say something about the broad kinds of agents and actions required to *begin* reducing injustice without

specifying too exactly what a completely just society should look like. Contributions to the appropriate agency debate clearly cannot remain entirely neutral on whether—say—extreme economic inequalities are or are not compatible with social justice (the kinds of agents required to bring about social change will obviously radically differ depending on where one stands on an issue like this). But this desideratum insists that claims about appropriate political agency ideally do not require subscribing to a very specific and contentious ultimate normative vision in order for the agent under discussion to be found a potentially valuable one.

Bookchin's long-term case arguably also doesn't fare particularly well on this front. In particular, whilst many proponents of social justice will oppose the most severe and debilitating relations of hierarchy that Bookchin discusses, they will nonetheless be sceptical of the idea that a totally stateless and classless society is all-things-considered normatively desirable. Bookchin's view is that there is 'no longer [...] any social rationale [...] for bureaucracy and the state (Bookchin 1986b: 19). But of course, many proponents of greater social justice will be suspicious of this claim and will in fact be wedded to various progressive defences of the state. Many currently well-regarded egalitarian visions of social justice, for instance – property-owning democracy, social democracy, market socialism, and so on – make space for the continued existence of states and socioeconomic classes of some kind (Schweickart, 2011; Thomas, 2017; von Platz, 2020). But because Bookchin's long-term case is so intimately tied to the complete eradication of the state and the class system, proponents of visions like these are unlikely to consider municipalist agency as key to the arrival of their own preferred long-term institutional goals.

My claim here is not that both of these worries about Bookchin's long-term case are entirely insurmountable, and that a sufficiently compelling endorsement of democratic municipalism along these lines can simply never be offered (it might be possible, at some point in the future, to provide novel empirical evidence that supports Bookchin's case or shows that Bookchin's completely non-hierarchical society is in fact the best conception of a socially just society, for instance). But I just want to flag here the difficulty of offering a defence of this long-term case for democratic municipalism, as things currently stand, that is likely to be sufficiently compelling to a range of contemporary theorists (and activists) seeking to rectify social injustice. Bookchin's claims here simply rely on too many contentious normative and empirical claims to have much chance of persuading anyone who isn't already a signed-up Anarchist or – Bookchin's (2006) preferred term – 'Communist'.

### **Bookchin's case: The short-term view**

Thankfully, however, there is also a second case for the value of democratic municipalism to be found in Bookchin's work, and one which, I think, represents a contribution to the agency debate that a greater number of readers will consider compelling. As well as tying his case for municipal action to his ultimate normative vision of a completely non-hierarchical society, Bookchin also suggests a second, perhaps more pragmatic reason for pursuing democratic municipalism: democratic municipalist agents can create what he

calls 'a living educational arena for developing an active citizenry' (Bookchin, 1986a). Although somewhat less pronounced in his work than the long-term case, this argument is also present throughout and runs something like this: (1) it would be desirable if citizens participated in political activity, and were more preoccupied with political matters in general, to a greater extent than is currently the case, (2) the only way to stably realise a social change of this kind is to make targeted transformations to political character, and (3) the political actors that can most effectively organise this process of character transformation over the short term are democratic municipalist agents.

Concerning (1), Bookchin claims that most citizens in capitalist societies are currently just passive 'spectators whose lives are guided by elites' (1980: 48). The ideal citizen in present societies, Bookchin argues, 'obeys the laws, pays taxes, votes ritualistically for preselected candidates' but otherwise "'minds his or her own business'" (1992: 9). According to Bookchin, this state of affairs is undesirable because political participation is an undisputed and non-negotiable component of living well and human nature is only sufficiently expressed or developed – we only sufficiently flourish – through participation in directly democratic exchanges. A life that does not include extensive political engagement and awareness is a fundamentally 'warped and self-degraded' one, where 'much that is uniquely human in human beings' remains undeveloped (Bookchin, 1992: 228). He thus claims that it would be desirable for social change to occur that reduces these pacifying and atomising effects of modern capitalism and encouraged greater levels of political awareness and participation among the citizenry.

Concerning (2), Bookchin sees current levels of political disengagement as being deeply rooted in the individual psyche as a result of modern consumerist culture. The spread of these forms of character is at least partly the result of individuals applying the individualist and instrumentalist logic they are socialised into by consumerism to the political realm (Bookchin, 1980: 232). For Bookchin, the influence of these dynamics is encapsulated particularly clearly in that paradigmatically capitalist space, the shopping mall, which he claims is the nearest thing to a properly public space in contemporary societies. 'The massive dissolution of personal and social ties' witnessed under capitalism, for instance, is apparently reflected in the fact that 'the motor vehicles that carry worshippers to its [the mall's] temples are self-enclosed capsules that preclude all human contact' (1982: 137). Consequently, and in a similar way to his long-term case, he holds that a process of re-socialisation or character transformation is the most important necessary precondition for a society with greater levels of political awareness and engagement. Citizens need to come to see, in short, political awareness and participation as an integral part of their existence, rather than as a distraction from and distinct from everyday life.

Concerning (3), Bookchin again claims that democratic municipalist agents are well-placed to bring about this necessary process of character-transformation, or *paidea*. Part of the reason for this is that local neighbourhoods are, in Bookchin's view, frequently the epicentre of a series of capitalist pathologies which create grievances that can motivate participation in democratic political activity. Contemporary capitalist dynamics appear to not only pacify and atomise but also create and exacerbate a whole series of grievances concentrated primarily at the level of the neighbourhood. Bookchin lists as examples of these neighbourhood grievances: 'shortcomings in public services and education [...] the

integrity of [...] supplies of food, air, and water', as well as issues of safety, housing, congestion, recreation, loneliness, and the erosion of local community (2015: 175–6). These are issues that Bookchin labels 'interclass in nature', affecting 'the middle as well as the working class', albeit in somewhat different ways (2015: 178). What is crucial for Bookchin is that these kinds of pathologies do not primarily manifest themselves in the workplace as (arguably rather crude misreadings of) Marx's account of political motivation would seem to suggest, but rather in the broader 'overall environment' which victims of social injustice inhabit (2015: 176; 1980: 242).

For Bookchin, democratic municipalist political action can effectively utilise the raw material of these grievances in the here-and-now as the catalyst for a process of character transformation. As a result of these grievances, Bookchin argues, many working- and middle-class citizens will tend to 'harbor basic impulses which make them very susceptible to' participating in democratic forms of political discussion (1990: 81). Bookchin notes two specific character-transforming contributions that he thinks neighborhood assemblies can make. Politically active citizens require, first and foremost, a perception of self-efficacy: a sense that they are 'capable of [...] self-management' (Bookchin, 1992: 251) and participation in directly democratic exchanges, Bookchin claims, can help to gift this political self-confidence. An active citizenry also requires, second, a loose commitment to one's fellow deliberators and local residents captured, for Bookchin, in the 'Greek term, *philia*, ordinarily translated as "friendship", but which I prefer to call "solidarity"' (1992: 250). For Bookchin, if appropriately organised by democratic municipalist agents, neighbourhood assemblies can deliver this also, enabling local residents to understand more clearly what they share with others, both revealing previously undisclosed commonalities of experience and desire, and also potentially building new ones.

Although in many ways structurally very similar to his long-term case described above, it is important to note a contrast here with that argument: the character transformation called for with this short-term case is arguably of a much more limited and targeted kind. Bookchin has in mind here not the deep moral reorientation against hierarchy of all kinds described earlier, but just more of a desire to be aware of and participate in political activity of some kind. This is what makes this a more short-term case: regardless of the ideological views local residents *eventually* come to hold (whether that be a wholesale rejection of the state and the capitalist system, or not), Bookchin is claiming, they can at least come to be more motivated to participate in democratic political activity in the here and now as a result of the actions undertaken by municipalist agents.

As already mentioned, I think there are several good reasons for thinking this case is considerably less contentious and more plausible than the long-term one. Recall the first desideratum I noted in the previous section: contributions to the debate about appropriate political agency ideally ought to be characterised by a high degree of empirical plausibility. Although Bookchin's long-term case engages in a large amount of empirical speculation, there are a number of findings in the social sciences which we can draw on to substantiate the empirical aspects of his short-term case. There is plentiful evidence, for instance, that many people feel a fairly deep level of attachment to the neighbourhood

in which they live. Individuals often possess a desire to improve the parts of the area of which they are fond and to generally see their neighbourhood flourish (Lewicka, 2011).

There is also evidence that this attachment to place, this embeddedness in a particular locale, often plays a significant role in determining citizens' political behaviour. For instance, Hahrie Han has highlighted the centrality of individuals' commitments to overcoming the 'problems in their own lives' and those of others close to them, in determining their motivations to engage in political activity (Han, 2009: 3). Chief among these issues, for Han, are the inadequacy of 'the schools their children attend or the health care their parents receive' (2009: 70) in their immediate lived environment. Typically, Han argues, it is only when people see a connection between political activity and achieving these highly personal – and highly localised – goals that 'the emotional arousal necessary for action' is likely to be present (2009: 17; Nuamah and Ogorzalek, 2021).

There is also some promising empirical evidence that supports the claim that through building and empowering neighborhood assemblies, democratic municipalist agents will often be well-placed to capitalise on these grievances. Participation in deliberative exchanges is widely seen as able to lead to increased 'internal political efficacy', for instance, increasing subjective confidence in one's own capacities to competently participate in political affairs (Gastil, 2018: 284; Knobloch and Gastil, 2014). The recent 'New Municipalist' wave also seems to provide some evidence of this: what seems particularly notable is that the constituency that movements such as *BenC* have often been successful in building encompasses many of those that feel alienated by and do not identify with more traditional national and international forms of political participation (Russell, 2019).

There are also many examples of participants in the latest wave of democratic municipalism engaging in small acts of mutual aid among themselves, for instance, which illustrate growing bonds of trust and empathy (or what Bookchin calls *philia*). To give just one example: some *BenC* activists serve paella at their bi-weekly meetings to reduce the (unequally shared) burdens of care work and social reproduction and create a more convivial atmosphere for deliberative discussion (Islar and Irgil, 2018: 495). Taylor, Nanz, and Taylor also lend empirical weight to this when, summarising their observations and involvement with a number of local community initiatives that centre-around collective participatory planning, they write that '[f]ace-to-face contact often softens our stereotypical hostilities toward each other. Thereby, deliberative communities [can] build new inclusive solidarities and trust among the participants' (Taylor et al., 2020: 22–3, Segall 2005: 369).

Interestingly, the bonds of *philia* that democratic municipalist agents can construct among local residents also often challenge the mistaken idea of a necessary connection between the local and the parochial: *BenC* and several other New Municipalist agents, for instance, have played a pivotal role in raising awareness about and challenging restrictive and punitive migration and asylum policies by serving as 'Refuge Cities' for refugees and migrants (Agustín, 2020). Others have noted that *BenC* assisted migrant street vendors in the creation of 'a worker cooperative called *Diomcoop* with its own fashion line' (Forman et al., 2020: 138). This is something Bookchin himself appeared to recognise: provided that municipal agents 'fuse' the needs of local citizens

‘with broader social ideals’, Bookchin claims that they can just as easily foster an inclusive, outward-looking spirit as an exclusivist, parochial, and chauvinist one (1980: 164; 1992: 293).

Recall also the second desideratum: contributions to the appropriate agency debate should ideally be capable of accommodating at least a degree of reasonable disagreement about the ultimate shape of a socially just society. Although Bookchin’s long-term case arguably requires an endorsement of a completely non-hierarchical society as the ultimate horizon of just social change to be viewed as compelling, the short-term case clearly does not: it only requires that one object to current levels of political disengagement and apathy. One need not even necessarily think, as Bookchin does, that political participation is an irreducible component of living well, as his case can still be found compelling provided one holds that greater levels of political awareness and activity among the citizenry would be instrumentally valuable in bringing about a more just society.

For example, passing the kinds of radically redistributive policies that many political theorists think would enable contemporary societies to more closely approximate the correct principles of social justice will undoubtedly be vehemently resisted by the powerful employers and property owners that benefit from the status quo, who are likely to employ every means at their disposal – political donations, lobbying, media power, capital flight and strike, and so on – to retain their advantages (Shelley 2021, 462). Such resistance can surely only be overcome by a sufficiently strong counter-power comprised of a politically active constituency of citizens who stand to benefit from egalitarian social change. Thus, whilst there is clearly continuing disagreement about the precise form of the institutional matrix which best embodies principles of social justice (property-owning democracy, social democracy, market socialism, complete non-hierarchy, etc.), a great many egalitarian theories of justice can arguably still note the advantages of agential forms which can play a role in fostering greater political awareness and participation.

## **Implications for the agency debate**

What implications does this reconstruction of Bookchin’s claims about the value of democratic municipalist agency have for existing contributions to the emerging debate about the most appropriate political agents for realising social justice? I earlier summarised the various ways in which national political parties and trade unions are highlighted as desirable agents for helping to instantiate social justice as follows. National political parties are often the most appropriate agents for coming to manoeuvre the levers of power in a society such that it more closely approximates a given set of principles of justice, and these agents can not only enact social change through alterations to state policy mechanisms but can also articulate and sculpt shared interests in civil society (Dryzek, 2015: 381; White and Ypi, 2017: 448). And strong trade unions can also help ensure that national parties continue to effectively represent the interests of the communities with which they have historic ties, even when these parties are faced with incentives to no longer do so, and they can appeal to the lived experience of many citizens in such a way that can successfully persuade them to get involved in

social justice activism (Gourevitch and Robin 2020: 394–5; O'Neill and White, 2018: 255–60).

This paper provides a useful partial corrective to these claims. I don't think it should cause us to *deny* the potentially valuable contributions that agents such as national parties and trade unions can make to projects of just social change. But what it does tell us is that democratic municipalist agents can often *also* constitute another important partial answer to the contemporary debate about political agency, alongside the other agents more commonly highlighted in this emerging literature. This is because there are various ways in which the activity of democratic municipalist agents might complement trade unions and national parties and help to generate favourable conditions for the success of these more paradigmatic political agents.<sup>9</sup>

It is often the case, after all, that partisans and trade unionists in unjust societies operate under highly hostile political conditions: needing to grapple with unfavourable transformations in labour markets and the media landscape, as well as a marked decline in class-based social institutions and the increasing influence of an office-seeking, state-orientated party elite over party decision-making (Mair, 2013). Such unfavourable circumstances seem to recommend, I would suggest, creative experimentation with a more diverse range of actions and agents than would perhaps be warranted under different political conditions. What Bookchin helps us to see in both cases is that existing neighborhood grievances can be particularly powerful building blocks that municipalist agents can utilise to heighten political awareness and participation. Consequently, where favourable conditions for traditional trade union success are wanting or unavailable, union activists may wish to look to engage in somewhat less workplace-centred activity, such as aiding the solidarity-strengthening struggles of democratic municipalist agents and other local actors.<sup>10</sup>

Additionally, where favourable conditions for traditional national party-building are also lacking, party activists too may have to look to engage in less state-centric action, such as the activities practiced by democratic municipalists. After all, the motivational benefits of participation in national parties discussed by White and Ypi (2016: 87–89) still require political actors sufficiently motivated to *access* these benefits in the first place. The emergence of widespread motivations of this sort certainly seems *possible* in the sense that their existence doesn't appear to be incompatible with basic laws of nature or human psychology (a small but nonetheless significant number of citizens of course already engage in these actions every day). But many political dynamics are currently at work which would seem to render the spontaneous emergence of these motivations to participate in national partisanship on a mass scale highly unlikely indeed. Democratic municipalism can, I would suggest, potentially play a valuable role in *engendering* these initial participatory motivations.<sup>11</sup>

Of course, national and international political forces will often highly constrain the activities of municipalist projects, so it is not as if there will simultaneously be unfavourable conditions for trade unions and national political parties, and highly favourable conditions for municipal agents. Municipal political actors will rarely possess *carte blanche* to reshape their localities in whichever way they please.<sup>12</sup> But present political conditions will often present a variety of cracks and loopholes at the level of the neighbourhood and



the municipality, which municipalist agents can exploit to progressive effect. For instance, the creation of the Greater London Council – which extended London’s original boundaries to include many prosperous suburbs – was initiated by a Conservative British government at least partly in an attempt to erode the left’s existing support base in the capital, but ultimately led to a substantial and radical period of progressive democratic municipalist experimentation and political consciousness-raising in the capital (Hatherley, 2020: 94). Although far from unconstrained, there is thus a long tradition of democratic municipalist actors succeeding in exploiting the opportunities presented by the devolvement of political power to local authorities in order to foster more favourable conditions for just social change.

## **Conclusion**

Recent debates about the most appropriate political agents for realising social justice have largely focused on the potential value of national political parties on the one hand, and trade unions on the other. Drawing on the thought of Murray Bookchin, this article has suggested that democratic municipalist agents – democratic associations of local residents that build and empower neighbourhood assemblies and improve the municipal provision of basic goods and services – can often also make valuable contributions to projects of just social change. After distinguishing democratic municipalist agents from national political parties and trade unions, I identified both a long-term and a more short-term argument for the value of democratic municipalist agency in Bookchin’s thought. The former focused on the role that these agents can play in bringing about an entirely non-hierarchical society, whereas the latter focused on the ability of democratic municipalist agents to contribute to combatting political disengagement. By assessing these two cases against two desiderata for a contribution to the appropriate agency debate (empirical plausibility and capacity to accommodate a degree of reasonable disagreement about the ultimate shape of a socially just society), I claimed that Bookchin’s short-term case provides a useful partial corrective to recent political theorising about the nature of the partisanship and trade unionism necessary to secure social justice.

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**Notes**

1. Michael Goodhart has also recently complained that ‘questions about strategy and tactics and agency and implementation’ have received only scant attention from contemporary political theorists (Goodhart, 2018: 177). There are – of course – certain exceptions to this general rule (Deveaux, 2018; Laurence, 2020).
2. Abstract definitions of this sort are – of course – unlikely to capture everything in our messy political reality. But establishing an ‘ideal type’ of this sort nonetheless helps to fix ideas (White and Ypi, 2016: 24).
3. The activity of social movements is not always exhausted by these efforts to pressure political decision makers: many also seek to directly address various social ills themselves. My thanks to an anonymous referee for raising this important point. For a fascinating history of the role played by food provision and mutual aid in the US civil rights movement, see Cope (2022).
4. If the wage-earners share one occupation or trade, this will often be termed a ‘craft’ trade union. If they differ in terms of specific occupation but nonetheless share a common economic sector, their association will typically be known as an ‘industrial’ trade union. Associations of wage-earners who share neither of these features are typically organised into ‘general’ trade unions. For more on the distinction between these three sub-variants of trade unions, see Visser (2012: 136) and Mosimann and Pontusson (2022: 1316).
5. Bookchin himself actually more often uses the term *libertarian* municipalist (Bookchin, 2015: 84–5) but I prefer the *democratic* epithet because it seems to more accurately capture the central defining features of this form of agency, as well as doing so without the (arguably unhelpful) connotations of left-libertarian and right-libertarian political ideology.
6. Different municipalist actors in different places will also have differing levels of power at their disposal to enhance access to these various resources. But political decision-making on at least some of these issues will often be devolved to the level of the municipality. For a discussion of the kinds of powers municipal authorities typically have over public transportation in London, see Hatherley (2020: 151–3). For a recent international survey of the success of local authorities in bringing public utilities such as water, energy, telecommunications, waste, and transport back under local control, see Kishimoto et al. (2020).
7. Some municipalist agents, like *BenC*, prefer to refer to themselves as horizontalist ‘citizen platforms’, in order to differentiate themselves from what they consider more hierarchical and professionalised local parties (Thompson, 2021: 326–328; Forman et al., 2020: 136). But other instances of democratic municipalism have been undertaken by (democratically run) parties (Brownill, 1988; Kohn, 2003).
8. For example, Gelderloos (2019) has provided a Bookchin-esque critique of *BenC* for concentrating too much on its reform agenda and losing sight of its democratisation agenda. Whereas leaders of *BenC* retort that concentrating primarily on these more top-down reforms can help to *catalyse* participation in assemblies and help engender a more participatory culture, when participation levels are currently ‘not sufficiently intense’, primarily by reducing understandable scepticism about the impossibility or undesirability of transformative change (Gilmartin 2019).
9. The kinds of life-enhancing political changes that democratic municipalist agents like *BenC* have been able to implement, such as building the city’s renewable energy provision,

- increasing its affordable housing stock and decreasing air pollution, will also often be morally valuable in their own right, regardless of their contribution to broader processes of social change.
10. This position is not as heterodox as it may at first sound: in practice, some labour relations scholars already hold the view that trade unions will be most effective when they think in terms of organising broader neighbourhoods and communities, rather than solely operating at the level of the workplace (Fletcher Jr and Gapasin, 2008).
  11. Existing normative work on parties and partisanship has thus far tended to focus overwhelmingly on differing options for the *internal* organisation of parties, and the various arguments in favour of more democratic and deliberative organisations in particular (Wolkenstein, 2019). Although these are certainly important issues, this means that the question of how national parties ought to relate *externally* with *other* political actors – particularly at the local, neighbourhood or constituency level – has barely received any attention in the existing literature.
  12. For example, the Spanish government's recent 'Montoro Law' curtails the ability of *BenC* and other municipal agents to hire city government staff and pursue an agenda of re-municipalisation (Rubio-Pueyo, 2017). There is also a great deal of historical precedent for acts of these kinds. In 1986, for instance, Margaret Thatcher's Conservative government abolished the progressive Greater London Council, despite various polls showing a clear majority of Londoners – in some cases almost as many as three quarters – opposed to abolition (Pimlott and Rao, 2002: 41).

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