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Between Infoshops and Insurrection

U.S. Anarchism, Movement Building, and the Racial
Order

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Joel Olson argues against two major tendencies in American anarchism, counterinstitution building and militant street protests, and suggests building a movement against the racial order should be a priority.

Anarchism has always had a hard time dealing with race. In its classical era from the time of Proudhon in the 1840s to Goldman in the 1930s, it sought to inspire the working class to rise up against the church, the state, and capitalism. This focus on “god, government, and gold” was revolutionary, but it didn’t quite know how to confront the racial order in the United States. Most U.S. anarchist organizations and activists opposed racism in principle, but they tended to assume that it was a byproduct of class exploitation. That is, they thought that racism was a tool the bosses used to divide the working class, a tool that would disappear once capitalism was abolished. They appealed for racial unity against the bosses but they never analyzed white supremacy as a relatively autonomous form of power in its own right.

Unfortunately, contemporary anarchism (which dates roughly from Bookchin to Zerzan) has not done much better. It has expanded the classical era’s critique of class domination to a critique of hierarchy and all forms of oppression, including race. Yet with a few exceptions, the contemporary American anarchist scene still has not analyzed race as a form of power in its own right, or as a potential source of solidarity. As a consequence, anarchism remains a largely white ideology in the U.S.

Despite this troublesome tradition, I argue that anarchist theory has the intellectual resources to develop a powerful theory of racial oppression as well as strategies to fight it, but first it must confront two obstacles placed in front of it by the contemporary American anarchist scene. First, it must overcome an analysis of white supremacy that understands racism as but one “hierarchy” among others. Racial oppression is not simply one of many forms of domination; it has played a central role in the development of

capitalism in the United States. As a result, struggles against racial oppression have a strategic centrality that other struggles lack.

Second, it must reject the current U.S. anarchist scene's "infoshops or insurrection" approach to politics and instead focus on movement building. Organizing working class movements, which was so central to the classical anarchist tradition, has given way to creating "autonomous zones" like infoshops, art spaces, affinity groups, and collectives on the one hand, and glorifying protests, riots, and sabotage on the other. But in the infoshops and insurrection approaches, the vital work of building movements falls through the middle.

In a class society, politics is fundamentally a struggle for hegemony, or a struggle to define what Antonio Gramsci calls the "common sense" of a society. In the United States, white supremacy has been the central means of maintaining capitalism as "common sense." Building mass movements against the racial order, then, is the way in which a new hegemony, an "anarchist common sense," can be created. But in building that common sense, I argue that contemporary American anarchism should look less toward Europe and more toward the struggles of peoples of color in their own back yard for historical lessons and inspiration.

Hierarchy, hegemony, and white supremacy

The intellectual framework of most of contemporary American anarchism rests on a critique of hierarchy. Murray Bookchin, perhaps the most important theorist of the concept, defines hierarchy as "a complex system of command and obedience in which elites enjoy varying degrees of control over their subordinates" (Bookchin 1982, 4). Capitalism, organized religion, and the state are important forms of hierarchy, but the concept includes other relations of domination such as of "the young by the old, of women by men, of one ethnic group by another, of 'masses' by bureaucrats, ... of

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answer, no doubt, lies in the fact that anarchists grossly underestimated the power of capitalism and liberalism. All socialist ideologies lost popularity with the fall of the Soviet Union, since there no longer seemed to be a viable, “actually existing” alternative to capitalism. Capitalism and liberalism appeared invincible and the world system seemed to be at “the end of history.” September 11, 2001, brought a new antagonist to global capital — religious fundamentalism — but it hardly represents a libertarian alternative. World events, in other words, smothered libertarian socialism between neoliberalism and fundamentalism.

But part of the problem, I have suggested, lies with anarchism itself. The failure to develop a theory of U.S. history that recognizes the centrality of racial oppression, combined with a related failure to concentrate on building mass movements, has contributed to anarchism’s continued marginalization.

But what if this was to change? What if American anarchists went from building infoshops and plotting insurrections to building movements, particularly movements against the racial order? (They could still build free spaces and encourage insurrection, of course, but these efforts would be part of a broader strategy rather than strategies in themselves.) What if anarchists, instead of concentrating on creating “autonomous zones” on the U.S.-Mexico border, as some have tried to do, worked to build movements in resistance to anti-immigrant laws?

What if anarchists, instead of planning (largely ineffective) clandestine direct actions with small affinity groups, worked to build movements against the police, who are at the forefront of maintaining the color line? What if anarchists, in addition to supporting jailed comrades, worked with family members of incarcerated people to organize against prisons? What if anarchists stopped settling for autonomous zones and furtive direct actions and focused on undermining the cross-class alliance and on changing the “common sense” of this society?

The scene might just build a movement.

countryside by town, and in a more subtle psychological sense, of body by mind, of spirit by a shallow instrumental rationality, and of nature by society and technology” (4). Hierarchy pervades our social relations and reaches into our psyche, thereby “percolating into virtually every realm of experience” (63). The critique of hierarchy, Bookchin argues, is more expansive and radical than the Marxist critique of capitalism or the classical anarchist critique of the state because it “poses the need to alter every thread of the social fabric, including the way we experience reality, before we can truly live in harmony with each other and with the natural world” (Bookchin 1986, 22–23).

This analysis of hierarchy broadened contemporary anarchism into a critique of all forms of oppression, including capitalism, the state, organized religion, patriarchy, heterosexism, anthropocentrism, racism, and more. The political task of contemporary anarchism, then, is to attack all forms of oppression, not just a “main” one like capitalism or the state, because without an attack on hierarchy itself, other forms of oppression will not necessarily wither away after the “main” one has been destroyed.¹

¹ The critique of hierarchy and “all forms of oppression” is so pervasive in North American anarchist thought that a supporting quote here hardly seems adequate. These two examples are representative: 1) “We actively struggle against all forms of oppression and domination, including patriarchy, racism, anthropocentrism and heterosexism. We recognize and actively work against these systems of oppression that co-exist with capitalism, as well as against the ecocide of the planet” (“Principles of the Anti-Capitalist Network of Montreal” [2007], montreal.resist.ca). 2) “We stand against all forms of oppression: imperialism, capitalism, white supremacy, patriarchy, fascism, heterosexism/homophobia/transphobia and the domination of human over human & human over all living things including mother earth” (Revolutionary Autonomous Communities [Los Angeles] Mission Statement [2007], www.mediaisland.org). This perspective is also evident in the definitions of anarchism provided in numerous Anarchist FAQ sites. For examples, see “An Anarchist FAQ Page, version 12.2,” www.geocities.com; “Anarchist Communism: An Introduction,” libcom.org; “Anarchist FAQ,” www.infoshop.org, and “Anarchy” at the Green Anarchist Info Shop, www.greenanarchy.info.

This critique of what is sometimes called “class reductionism” is powerful, for while patriarchy is surely connected to capitalism, for example, it can hardly be reduced to it. Despite this advantage, however, the anarchist critique of all forms of oppression fails to distinguish among those forms of oppression that have been more significant than others to the structuring of U.S. society. In other words, the critique of hierarchy in general lacks the ability to explain how various forms of hierarchy are themselves hierarchically organized. It correctly insists that no one form of oppression is morally “worse” than another. But this does not mean that all forms of oppression play an equal role in shaping the social structure. The American state, for example, was not built on animal cruelty or child abuse, however pervasive and heinous these forms of domination are. Rather, as I will argue below, it was built on white supremacy, which has shaped nearly every other form of oppression in the United States, including class, gender, religion, and the state (and animal cruelty and child abuse). Understanding white supremacy should therefore be central to any American anarchist theory, and developing political programs to fight it should be a central component of anarchist strategy, even if racism is not morally “more evil” than another forms of oppression.

The critique of hierarchy, in other words, confuses a moral condemnation of all forms of oppression with a political and strategic analysis of how power functions in the United States. It resists the notion that in certain historical contexts, certain forms of hierarchy play a more central role in shaping society than do others. It assumes that because all forms of oppression are evil and interconnected that fighting any form of oppression will have the same revolutionary impact. For this reason, it assumes that there is no more need to fight racial discrimination than, say, vivisection, since both are equally evil and interconnected forms of domination.

But as the great theorist W.E.B. Du Bois shows in his classic *Black Reconstruction*, the primary reason for the failure of the development of a significant anti-capitalist movement in the United

Traitor (which was sympathetic to the anarchist scene and did much to develop it intellectually regarding race), and anarchist organizations such as Love and Rage, Black Autonomy, Anarchist People of Color, and the anarchist-influenced Bring the Ruckus. Not coincidentally, these organizations also tend or tended to emphasize movement building rather than infoshops or insurrection. It is this tradition that influences my analysis here. But it is hardly a dominant perspective in the anarchist scene today.

After the Berlin Wall

When the Berlin Wall fell in 1989 followed by the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, many anarchists were confident that anarchism would fill the void left by state communism and once again become the dominant ideological challenge to liberalism like it was before the Russian Revolution. This confidence, even exuberance, was on display throughout the U.S. anarchist scene in publications such as *Anarchy*, *Fifth Estate*, and *Profane Existence*; in the creation of new organizations such as the Network of Anarchist Collectives; and in the burst of anarchist infoshops opening up in Chicago, Minneapolis, San Francisco, D.C., New York, and elsewhere.

It was an exciting time. Yet anarchism never filled the void. It never captured the hearts and minds of ordinary people. A similar optimism followed the uprising in Seattle in 1999. Anarchists again confidently predicted the emergence of a new, powerful movement. Yet once again, it didn’t happen. Today anarchism in the U.S. is in about the same place it was in 1989: a static ideology and a loose scene of largely white twenty-somethings, kept together by occasional gatherings, short-lived collectives, the underground music scene, and a handful of magazines and websites.

What went wrong in 1989 and 1999? Why hasn’t anarchism filled the void left by the collapse of communism? Why hasn’t anarchism grown as a movement and a philosophy? Most of the

produced by other U.S. struggles, even if it describes itself as “nationalist” (See Robin Kelley’s great book *Freedom Dreams* for more on this). Yet these persons and events curiously form no part of the anarchist scene’s historical tradition.⁴

In sum, the Black freedom struggles have been the most revolutionary tradition in American history yet the anarchist scene is all but unaware of it. I suggest that there is more to learn about anarchism in the U.S. from Harriet Tubman, Abby Kelley, Nate Shaw, Malcolm X, W.E.B. Du Bois, Ella Baker, Fannie Lou Hamer, James Forman, Angela Davis and Assata Shakur than from Proudoun, Kropotkin, Bakunin, Berkman or Goldman. There is more to learn from abolitionism than Haymarket, more from Reconstruction than the Spanish Civil War, more from the current social conditions of Black America than the global South. To see this, however, requires modifying the critique of hierarchy so that it can explain how forms of domination are themselves organized. It requires abandoning the infoshops and insurrection models for a commitment to building movements. It requires looking to Mississippi and New Orleans more than Russia or Paris.

This is not to say that American anarchism has been completely silent on race. The anarchist critique of white supremacy began in the 1980s and ‘90s, with the work of Black anarchists such as Kuwasi Balagoon and Lorenzo Komboa Ervin, the journal *Race*

⁴ Lucy Parsons and the Black Panthers tend to be the main links between Black struggles and American anarchists’ historical sense. Parsons, a militant anarchist organizer in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and possibly a former slave, is a problematic connection to the Black tradition because although she fought lynching and racial discrimination, she was not part of the Black community and often denied her Black identity. (She was married to a white man, Albert Parsons, so this denial may in part have been to evade anti-miscegenation laws. See Lowndes 1995 and Roediger 1986.) Many anarchists fetishize the Panthers because they seem to fit both the infoshops and insurrection models (i.e. men and women with guns serving breakfast to Black children), but this position tends to idealize the Panthers rather than critically evaluate and integrate their experience into the anarchist tradition.

States is white supremacy. Rather than uniting with Black workers to overthrow the ruling class and build a new society, as classical anarchist and communist theory predicts, white workers throughout American history have chosen to side with capital. Through a tacit but nonetheless real agreement, the white working class ensures the continuous and relatively undisturbed accumulation of capital by policing the rest of the working class rather than uniting with it. In exchange, white workers receive racial privileges, largely paid for by capitalists and guaranteed by the democratic political system. Du Bois calls these privileges “the public and psychological wages” of whiteness:

“It must be remembered that the white group of laborers, while they received a low wage, were compensated in part by a sort of public and psychological wage. They were given public deference and titles of courtesy because they were white. They were admitted freely with all classes of white people to public functions, public parks, and the best schools. The police were drawn from their ranks, and the courts, dependent upon their votes, treated them with such leniency as to encourage lawlessness. Their vote selected public officials, and while this had small effect upon the economic situation, it had great effect upon their personal treatment and the deference shown them.” (Pp. 700–701)

At the time of the publication of *Black Reconstruction* in 1935, these “wages” included the right to vote, exclusive access to the best jobs, an expectation of higher wages and better benefits, the capacity to sit on juries, the right to enjoy public accommodations, and the right to consider oneself the equal of any other. Today they include, in part, the right to the lowest mortgage rates, the right to decent treatment by the police, the right to feel relatively

immune from criminal prosecution, the right to assume one's success is due entirely to one's own effort, the right to declare that institutionalized racial discrimination is over, and the right to be a full citizen in a liberal democratic state. These wages undermine class-consciousness among those who receive them because they create an interest in and expectation of favored treatment within the capitalist system rather than outside of it.

The racial order in the United States, then, is essentially a cross-class alliance between capital and one section of the working class. (I make this argument in detail in my book *The Abolition of White Democracy*). The group that makes up this alliance is defined as "white." It acts like a club: its members enjoy certain privileges, so that the poorest, most wretched members share, in certain respects, a status higher than that of the most esteemed persons excluded from it (Ignatiev and Garvey 1996). Membership in the white "club" is dynamic and determined by existing membership. Richard Wright once said, "Negroes are Negroes because they are treated like Negroes" (Wright 1957, 148). Similarly, whites are whites because they are treated like whites. The treatment one receives in a racial order defines one's race rather than the other way around: you are not privileged because you are white; you are white because you are privileged. Slaves and their descendants have typically been the antithesis of this club, but various other groups have occupied the subordinate position in the racial binary, including Native Americans, Latinos/as, Chinese Americans, and others. Some, such as Irish and Jewish immigrants, started out in the subordinate category but over time successfully became white (Ignatiev 1995, Brodtkin 1999). Others, such as Mexican American elites in California in the nineteenth century, started out as white but lost their superior status and were thrown into the not-white group (Almaguer 1994).

This system of racial oppression has been central to the maintenance of capitalist hegemony in the United States. If, as Marx and Engels argue in *The Communist Manifesto*, capitalism tends

The intellectual tradition of American anarchism has always looked more toward Europe (and sometimes Mexico) than the United States. American anarchists know more about the Paris Commune, the Kronstadt rebellion, the Mexican Revolution, the Spanish Civil War, Paris 1968, the German Autonomes, and the Zapatista uprising in Chiapas than they do about the abolitionist movement, Reconstruction, the Sharecroppers Union, the civil rights movement, or the Black/Brown/Red power movements. It's not that American anarchists and history are ignored—Haymarket, Berkman, Parsons, de Cleyre, Goldman, Bookchin, and Zerzan all have their place in the anarchist pantheon—but these persons and events are curiously detached from an understanding of the social conditions that produced them, especially the racial order that has dominated U.S. history. (One consequence of this European focus, I suspect, is that it has contributed to the predominantly white demographic of the contemporary anarchist scene.)

The ignorance of Black freedom movements is so profound that even anarchistic tendencies within them get ignored. Nat Turner led a slave uprising in 1831 that killed over fifty whites and struck terror throughout the South; it should clearly count as one of the most important insurrections in American history. Historians often describe William Lloyd Garrison, a leader of the abolitionist movement, as a "Christian Anarchist" (e.g. Perry 1973), yet he is almost never included in anarchist-produced histories. The Black-led Reconstruction government in South Carolina from 1868–1874, which Du Bois dubbed the "South Carolina Commune," did far more toward building socialism than the Paris Commune in 1871 ever did. Ella Baker's anti-authoritarian critique of Martin Luther King Jr. encouraged young civil rights workers to create their own autonomous and directly democratic organization, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), arguably the most important direct action civil rights group. Further, the racial consciousness produced by these struggles has often been broader, radical, and international than the consciousness

against the state and/or other institutions of power to achieve their ends. When movements become powerful enough, when they sufficiently weaken elites, and when fortune is on their side, they lead to an insurrection, and then perhaps a revolution. Yet in much of the anarchist scene today, building free spaces and/or creating disorder are regarded as the movement itself rather than components of one. Neither the infoshops nor insurrection models build movements that can express the organized power of the working class. Thus, the necessary, difficult, slow, and inspiring process of building movements falls through the cracks between sabotage and the autonomous zone.

The strategy of building autonomous zones or engaging in direct action with small affinity groups that are divorced from social movements assumes that radicals can start the revolution. But revolutionaries don't make revolutions. Millions of ordinary and oppressed people do. Anarchist theory and practice today provides little sense of how these people are going to be part of the process, other than to create their own "free spaces" or to spontaneously join the festivals of upheaval. Ironically, then, the infoshops and insurrection approaches lead many anarchists to take an elitist approach to politics, one in which anarchists "show the way" for the people to follow, never realizing that throughout history, revolutionaries (including anarchists) have always been trying to catch up to the people, not the other way around.

Movement building and the racial order

Which brings us back to the racial order. The abandonment of movement building by the bulk of the contemporary American anarchist scene has led it to ignore the most important and radical political tradition in the United States: the Black freedom movements against slavery, segregation, and other forms of racial oppression.

to bring workers together by teaching them how to cooperate, and if this cooperation has revolutionary tendencies ("what the bourgeoisie produces, above all, are its own gravediggers"), then capitalists need to break up the very cooperation that their system of production creates.² Now, different societies have developed different ways of disrupting class solidarity, often by giving advantage to one set of workers over others. Perhaps in Turkey it's through the subordination of the Kurds, perhaps in Saudi Arabia it's through the subordination of women, perhaps in Bolivia it's through the subordination of the indigenous population, perhaps in Western Europe it's through social democracy. In the United States, it has been through the racial order. The wages of whiteness have undermined the solidarity that the working class otherwise develops daily in its activities. It has fundamentally shaped other hierarchies, such as gender, ethnicity, sexuality, and religion, refracting them through its prism. In so doing, it has contributed to making capitalism seem like "common sense," even to many workers (particularly white ones) who stumble under its burdens.

The racial order, then, is not merely one form of hierarchy among others. It is a form of hierarchy that shapes and organizes the others in order to ensure capitalist accumulation. Morally, it is not more evil than other forms of domination, but politically it has played a more central role in organizing American society. Strategically speaking, then, one would think that it would be a central target of American anarchist analysis and strategy. Curiously, though, this has not been the case.

² For those who believe that the Manifesto is not an appropriately "anarchist" source to cite here, I remind them that Bakunin translated the Manifesto into Russian and worked on a translation of Capital. For more on the complicated relationship between anarchism and Marx see Paul Thomas's interesting book, *Karl Marx and the Anarchists*.

Between infoshops and insurrection

It is surprising how little thought the contemporary American anarchist scene has given to strategy. Broadly speaking, it upholds two loose models that it presents as strategies and repeats over and over with little self-reflection or criticism. I call these models infoshops and insurrection.

An infoshop is a space where people can learn about radical ideas, where radicals can meet other radicals, and where political work (such as meetings, public forums, fundraisers, etc.) can get done. In the infoshop strategy, infoshops and other “autonomous zones” model the free society. Building “free spaces” inspires others to spontaneously create their own, spreading “counterinstitutions” throughout society to the point where they become so numerous that they overwhelm the powers that be. The very creation of anarchist free spaces has revolutionary implications, their proponents argue, because it can lead to the “organic” (i.e. spontaneous, undirected, nonhierarchical) spreading of such spaces throughout society in a way that eventually challenges the state.

An insurrection is the armed uprising of the people. According to the insurrection strategy, anarchists acting in affinity groups or other small informal organizations can engage in actions that encourage spontaneous uprisings in various sectors of society. As localized insurrections grow and spread, they combine into a full-scale revolution that overthrows the state and capital and makes possible the creation of a free society.³

Infoshops serve very important functions and any movement needs such spaces. Likewise, insurrection is a focal event in any revolution, for it turns the patient organizing of the movement and the boiling anger of the people into an explosive confrontation with the state. The problem is when infoshops and insurrection get

³ For examples of insurrectionary anarchism, see the magazines *Willful Disobedience* (www.omnipresence.mahost.org) and *Killing King Abacus* (www.geocities.com).

taken as revolutionary strategies in themselves rather than as part of a broader revolutionary movement. In the infoshops model, autonomous spaces become the movement rather than serving it. In the insurrection model, spontaneous upheaval replaces the movement by equating insurrection with revolution rather than seeing it as but one part of the revolutionary process. The infoshops and insurrection models, in other words, both misunderstand the process of social transformation. Radical change may be initiated by spontaneous revolts that are supported by subterranean free spaces, but these revolts are almost always the product of movement building.

Social movements are central to radical change. The classical anarchists understood this, for they were very concerned to build working class movements, such as Bakunin’s participation in the International Working Men’s Association, Berkman and Goldman’s support for striking workers, Lucy Parson’s work in the International Working People’s Association, and the Wobblies’ call for “One Big Union.” To be sure, they also built free spaces and engaged in “propaganda by the deed,” but these were not their sole or even dominant activities. They did them in order to build the anarchist movement, not as a substitute for movement building.

Yet surprisingly much of the contemporary anarchist scene has abandoned movement building. In fact, the infoshops and insurrection models both seem to be designed, in part, to avoid the slow, difficult, but absolutely necessary work of building mass movements. Indeed, anarchist publications like *Green Anarchy* are explicit about this, deriding movement building as inherently authoritarian.

A revolution is not an infoshop, or an insurrection, or creating a temporary autonomous zone, or engaging in sabotage; it cannot be so easy, so “organic,” so absent of political struggle. A revolution is an actual historical event whereby one class overthrows another and (in the anarchist ideal) thereby makes it possible to abolish all forms of oppression. Such revolutions are the product of mass movements: a large group of people organized in struggle