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African Anarchism: An Interview with Sam Mbah

Chuck Morse

1999

African Anarchism: The History of a Movement (See Sharp Press, 1997) by Sam Mbah and I.E. Igariwey is the first book-length treatment of anarchism and Africa. The authors argue that anarchism provides a coherent framework with which to comprehend and respond to the multiple crises afflicting the continent. I met with Mbah on November 4, 1998 at the beginning of his North American speaking tour.

You state that “the overall tendency in the development of human society has been toward social equality and greater individual freedom.” Do you share Marx’s belief that capitalism is a progressive development in world-history and a necessary precondition of more adequate social forms?

The Marxist position is not completely accurate. Capitalism was a progressive development during its own epoch: it provided the grounds for the radicalization of the working class, which was not possible under feudalism and definitely a step ahead. It was based on this that the struggle against capitalism and the state-system intensified. However, I do not think every

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country or society must pass through this process or that capitalism is a precondition for human progress or development.

I also do not think that human history is predictable or can be tied to sequences developed by historians and writers. I believe that the capacity of ordinary people in a given society is so great that it can almost propel them to take destiny into their own hands at any point in time. It does not have to wait until capitalist development has taken root or the working class has been formed. The peasantry, for example, can also take destiny in their own hands if their consciousness is raised to a certain level. I do not believe in the compartmentalization of history into stages: I believe in the capacity of the ordinary people to struggle on their own and free themselves at any point in time.

Your book is grounded in anarcho-syndicalism, a tradition derived primarily from European historical experiences. What distinctive contributions can the African experience make to anarchism as a whole?

We attempted to point this out in our book. Although anarchism is not complete without the Western European contributions, we believe there are elements of African traditional societies that can be of assistance in elaborating anarchist ideas.

One of these is the self-help, mutual aid, or cooperative tradition that is prevalent in African society. This society is structured such that there is reduced individualism and a collective approach toward solving problems and living life: reduced to its essence, I think that is what anarchism is preaching.

African traditional societies also offer some things we should learn from. For example, leadership — especially in societies where feudalism (and thus chiefdoms) did not develop — was horizontal and diffused, not vertical. Almost everybody in a given community or village took part in decision-making and had a say in anything that involved them. Even the elders would ordinarily not declare a war against the next village except if there was a consensus, which was really the binding force of African society. Also, the extended family system, in

which your nephew could come live with you and your wife, is definitely something we recommend to anarchism. So, these are areas in which we think that African ideas could also be incorporated into anarchism. These ideas are enduring, almost in human nature as far as Africa is concerned.

The inability to combine a coherent critique of the state and capitalism with a critique of racism has exacted an enormous toll on anarchism. In what sense must an analysis of racism and white supremacy complement a class analysis?

The capitalist system we inherited thrives on the exploitation of workers and other non-dominant classes and also exploits racial differences. It has instituted a permanent racial dichotomy among workers, where there is a group of privileged workers and another, not so privileged group. There is a double exploitation: an exploitation of the working class in general and an even greater exploitation of the non-white working class. This was not properly addressed even by Marxism, because it assumed a unity of interests among the working class without reference to the specific kinds of exploitation and deprivation faced by workers.

Racism is a key factor in this world and any working class analysis that seeks to deny this is only being escapist. Racism is simply endemic in capitalism.

It is for workers to comprehend this, as a basis for unity within their own ranks and to move forward. This must be recognized by anarchist activists and social movements, so as to integrate blacks and whites to face a common enemy, which is capitalism and the social relations of production that it puts in place.