

Black Anarchism

Book Review

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A number of books have recently been published exploring the relevance of anarchist ideas to Black struggles, including *As Black as Resistance*, *Anarcho-Blackness* and the books under review here.

William Anderson's *The Nation on No Map* is an often-poetic text, drawing on a wide range of Black thinkers and activists that starts from the notion that everywhere Black people remain stateless and unfree. But he is also critical of an anarchist movement he sees as locked into reactive cycles, lacking a creative vision capable of transforming our world.

Ervin's *Anarchism and the Black Revolution* has gone through a few editions over four decades, each of which added new material. It would benefit from a brief discussion of these changes—his introduction does discuss the history of the various editions, but not how the text (and his ideas) have evolved. Tighter editing also would have helped. Leaving aside a few references to the "International" Workers of the World (rendered correctly elsewhere), at one point he says that there were no Black anarchists in the 1960s and 1970s—clearly a bit of hyperbole, as he is otherwise quite clear about Martin Sostre's role in introducing him to the anarchist tradition. But there were others as well. ASR recently published an article about Juanita Nelson, one of several Black anarchist pacifists active in organizations such as Peacemakers. Anarchists were also active in the civil rights movement and struggles against police brutality. But Ervin's broader point that the movement had become (and remains) too white, and too divorced from class struggle, is certainly correct.

Ervin's introduction offers a sharp critique of the limits of the Black Lives Movement, and a leadership he sees as more concerned with cozying up to power than with "dismantling racial capitalism."

"Some activists propose an alternative to Black Lives Matter: community control of the police. But I say lipstick on a pig shows us reformism will not win and won't stop police murder of Black people." (21)

The long history of failed efforts to reform the police suggests that even defunding is not enough. Instead, we need Black anti-fascism.

Both books point to the persistence of racism and oppression even in the "socialist bloc" countries, and the need to dismantle the nation-state and to bring an end to exploitation and oppression. Ervin discusses mutual aid and solidarity economies as a transitional strategy as

communities build toward an anarcho-communist future where people democratically determine their own needs and make the arrangements to satisfy them.

Anderson suggests creating liberated zones or communes, an idea with a long lineage in the Black revolutionary tradition:

”The important thing is rejecting the everyday realities of capitalism in our day-to-day lives. This is something Black people are forced to do by the intentional neglect inflicted upon us by the state...Our experience tells us the commune must be stateless.” (112-13)

The state is intrinsically white supremacist, Anderson notes, pointing to the state’s historic role not only in the U.S. but also through the permanent state of war the state has imposed everywhere under its dominion.

Anderson is sharply critical of those who look to a romanticized, mythic past of African royalty or embrace their own toxic nationalism: ”We have to overcome the lies that nations and states are necessary and that borders and citizenship serve Black people seeking liberation.” (173) But he also warns that mutual aid and even horizontalist organizing can be co-opted. Ultimately, we must overthrow capitalism and the state.

”The U.S. state isn’t killing us simply because it’s white supremacist: killing is part of the power granted to states, it’s what states do. It’s what they are built for...We must not remain trapped on this map; we must try to draw new lines to sketch out a life for ourselves that their borders, their states, and their map cannot hold. Our task is to shape a new society, a world we want to live in.” (184-85)

Ervin offers more specifics, including building inner city communes to build dual power and a culture of revolutionary solidarity, mutual aid projects to ensure economic survival, organizing Black workers into unions and rank-and-file caucuses, confronting the twin epidemics of drugs and prisons, and organized self-defense units. Ervin calls for an autonomous movement of peoples of color, based on federalism, internationalism and mutual aid. We must become ungovernable, he concludes, but in pursuit of liberation.

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