

# **Looking to the Light of Freedom**

**Lessons from the Civil Rights Movement and Thoughts on Anarchist  
Organizing**

Chris Crass

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When thinking about organizing, about the possibilities for movement building, about the potential of challenging injustice and fundamentally altering the relationships of power in this society – my mind turns to the Civil Rights movement of the 1950’s and 60’s. More specifically, my attention focuses in on Ella Baker and the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee who initiated some of the most exciting work that I’ve ever come across. Today, when I read and hear so many debates, dialogues, and discussions about movement building and “Where do we go from here?”, I again look to the insights and inspiration of Ms. Baker and SNCC.

The Black liberation struggle and movements for Civil Rights have shaped the history of the United States. From slave revolts to Ida B. Wells international anti-lynching campaign, to the 50,000 women in the National Association of Colored Women at the beginning of the century, to the struggle today against the prison industrial complex: these legacies of resistance are at the heart of liberation struggles in this country. For white organizers, it is key to study these legacies from the understanding that when people of color oppose racism they are also re-affirming their humanity. In a social order built on white supremacy, people of color organizing for justice and dignity challenges the very foundation of this society. This is why struggles against racism have repeatedly been catalysts for revolutionary social change. The challenge for me, as a white organizer, is to apply the insights and inspiration from these legacies to the work that I’m currently engaged in. The mass actions against global capitalism in the last two years have heavily influenced the local work that I’m involved with.

The mass mobilizations in North America opposing corporate power and global capitalism – including Seattle, Washington DC, Los Angeles, Philadelphia, and in Quebec – have opened up important conversations about strategy, about racism in white progressive movements and the goals of organizing. While these mass actions are connected to a history of resistance over 500 years old, they have served this generation, particularly white activists, as a catalyst for both organizing and reflection on that organizing. In particular, they have created openings for broader movement debate and dialogue. Writings by radicals of color critiquing the whiteness of these actions and the ways in which racism operates within social change movements have presented clear challenges to white radicals working for social change. These challenges and the issues that they bring up are opportunities for growth and learning that white radicals have a responsibility to take seriously and engage with. The questions, possibilities and challenges coming out of the mass mobilizations become concrete when they are connected to the day-today work that makes the mass actions possible.

The critique developed by Elizabeth Betita Martinez in her essay, “Where was the Color in Seattle?” needs to be examined for what lessons it has for organizers involved with Food Not Bombs and anti-poverty organizing, Earth First! and environmental action, union organizing and economic justice, alternative media like micro powered radio, Independent Media Centers and activist ‘zines everywhere, working for immigrant rights and housing, teaching in public schools and free skools, running community gardening and radical art programs, Reclaiming the Streets, working to dismantle the prison industrial complex and support political prisoners, and so on. When the critical analysis and lessons developed out of the mass mobilizations are applied to the local work that we, as white radicals are doing, then new possibilities and potential is found.

While there are numerous challenges and complex questions to be struggling with, the goal of this essay is to look at issues of organizing, power and leadership in relationship to anarchist practice. Anarchism as a political theory and organizing strategy has been overwhelmingly white

and therefore influenced and shaped by white privilege. White privilege is the flipside of racial oppression and each must be challenged in the struggle against white supremacy. Additionally, the voices dominating anarchist movement for well over 100 years have been male and this too has shaped much of anarchist thought and action.

This essay argues that anarchists need to follow the advice of Pauline Hwang, an organizer with Colours of Resistance, who writes, “Organize from the bottom up, and follow the lead of women and people of colour who are organizing at the grassroots level.” With that in mind, there are three immediate challenges which present themselves to white activists generally and white anarchists in particular: understanding and dismantling privilege and oppression based on race, class and gender; critically examining our understandings of power; and rethinking our conception of leadership. With those challenges before us, let us now look to some of the most dynamic organizers of the twentieth century for both insights and inspiration in doing this work.

## **Ella Baker, Community Organizing and Participatory Democracy**

Ella Baker, who was born in North Carolina in 1905, was politicized and radicalized by the poverty of the Great Depression. She participated in self-help programs throughout the 30s and developed an understanding and respect for the process by which people take control over their own lives while also protesting injustices.

In the late 1930s, Baker became a field organizer for the NAACP. She would travel throughout the South and lecture, network and organize with any one person or group of people she could find. She would stay with local branches and help organize membership drives. She would assist local groups that were having either internal or external problems. However, her overall goal of organizing was to bring the NAACP to the grassroots. As an organizer, Baker believed very strongly in the abilities and the knowledge of local people to address their own issues. She believed that the national organization should serve as a system of support to offer assistance and resources to local campaigns and projects. She believed that organizations needed to serve the grassroots that made the organization strong.

In the early 1940’s she became the assistant field secretary for the NAACP and by 1943, she was named the national director of branches. Baker describes her years of organizing with the NAACP and what she tried to accomplish as follows: “My basic sense of it has always been to get people to understand that in the long run, they themselves are the only protection they have against violence and injustice. If they only had ten members in the NAACP at any given point, those ten members could be in touch with twenty-five members in the next little town, with fifty in the next and throughout the state as a result of the organization of state conferences and they, or course, could be linked up with the national. People have to be made to understand that they cannot look for salvation anywhere but themselves”.

Baker’s organizational style actively worked to keep people informed and empowered, with the goal of people organizing themselves. Baker argued that strong people do not need a strong leader; rather they need an organization that can provide mutual aid and solidarity. Those views on organizing were very different then those of the national NAACP. In fact, Baker became critical of the national NAACP’s failure to support the development of self-sufficient local groups, as it failed to help “local leaders develop their own leadership potential”. In response to the un-

supportive stance of the national NAACP, Baker began organizing regional gatherings to bring people together and help develop local leadership and organizing skills.

Baker worked to organize and support regional gatherings to both develop people's skills and build communities of support and resistance. This is an example of Baker's commitment to bottom up organizing that values the work of developing relationships between people and building trust, respect and power on a grassroots level. She believed in participatory democracy, not just in theory or on paper, but in the messy and complex world of practice: where mistakes are made, decision-making is tough, and the process of growth is slow.

In her essay, "Ella Baker and the Origins of 'Participatory Democracy'", Carol Mueller breaks down Ella's conception of participatory democracy into three parts: (1) an appeal for grassroots involvement of people throughout society in the decisions that control their lives; (2) the minimization of hierarchy and the associated emphasis on expertise and professionalism as a basis for leadership; and (3) a call for direct action as an answer to fear, alienation and intellectual detachment.

The call for direct action was one of Baker's main strategies for creating meaningful social change. She argued that it is the people themselves who create change; that not only does direct action challenge injustice in society, but that ultimately individuals confront the oppression in their own heads and begin the process of self-transformation and self-actualization.

She also believed that as people organize, they will learn from their mistakes and successes and become stronger people in the process: people who believe in themselves and feel a sense of their own power to affect the world around them and make history. If there was a shortage of food due to economic injustice, she would help people to provide food for themselves but she would also help organize folks to protest the economic conditions that deny people food. If the school system isn't providing a satisfactory education, then the community must come together to demand changes and to also provide alternative ways of learning (i.e. after school programs, study groups, tutoring programs, free schools, homeschooling, etc.). For Baker, direct action was about achieving immediate goals, but it was also deeply connected to developing a sense of power in the people involved. It is this sense of power that would change people far beyond winning the immediate goals and help build a sustainable movement with long-term commitment and vision. It would also hopefully impact people's perceptions of themselves in relationship to the world and open up greater possibilities for happiness and satisfaction.

Ms. Baker had an innovative understanding of leadership, an idea which she thought of in multiple ways: as facilitator, creating processes and methods for others to express themselves and make decisions; as coordinator, creating events, situations and dynamics that build and strengthen collective efforts; and as teacher/educator, working with others to develop their own sense of power, capacity to organize and analyze, visions of liberation and ability to act in the world for justice. Ella believed that good leadership created opportunities for others to realize and expand their own talents, skills and potential to be leaders themselves. This did not mean that she didn't challenge people or struggle with people over political questions and strategies. Rather, this meant that she struggled with people over these questions to help develop principled and strategic leadership capable of organizing for social transformation.

Baker described good leadership as group-centered leadership. Group-centered leadership means that leaders form in groups and are committed to building collective power and struggling for collective goals. This is different than leader-centered groups, in which the group is dedicated to the goals and power of that leader.

Baker's commitment to participatory democracy led her to resign as the national director of branches of the NAACP in 1946. She moved to New York to care for her niece and became the local branch director and immediately began the process of taking the organization to the grassroots; out of the offices and into the streets.

After the 1954 *Brown vs. Board of Education* verdict declared segregation in public schools unconstitutional, Baker and the local branch started campaigning against segregation in the New York school system. Additionally, after the court decision, Baker and several other organizers formed the group *In Friendship*, which provided financial assistance to local leaders in the South who were suffering reprisals for their organizing. *In Friendship* believed that the time had come for a mass mobilization against the legally sanctioned racial apartheid of Jim Crow society in the South. When the Montgomery Bus Boycott campaign generated local mass participation, national support and international media, *In Friendship* thought they might have found the spark that they were looking for. The group established contact with the Montgomery Improvement Association who was leading the campaign and began taking notes as well as offering support and advice.

Once the campaign came to an end in 1956, with a major victory against segregation on the city buses, *In Friendship* put forward a proposal to the local leadership of Martin Luther King, Jr. and others. Ella Baker, Bayard Rustin and Stanley Levinson approached Dr. King with the idea of an organizational structure to help network and build a Southern movement against segregation. They believed that Montgomery had shown that "the center of gravity had shifted from the courts to community action" and that now was the time to strike. In 1957, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference was founded. The SCLC was intended to be a network of local leaders and communities coordinating their actions and providing assistance to one another. The SCLC was also formed around the strategy of getting more clergy members to involve themselves and their church communities in the Civil Rights struggle. SCLC started with sixty-five affiliates throughout the South. The leader of the SCLC was Martin Luther King, Jr., but it was Ella Baker who opened and ran the group's office in Atlanta, and she used her connections throughout the South to lay the groundwork for the organization. The two principal strategies of SCLC, laid out at the group's founding conference, were building voter power in the Black community and mass direct action against segregation. Baker spent two and a half years as the acting executive director of SCLC. She ran the Atlanta office and traveled throughout the South building support for the organization. The first project was the *Crusade for Citizenship*, which aimed at doubling the number of Black votes in the South within a year. With hardly any resources and little support from the other leaders of SCLC, over thirteen thousand people came together in over 22 cities to plan and initiate the campaign.

During her two and half years of organizing with SCLC, her relationship with the leadership began to wane. While Ella continued her work building a bottom up, grassroots powered organization, others in SCLC consolidated their adherence to the strategy of the charismatic leader-centered group style that formed around King. In addition to this, she was never officially made the executive director during her tenure as 'acting' executive director. Baker said that she was never made official because she was neither a minister nor a man. The failure to recognize and respect women's leadership was a major weakness in the SCLC and in other formations of the Civil Rights movement.

## **Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee and the Organizing Tradition**

In 1960, a massive resurgence of Civil Rights activism and direct action took place amongst students who initiated the sit-in movement, which swept through the South like wildfire. Thousands of students participated in desegregation actions in which Black and some white students would sit at segregated lunch counters requesting to be served and refusing to leave. The sit-ins were dramatic; they brought the tensions of racial apartheid to the surface and often ended with white violence against the sit-in protesters. The sit-in movement erupted out of previously existing autonomous groups and/or networks that had been forming. They were largely uncoordinated beyond the local level and there were no visible public leaders – it was a self-organized movement. Within a year and a half sit-ins had taken place in over one hundred cities in twenty states and involved an estimated seventy thousand demonstrators with three thousand six hundred arrests. Ella Baker immediately realized the potential of this newly developing student movement and went to work organizing a conference to be held in Raleigh, North Carolina in April of 1960.

The conference brought together student activists and organizers from around the South who had participated in the sit-in movement. There were two hundred delegates out of which one hundred twenty were student activists representing fifty-six colleges and high schools from twelve Southern states and the District of Columbia. As the conference was organized by Baker and she was the acting executive director of SCLC, the leadership of SCLC hoped that the students would become a youth wing of the adult organization. However, Baker, who delivered one of the key-note speeches at the conference, urged the students to remain autonomous, form their own organization and set their own goals that would reflect their militancy and passion for social change.

The Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee was born out of the Raleigh conference. SNCC (pronounced Snick) was run by the students themselves along with two adult advisors: Ella Baker and Howard Zinn. It would become one of the most important organizations of the 60s. They played a major role in the Freedom Rides, another direct action tactic that dramatically protested segregation. It's organizers started the "jail no bail" strategy of filling the jails and refusing to pay bail until segregation was ended. SNCC also played a principle role in Freedom Summer in Mississippi. That campaign followed their strategy of grassroots community organizing that took them into some of the most formidable areas of the South.

Ella Baker has been referred to as both the mid-wife who helped deliver SNCC and the founder who helped articulate the base principles from which the group developed. For instance, SNCC was committed to group-centered leadership, to mass direct action, to organizing in the tradition of developing people's capacity to work on their own behalf, and to community building that was participatory and involved local people in decision-making with the goal of developing local leaders. In looking to the lessons of Ella Baker's organizing strategies, it is useful to look at SNCC to see how these concepts were experimented with and applied. From the examples of SNCC, we can draw both insights and inspiration for the work that we are doing today.

Charles Payne writes in his book, *I've Got the Light of Freedom*: "SNCC may have the firmest claim to being called the birthing organization [as in inspiring and helping shape other organizations]. SNCC initiated the mass-based, disruptive political style we associate with the sixties, and it provided philosophical and organizational models and hands-on training for people who

would become leaders in the student power movement, anti-war movement, and the feminist movement. SNCC forced the civil rights movement to enter the most dangerous areas of the South. It pioneered the idea of young people 'dropping out' for a year or two to work for social change. It pushed the proposition that merely bettering the living conditions of the oppressed was insufficient; that has to be done in conjunction with giving those people a voice in the decisions that shape their lives. As SNCC learned to see beyond the lunch counter, the increasingly radical philosophies that emerged within the organization directly and indirectly encouraged a generation of scholars and activists to reconsider the ways that social inequality is generated and sustained."

One model of organizing in SNCC was the Freedom School used in Mississippi. The Freedom Schools prioritized political education informed by daily reality to connect day-to-day experiences with an institutional analysis. The Freedom Schools focused on building leadership and training organizers. SNCC envisioned the schools to operate as "parallel institutions" or what many anarchists refer to today as "counter-institutions". Charlie Cobb, who first proposed the creation of the Freedom Schools said that the schools were to be "an educational experience for students which will make it possible for them to challenge the myths of our society, to perceive more clearly its realities and to find alternatives and ultimately, new directions for action". Curriculum at the schools ranged from "Introducing the Power Structure", to critiques of materialism in "Material Things and Soul Things". There were classes on non-violence and direct action as well as classes on economics and how the power structure manipulates the fears of poor whites. The lessons learned from the Freedom Schools can help us to envision programs that educate as well as train people to take action.

Ella Baker devoted her time, energy and wisdom to SNCC, which came to embody those principles of participatory democracy and grassroots community organizing that she had helped to develop throughout her lifetime as a radical organizer. Both Baker and SNCC struggled to create collective leadership, to engage in activism that empowered others to become active, to generate change from the bottom up and to experiment with expanding democratic decision making into everyday life.

The history and experiences of SNCC offer much to organizers today, in terms of how we go about our work and how we envision our goals. One organizer from SNCC, Bob Zellner, described being an organizer as similar to a juggling act, "Organizers had to be morale boosters, teachers, welfare agents, transportation coordinators, canvassers, public speakers, negotiators, lawyers, all while communicating with people who range from illiterate sharecroppers to well-off professionals and while enduring harassment from agents of the law and listening with one ear for threats of violence. Exciting days and major victories are rare". Ella Baker described community organizing as 'spade work', as in the hard work gardening when you prepare the soil for seeds for the next season. It is hard work, but it is what makes it possible for the garden to grow.

Charles Payne warns us repeatedly to look at the everyday work that builds movements and creates social change and to draw from those experiences in order to learn the lessons for our work today. He writes, "Overemphasizing the movement's more dramatic features, we undervalue the patient and sustained effort, the slow, respectful work, that made the dramatic moments possible".

From here, he develops an analysis of how sexism operates in organizing efforts. He explores why it is that in most histories of social movements, the profound impact of women is rarely mentioned. In the Civil Rights movements it was women and young people who were the backbone

of the struggle. On this Payne writes, “We know beyond dispute that women were frequently the dominant force in the movement. Their historical invisibility is perhaps the most compelling example of the way our shared images of the movement distort and confuse the historical reality. There is a parallel with the way in which we typically fail to see women’s work in other spheres. Arlene Daniels, among others, has noted that what we socially define as ‘work’ are those activities that are public rather than private and those activities for which we get paid. In the same way, the tendency in the popular imagination and in much scholarship has been to reduce the movement to stirring speeches – given by men – and dramatic demonstrations – led by men. The everyday maintenance of the movement, women’s work, overwhelmingly, is effectively devalued, sinking beneath the level of our sight”.

As organizers today, it is crucial that we look at our own work and consider what activities we place value on. How do we treat the people making the grand speeches and leading the rallies? And how do we treat the people making the phone calls, facilitating the meetings, distributing the flyers, raising money, taking time out to listen to the troubles of other organizers, coordinating child-care, cooking all day, patiently answering dozens of questions from new volunteers or potential supporters, or working really hard to make other people in the group or project feel listened to, respected, heard, valued and supported?

Whose names do we remember and whose work do we praise? As organizers we are not just putting together actions; we are helping to build community, helping to build supportive and loving relationships between people, helping to sustain and nourish alternative values of cooperation and liberation in this fiercely competitive and individualistic society.

This was the strength of Ella Baker’s work, a strength that I think we can learn enormously from: her attention to group development. Ella Baker stressed the need to not only politicize and mobilize people, but to consciously develop people’s capacities to be organizers and leaders in the long haul struggle for a better world. While “each one teach one” strategies and training people in the skills of organizing don’t grab headlines in the media, it is this work that builds movement and develops a community of empowerment, solidarity and support that we need in order to transform society. Ella Baker’s legacy is one that both inspires and informs our day-to-day efforts. The challenge before us is to make sense of her legacy in relationship to our work today.

## **resisting Privilege, re-defining Power and re-thinking Leadership**

At the beginning of this essay I mentioned three immediate challenges which present themselves to white activists generally and white anarchists in particular and they were: understanding and dismantling privilege and oppression based on race, class and gender; critically examining our understandings of power; and rethinking our conception of leadership. As a white anarchist, I want to embrace the complexity of these issues, to acknowledge that there are no clear answers, but rather good questions that can challenge us to go further, to break out of what is comfortable and static so that we can open up new possibilities.

First, the challenge of understanding and dismantling privilege and oppression based on race, class and gender. When talking about privilege and how it relates to one’s life, it is important to stay focused on the goal of such reflection. It isn’t about guilt or confessing to one’s sins. Rather, it is about placing oneself in the matrix of domination that shapes our society. Recognizing

the complex nature of where one is placed allows for sharper insights into how your position influences you and how you can take part in dismantling the structures of domination altogether. It is also important to recognize how one's place in society shifts and takes on new meaning in different situations, which pushes us to be more and more aware of these dynamics.

For example, white privilege impacts the ways that white radicals conceive of politics and organizing. I've been socialized most of my life to speak my mind, to take my opinions and thoughts seriously. Teachers, parents and adults have looked at kids like me as the "future of this country". Pictures of people who looked like me (white, male and 'assuredly' heterosexual) filled the history books, were the important people on the walls and were celebrated as the smartest and brightest of those who have ever lived. Much of my initial politics was based on rejecting this middle class culture, rejecting this role of being among the "future leaders of this great country". I had the material privilege to do this comfortably, in terms of money and my parents house. I say all of this, not because I feel the need to express some sort of guilt, but rather to place myself in both history and society. In this way, I can analyze how my privilege, my location in the matrix, impacts my view of the world, my understanding of myself and my conception of organizing, resistance and liberation.

My anarchist politics were firmly rooted in a politics of rejection, a refusal to participate in a society based on exploitation, oppression and massive destruction of the environment, animals and people. My politics were summed up by saying, "Fuck all authority". Anarchism is indeed a much more complex body of theory and practice, but this anti-power politic, largely based on rejection, has been a strong undercurrent in anarchist thought – certainly in mine. Much of anarchist thought on issues of power, leadership and organization has been informed by both a brilliant critique of how power operates and of white privilege. One of the most important contributions of anarchist politics has been the analysis of power inequalities and the visions of egalitarian social relationships. One of the biggest shortcomings of anarchism has been, How do we get from here to there? White privilege has been one of the major barriers for anarchists struggling with this question.

The understanding of both power and leadership held by most anarchists has maintained inequalities both within anarchist circles and in our relationships with others. In our rejection of both power and leadership, we frequently work in or create organizations that are breeding grounds for informal hierarchies often defined by race, class and gender. We have frequently also argued for a complete rejection of organization altogether, advocating for spontaneous revolt, which again breeds informal hierarchies with no means of challenging this behavior. Given this situation, anarchism is one of the most white, often male dominated political movements in the United States today. Admitting the realities of white supremacy, patriarchy and heterosexism, I am not trying to isolate the anarchist movement, but rather to argue that we need to examine where we are at if we are to seriously think about where we want to go. As a movement we also need to look to the writings and organizing of anarchists of color, women and queer anarchists for thoughts and leadership about what direction we are already going in and should be going in.

One of the most significant aspects of anarchism is the argument that the ends do not justify the means of organizing. This has generally been thought of in terms of the tactics and organizational structure one uses. While there is a strong tendency in anarchism to lay out a very simplistic, dualistic framework of good/bad, right/wrong to think about these issues, there is also a large body of theory and practice coming overwhelming from anarchists and anti-authoritarians

who are women, people of color and/or queer. The multiple roles of the state, the ways that power operates, processes for empowerment and self-determination, what group development and collective action looks like and how this informs our organizing are all issues being developed. This is not to say that everything a radical of color or white queer says is brilliant, useful or right, or that nothing a white, hetero, male says is of value. Rather, I'm saying that the voices marginalized in larger society are often marginalized in radical movements and that anarchists who champion egalitarianism have a responsibility to do much better than this. Furthermore, marginalized voices are often the most radical and realistic about social change.

Defining anarchism as being in opposition to not only capitalism and the state, but also to white supremacy, patriarchy and heterosexism is a move in this direction.. The next step would be to figure out exactly what that shift in thinking means for the ways that we view and act in the world.

How anarchists talk about power is a big issue. For example, the anarchist punk band Crass put forward a slogan that has been widely used and highly popular, "Destroy Power, Not People". The Black Panther Party put forward a slogan that has also been widely used and highly popular, "All Power to the People". It is not inconsequential that the band Crass was all white people. While both of these slogans utilize the word 'Power', are they both using the word to mean the same thing? Crass talked about oppressive power: the power of the state to go to war, the power of capitalism to devastate the planet and exploit people. The Black Panther Party talked about power in terms of self-determination. The first demand of the Black Panthers 10 point Party platform was, "1. We want freedom. We want power to determine the destiny of our Black community. We believe that Black people will not be free until we are able to determine our destiny." The Black Panthers, Ella Baker, SNCC and many, many others (including many anarchists), have argued that the people are the source of power and that we must organize to build collective power to dismantle oppressive power. It is also useful to distinguish between power over others and power with others.

While this may sound like a debate over semantics, it is actually a debate about the ways that anarchists think about the world and the ways that we act in the world. It is also about the ways that white privilege and male privilege have influenced anarchist politics – to speak of anti-power rather than building power. This goes deep. Look at, for instance, white anarchist men who say that there are no 'power dynamics' within their organizations because no one has or wants power. Or worse still, look at white anarchist men who say that there are no power dynamics because they don't believe in organization anyway and everyone should just 'act'. These ideas must be challenged, as they fail to see the complex reality of race, class and gender, or how power and privilege operate on multiple levels. This must be challenged because while white anarchist men might reject power and denounce privilege in theory, we all still live in a society that grants and denies power and privilege on the basis of race, class and gender. This is why white male anarchists repeatedly say things like, "if women aren't being heard, they should just speak up", or "I'm not the leader, I'm just always doing everything because no one else knows how" (I can't even begin to count how many times I've said something like this over the years).

Helen Luu, an organizer with Colours of Resistance, frames the issue of white privilege as following, "Genuine anti-racist work involves building alliances and working in solidarity with people of colour; it means understanding the ways that unequal power relations manifests itself in all settings (including activist ones) and how it works to oppress some while privileging others; it means looking to people of colour as leaders, and not as mere tokens in order to prove how

‘anti-racist’ your group is (“We’re not racist! Look, we have two Asians in our group!”). It means a whole lot more too, but above all, it means being dedicated to proactively and consciously working to bring down the structure of white supremacy and privilege.”

## **Towards a theory and practice of anti-authoritarian leadership**

In her ground-breaking book, *Black Feminist Thought*, Patricia Hill Collins writes, “Black women have not conceptualized our quest for empowerment as one of replacing elite white male authorities with ourselves as benevolent Black female ones. Instead, African American women have overtly rejected theories of power based on domination in order to embrace an alternative vision of power based on a humanist vision of self-actualization, self-definition, and self-determination.” This understanding of power, in conjunction with a critical analysis of how oppressive power operates is a solid foundation for our work.

Organizing is about building collective power. In the process of building collective power it is also about developing the power that each of us has to act and engage with the world. The ways that anarchists conceptualize issues of power and politics plays out in the ways that we conceptualize organizing.

Ella Baker talked about and worked from a model of group leadership, of developing the capacities of each person to be a leader to participate in the shaping and making of decisions. She also paid great attention to developing the capacities of people to be organizers, to create a movement based on participation and empowerment. Traditionally, the idea of leadership is based on one person making all of the decisions in an authoritarian manner; a model in which people follow others, often times blindly. Anarchists have been rightfully critical of this model, but our thinking needs to be more complex than this. Furthermore, anarchists are not alone in thinking about these issues. Ella Baker and SNCC, among many others historically, present an approach to organizing concretely struggles with the question of getting from here to there.

Baker’s model of organizing and leadership is firmly rooted in a politics of empowerment. She believed that a movement fighting for social transformation must also be transforming the individuals involved. She believed that people grew and developed through collective work to challenge oppression. She wasn’t just talking about the ways that people see the world, but also the place they see themselves in the world; from being acted upon by forces of oppression, to acting in the world for social justice. This shift involves learning politics and skills, but also a sense of self and being prepared to act. A leader or organizer in the spirit of Ella Baker is one who actively encourages other people’s participation, who works with others to develop skills, confidence, analysis and ability to take action for the long haul. Leadership in the spirit of Ella Baker and SNCC means not prioritizing the ends over the means, because the means lead you to the ends. While they were not anarchists, the theory and practice they developed for egalitarian organizing was far more sophisticated than what most anarchists are working with.

The challenge also for a mostly white movement, is how to bring people together to not only fight against oppression, but to also dismantle their privileges. This is a major reason why we need to develop understandings of organizing and leadership. How do we support and encourage self-organization, while also being committed to dismantling white supremacy, patriarchy, heterosexism, capitalism and the state? As a mostly white movement, that means we are mostly speaking to white people, and when white people have spontaneously demonstrated their rage

it has usually been directed at communities of color ( from lynchings, to rape, to burning down whole towns, to voting overwhelmingly against immigrant rights and affirmative action). White radicals have a responsibility to play leadership roles in challenging white supremacy in white society.

A theory and practice of anti-authoritarian leadership is a subject full of contradictions, tensions, questions, discomforts, confusion, and uncertainties and that's what I like about it. Being honest about contradictions opens up possibilities for understanding, where denial does not. Furthermore, tensions can be a creative force to develop something new, something uncharted, as oppose to strict guidelines that contain and restrict. By tensions I mean looking at what exists between the binary or dualistic frameworks; the gray areas, the both/and rather than the either/or, where one is multiple. For example, the tension is what exists in the middle, if on one side you had leader and the other side was follower. What exists between these two concepts? What does it mean to be, all at once, a follower, a leader, an individual, a participant in a collective process, someone who is privileged on the basis of race, but oppressed on the basis of gender, someone who has experience and wisdom to share with the group, and also wants to encourage broad participation in discussions, to know that at all times one can be both oppositional to and complicit with oppression? When all of these different positions and ideas are recognized, rather than denied, then something more creative and dynamic can be developed. I am not wedded to the word leadership, rather I am interested in struggling with the tools and concepts of leadership in relationship to being an anarchist. Anarchists need more tools, more concepts to use in our day-to-day work. In looking for insights and inspiration on organizing that priorities egalitarian practices, I have looked to liberation struggles from communities of color. Many of these struggles are lead by women of color, who are producing many of the most radical and hopeful strategies for social transformation out there.

With that in mind, we should heed the advice of anarchist organizer, Gabriel Sayegh. Sayegh writes in his essay, "Redefining Success: White Contradictions in the Anti-Globalization Movement", "We [white activists] must become active, effective listeners if we are serious about being part of a movement. We must be willing to challenge our selves- our behaviors, actions, and thinking- as much as we are willing to challenge the global institutions of capitalism. This is a difficult task indeed. We can find direction by examining what radical people of color have been doing for centuries-organizing a movement for liberation."

We must be willing to struggle over these complex and difficult questions of theory and practice, but we must do so as we engage in our day-to-day work to transform ourselves in the process of transforming this society. Facing the complexity of reality is one of the most radical acts we can take.

## **Recommended reading on the Civil Rights movement and organizing:**

- Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment by Patricia Hill Collins. Routledge,1990.
- I've Got the Light of Freedom: the Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle by Charles M. Payne. University of California Press, 1995.

- *When and Where I Enter: the Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in America* by Paula Giddings. Quill, 1984.
- *Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference* by David J. Garrow. Vintage, 1988.
- *Women in the Civil Rights Movement: Trailblazers and Torchbearers 1941–1965* edited by Vicki L. Crawford, Jacqueline Anne Rouse, and Barbara Woods.

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Chris Crass  
Looking to the Light of Freedom  
Lessons from the Civil Rights Movement and Thoughts on Anarchist Organizing  
2013

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