

The Anarchism of Blackness

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Present incarnations of an unfazed and empowered far right increasingly demand the presence of a real, radical left. In the coming months and years, the left and left-leaning constituencies of the United States will need to make clear distinctions between potentially counterproductive symbolic progress, and actual material progress. Liberalism and party politics have failed a public attempting to bring about real change — but there are solutions.

The Black liberation struggle, in particular, has long provided a blueprint for transformative social change within the boundaries of this empire, and it has done so due to its positioning as an inherently radical social formation — a product of the virulent and foundational nature of anti-Blackness in American society. Understanding the significance of this struggle, we can proceed through examinations of the past, present and future to build new movements, a strong and radical left, and political power that generates and inspires rather than disappoints.

The Failings of American Liberalism

The United States' self-ascribed democratic traits have long been filtered through oppressive forms that the state insists are necessary. Life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness are measured by the success of a capitalist system that only truly benefits a few. Meanwhile, everyone else is told to believe that our supposedly meritocratic chance at being one of those few beneficiaries is what makes us “free.” True, unfiltered freedom and deep democracy are far too revolutionary for this state, so radical and revolutionary critiques of systemic limitations are often dismissed as overly idealistic or a utopian fantasy. But it is in the midst of the real-life nightmare that is the Trump administration that we should now — more than ever — be dreaming and striving to achieve something better.

For many years now, American liberalism has been a bitter disappointment to many of those who somehow maintained faith in the democratic integrity of the two-party system. The Democratic Party has seemingly been the only choice for those who consider themselves progressives working for a better society, but the notion that social inequities will be solved through the electoral process was always naïve at best. The entrails of this system are lined with the far-right fascism that is currently rising and has been bubbling under the façade of liberal democracy at the expense of non-whites in a white supremacist society. A system predicated on the over-emphasis of “order” and “security” is primed for authoritarianism.

Genocide, enslavement and other forms of violence the empire inflicts have grown more tepid in their bluntness since this nation's birth. Over time, the violence has been displaced and restructured by more insidious and invisible modalities of community destruction. The reservation, the prison system and austerity policies are just some of the negotiable forms of violence that liberalism has facilitated over time.

Over the past few decades, the United States has seen a shift in liberal politics leaving the Democratic Party in a completely compromised position. The emergence of the Tea Party, a populist surge in the Republican Party, alienated the more “moderate” establishment Republicans in favor of a more explicitly articulated bigoted takeover. The lack of a real response to this moment further enabled the rightward shift as a shaken liberal establishment only sought and attempted bipartisan negotiations with the more extreme elements commandeering the party. Instead of moving left, the Democratic Party pandered to the alienated “moderate” right as it had been for years, and facilitated this conservative shift with nearly every waking opportunity.

Bipartisan Delusions

Liberal support for the Iraq War, post-9/11 domestic policy and the foreign policy extensions of the War on Terror made clear the position of the Democratic Party. For “millennials” in particular, our generation has come of political age watching perpetual disappointments to this end. There has been no true left in the United States because the positioning of the Democratic Party is not one of stark opposition to the right. The messaging that suggests we should meet conservatives halfway and work on “both sides of the aisle” has comfortably consolidated a giant right-wing apparatus.

It seems fitting that at the end of the Obama era we would see a white supremacist Trump presidency, and that immediately following a Black president whose cabinet was outspoken about diversity and inclusion we would see a spike in right-wing hate group enrollment. And through the transition of administrations and the first wave of antagonistic legislation, there was neither sustained nor sustainable protection being planned by the party purporting to defend progress. That quiet has now manifested itself in a Trump administration filled to the brim with the worst of the worst: the absence of a real left has left so many vulnerable populations exposed and at the mercy of a plutocratic tyrant hell-bent on destruction.

After a spate of extrajudicial police killings, hate crimes and domestic terror incidents, the country is reeling. Black America has been reminded again and again that we are seen as a monolithic group of feeble-minded children to be chastised by the state for our own disenfranchisement and community disadvantage. If there is nothing to be offered that addresses the reparations Black America is owed on several fronts, then we should seek to secure these things ourselves through action.

Liberalism and Democratic Party politics are simply not working for Black people. The agenda of the liberal establishment is frequently not one that is in line with the everyday material needs of Black America. Despite the optics of change and the promises of a new day and the moral victories of “going high,” an old sun is rising on a white horizon. At this point Black people and all people of color across the United States will have to decide between securing real change and bargaining with bigotry for compromise.

Blackness and the Zone of Non-Citizenship

Societal fascism describes the process and political logics of state formation wherein entire populations are either excluded or ejected from the social contract. They are excluded pre-contractually because they have never been a part of a given social contract and never will be; or they are ejected from a contract they were previously a part of and are only able to enjoy a conditional inclusion at best.

Black Americans are the former: they are residents in a settler colony predicated upon the genocide of indigenous people and the enslavement of the Africans from whom they are descendants. Residents *in* the United States, as opposed to citizens *of*. Despite a Constitution laden with European Enlightenment values, and a document of independence declaring egalitarianism and inalienable rights as the law of the land, Black existence was that of private property. The Black American condition is perpetual relegation to the afterlife of slavery, and as long as the United States continues to exist as an ongoing settler project, in this afterlife Black people will remain.

As Hortense Spillers makes clear in her seminal work, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Story,” Blackness was indelibly marked and transformed through the Transatlantic chattel trade. European colonialism and the subsequent process of African enslavement — both as a profit-maximizing economic institution and an un-humaning institution — can be regarded as “high crimes against the *flesh*, as the person of African females and males registered the wounding.”

Crimes against the flesh are not simply crimes against the corporeal self: the wounded flesh, rather, was the personhood and social positionality of the African. The wounding is the process of blackening and necessarily of subjugation, a wound from which Black people and “Blackness” writ large have yet to recover. Black exclusion from the social contract is existence within a heavily surveilled and heavily regulated state of subjection. We are carriers of the coveted blue passport still trapped in the zone of citizen non-being. We are simultaneously subjugated and teased with promises of liberation via individualized neoliberal self-betterment and swallowing of a long-soured American Dream whilst choking back dissonances and forcibly reconciling irreconcilable double consciousnesses.

Whiteness has long sought to grapple with the existential threat posed by Black freedom. Black repatriation to Africa, or “colonization,” has long been floated as one potential solution. Founded in 1816 and driven by a variety of ultimately complementary motivations, the American Colonization Society helped to found the colony of Liberia in 1822. The abolitionist contingents within the society believed that because of the insurmountable discriminations free-born Black people and freedmen and their families experienced, Black people would fare far better organizing themselves in their African “homelands.”

Slaveholders within American society were concerned that the presence of free Blacks would inspire enslaved Blacks to revolt and thus compromise the stability (both economic stability and the stability of the anti-Black racial order) of the southern slaveocracy, and other openly racist members outright refused Black people the opportunity to integrate into American society. Others still were concerned that Black families would burden state welfare systems and that interracial labor competition would ultimately compromise wages for white workers.

A lesser known proponent of colonization was the “Great Emancipator” himself, Abraham Lincoln, who entertained a far lesser known and quickly abandoned plan for Black colonization in Panama — one decried by Frederick Douglass as “ridiculous” — which would also play a role in the expansion of American trade influence in the Caribbean. The “Back to Africa” project was subsequently taken up by Black thinkers like Marcus Garvey in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries following the failures of Reconstruction in the South, the first attempt to meaningfully extend citizenship to newly emancipated Blacks, to protect them from white supremacist violence and also the social and political disillusionment of Blacks who had migrated to northern states. It is no coincidence that interest in repatriation peaked during the period.

The major problem with both historical and contemporary repatriation-colonization programs is the means by which they fail to both provide reparation for historic violence and answer the perennial question of Black citizenship in the United States. Many or most Black people, including many descendants of enslaved Africans trafficked from the continent centuries ago, have no desire to return to an Africa that has never been their home in any material sense. Given plans to remain, Black people have organized in myriad ways to affect change and actualize varying conceptions of liberation in the United States. But as history has demonstrated, some vehicles for change and political advancement are more fickle than others.

The Anarchism of Blackness

Make no mistake: progress has been secured by Black people's mobilization as opposed to a single political party. We are the ones who have achieved much of the progress that changed the nation for the better for *everyone*. Those gains were not a product of any illusion of American exceptionalism or melting pots, but rather through blood, sweat and community self-defense. Our organization can be as effective now as it has been in the past, serving every locality and community based on their needs and determinations. This much can be achieved through disassociating ourselves from party politics that fail to serve us as Black freedoms cannot truly be secured in any given election. Our political energy is valuable and should not all be drained by political cycles that feed into one another as well as our own detriment.

While bound to the laws of the land, Black America can be understood as an extra-state entity because of Black exclusion from the liberal social contract. Due to this extra-state location, Blackness is, in so many ways, anarchistic. African-Americans, as an ethno-social identity comprised of descendants from enslaved Africans, have innovated new cultures and social organizations much like anarchism would require us to do outside of state structures. Black radical formations are themselves fundamentally anti-fascist despite functioning outside of "conventional" Antifa spaces, and Black people have engaged in anarchistic resistances since our very arrival in the Americas.

From slave ship and plantation rebellions during enslavement to post-Emancipation labor and prison camps, to Harriet Tubman's removal of enslaved peoples from the custody of their owners, to the creation of maroon societies in the American South, to combatting the historic (and present) collusion between state law enforcement and the Ku Klux Klan — assertions of Black personhood, humanity and liberation have necessarily called into question both the foundations and legitimacy of the American state.

So given this history, why do we understand Black political formations as squarely entrenched within liberalism or as almost synonymous with supporting for the Democratic Party? The reality of the afterlife of slavery shows that the updated terms of Black citizenship are still inextricably linked to the original sins levied against us from the moment of this nation's inception. We are not able to escape a cage that has never been fully removed, though liberal fantasy would have you think we will have a dream or dignifiedly protest out of harm's way.

The simple and increasingly realized reality is that mass protests, petitions and the over-exhausted respectable methods liberals tout as sole solutions have a purpose, but do not stop bullets — that is why Dr. King and many of their favorite sanitized "non-violent" protesters of yesteryear carried weapons to defend themselves.

Responding to this Neo-Fascist Moment

Liberalism cannot defeat fascism, it can only engage it through symbolic political rigmarole. The triteness of electoral politics that has been superimposed onto Black life in the United States positions Black people as an indelible mule for much of this nation's social progression. Our hyper-visible struggle is a fight for all people's freedom and we die only to realize that everything gained can be reversed with the quick flick of a pen. While liberalism takes up the burden

of protecting “free speech” and the rights of those who would annihilate all non-whites, Black people and other people of color assume all of the risks and harms.

The symbolic battles the Democratic Party and its liberal constituents engage in pose direct existential threats to Black people because they protect esteemed ideals of a constitution that has never guaranteed Black people safety or security. The idealistic gestures with which liberalism defines itself are made at the expense of Black people who are not protected by such ideals in the ways institutional whiteness and even articulations of white supremacy are protected.

Constitutional amendments are contorted based on the state’s historical disregard for sustaining an active antagonism towards Black life. The First Amendment has been repeatedly trampled by militarized police trotting through Black neighborhoods. The Second Amendment has been shot down by countless state enforcers who have extra-judicially murdered Black people based merely on the suspicion they *might* have a weapon. The Thirteenth Amendment legitimized enslavement through mass incarceration and extended the practice into a new form of white supremacist rationalization and an old capitalist labor politic that still tortures us to this day. This fascist moment is neither ideologically new nor temporally surprising. It is an inevitability.

Anti-fascist organizing must be bold. The mechanisms working against us do not entertain our humanity: they are hyper-violent. They deal death and destruction in countless numbers across the non-Western world while turning domestic Black and Brown neighborhoods into proxies for how to treat sub-citizen “others.” The militarization of police, border regimes, stop-and-frisk and ICE are clear examples of how the state regards the communities it targets and brutalizes. At the very least, a conversation on self-defense that does not mistreat our survival as a form of violence is deeply needed. And it would be even better if such a conversation normalized anti-fascist organizing that prepared people for the possibility of a fight, instead of simply hoping that that day never comes and respectably clutching proverbial pearls at those currently fighting in the streets.

Everyone has a stake in the fight against fascism. It cannot be defeated with bargaining, petitioning, pleading, “civilized” dialogue, or any other mode of response we were taught was best. Fascists have no respect for “othered” humanities. Regardless of age, gender, race, sexuality, religion, physical ability or nationality, there is a place for all of us in this struggle. We are always fighting against the odds because there is no respite in a perpetually abusive state. It can only function through this abuse, so we can only prevail through organizing grounded in radical love and solidarity.

Our solidarity must prioritize accountability, and it must be authentic. Strategic organizing of this sort, organizing where we understand the inextricable linkedness of our respective struggles, is our means of bolstering the makings of a cohesive left in the United States. The time wasted on dogma and sectarianism, prejudice and incoherence among leftists is over.

The sooner Black America in particular begins to understand our position as an inherently anarchistic element of the United States, the more realistically we will be able to organize. Moving beyond the misnomer of chaos, the elements that make us such are the very tools we should utilize to achieve our liberation. This burning house cannot be reformed to appropriately include us, nor should we want to share a painful death perishing in the flames. A better society has to be written through our inalienable self-determinations, and that will only happen when we realize we are holding the pen.

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