

Black Panther Radical Factionalization and the Development of Black Anarchism

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Abstract

Racial justice social movements often fragment when their goals do not seem completely achievable. Former participants in the radical Black freedom struggles of the 1960s and 1970s, most of whom were Black Panther Party (BPP) members (and also participants in the Black Liberation Army) and identified with Marxist-Leninism, became disaffected with the hierarchical character of the Black Panthers and came to identify with anarchism. Through the lens of radical factionalization theories, Black anarchism is seen as a radical outgrowth of the Black freedom struggle. Black anarchists were the first to notably prioritize a race analysis in American anarchism. This tendency has a number of contemporary manifestations for anarchism, including Anarchist People of Color caucuses within the movement, and, more indirectly, the many anarchist strategies and organizations that share similarities with the BPP, prior to its centralization.

Introduction

The Black freedom movement evolved in a variety of directions, but why did some former activists continue to radicalize as they witnessed movement failure? I focus on some of these activists who converged upon anarchist positions, only to discover that American anarchism was a largely White movement. Racial minorities critiqued what they perceived as a White majority anarchist movement. Black anarchism did not originate within anarchism, but external to it, from the Black power movement—where Marxist-Leninism was the most influential political ideology—whereafter activists blended anarchist positions with their revolutionary nationalism. Black anarchism may be seen as a third-order variation of Black American movements for social change. They rejected both the liberal assimilationism of the mainstream civil rights movement and the radical Black power response to civil rights manifested in the Marxist-Leninist Black Panthers.

In order to understand these transformations, this article utilizes theories of radical organizational factionalization. First, the racial composition of American anarchism (into which Black anarchism grew) and the extent of its Whiteness is described. Then, the article describes anarchism's pre-1960s' views of race and explores the participation of people of color, emphasizing how race was more consciously synthesized with anarchist thought *after* this period. Crucial to this history are the experiences of the Black Panther Party (BPP), the Black Liberation Army (BLA), and a variety of activists associated with these organizations and the Black freedom movement,¹ who experienced incarceration and began an ideological move away from Marxist-Leninism and toward anarchism. Specifically, this article addresses from where Black anarchism in the United States originated and why it emerged when it did. Next, the article explores Black anarchism's main foci and what makes it unique from other strands of anarchism. Black anarchists have found themselves in a unique and conflictual position within the American Left, by critiquing the liberal civil rights movement, the authoritarianism of Black power organizations, and racism in a currently White majority anarchist movement. Most recently, Black anarchism has led to a

¹ I refer to the Black-led movements of the 1950s through 1970s as the "Black freedom movement." Within this designation are a variety of other movements, including the liberal, assimilation-oriented movement known as the "civil rights movement" and more radical, autonomy-oriented as the "Black power movement."

more thorough integration of race analysis into anarchism and the formation of people of color caucuses within the anarchist movement.

This article utilizes an approach advocated by Clemens and Hughes (2002) that triangulates various historical data sources (ranging from already-compiled datasets, movement-based newspapers, interviews, and original activist writings) to construct an accurate picture of Black anarchism's creation. The key figures of Black anarchism, who are the focus of this study, are Ashanti Alston, Kuwasi Balagoon, Lorenzo Kom'boa Ervin, Ojore Lutalo, and Martin Sostre. These individuals began to discover anarchism during the period of the late 1960s through the 1970s, to develop their ideas into the 1980s, and then began to have an influence upon American anarchism beginning in the 1990s. All except Sostre were members of the BPP, and Alston and Balagoon participated with the BLA. All spent time in prison for a variety of crimes (including allegedly fabricated charges), which they and supporters considered politically motivated crimes and prosecutions. None began adulthood as anarchists, but all moved toward anarchist positions after their participation in the Black freedom movements in the 1960s. Each articulated a distinct version of Black anarchism, as they emphasized different concerns, defined anarchism differently, advocated different strategies for social change, and spoke to different audiences—consequently “Black anarchism” appears to be a somewhat heterogeneous ideological subvariant in anarchist thought and practice. Thus, these individuals do not represent a conclusive or unified configuration of anarchist thought, nor do any claim that they embody the “correct” view of Black anarchism. Nonetheless, Black anarchism began to exert an intellectual and activist influence upon American anarchism in the 1990s, which helped to create the space and inspiration for Anarchist People of Color (APOC) in the 2000s. A notable result of Black anarchist thought and writing is the widening of legitimacy for racially under-represented voices within anarchism (especially in the United States), including from the Global South, thereby supplementing the dominant European orientation of anarchist movements.

A Sociological Critique of the Black Power Movement

Numerous themes are relevant to interpreting the Black power movement, but key among them would be liberalism's shortcomings, intersectionality, and revolutionary nationalism. Each of these themes is briefly presented here with examples of their significance for radical Panthers, while more evidence will be provided in subsequent sections. First, and perhaps most importantly, the civil rights movement's failure to achieve de facto equality was interpreted as a failure of liberalism (i.e., the emphasis upon individual rights). Black power was initially a critique of integrationism, with early proponents focused on electing Black politicians and forming Black nationalist organizations (Joseph, 2006). Then, instead of focusing on how to integrate racial minorities *into* the capitalist U.S. state, later Black power emphasized the need for economic, political, and cultural autonomy. Liberalism considered the problem of racial inequality to stem from mere intolerance or exclusion, whereas Black power understood racial inequality as the consequence of racial domination resulting from a system of White supremacy (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001).

In critique of the 1960s' civil rights movement, Ervin (1995) argues that not all organizations were the same. For example, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) was “anti-authoritarian in that it had no leadership... Power was in the hands of the membership and grass-

roots organisers” (Ervin, 1995, p. 206). SNCC’s anti-authoritarianism—which was in part inspired by the organization’s advisor, Ella Baker (Ransby, 2003)—only faded when the organization weakened and “leadership egos” flared (Ervin, 1995). Comparatively, Lutalo (2004) characterized the modern civil rights movement as “corrupt” and “opportunist” but also argued that those qualities have existed for decades, saying leaders are

“open” for a price, just like Martin Luther King; he accepted money during the march on Washington, ... [and] the big six civil rights leaders at that time... They just want[ed] a place at the table.

Lutalo also proposes a class analysis of the movement, asserting, “They [movement leaders] don’t have the interests of black people, *per se*, at heart. Just look at how *they* live today and look at how *we* live.” Large civil rights protests since the 1960s, as well as the Nation of Islam-organized Million Man March in 1995, were “stage managed” affairs and did not work to politically educate the Black masses (Ervin, 2000a). The civil rights movement may also “have served white society ... more than those who claimed victory,” as its focus on “rights” was more procedural in focus than substantive and easily stalled by “narrow interpretation, administrative obstruction, and delay” (Revolutionary Anti-Authoritarians of Color, 2002).

The Black feminist and third-wave feminist analyses of a “matrix of domination” (Collins, 1990), especially regarding race and class, are central to the Black freedom movement’s evolution.² For example, the Black Panthers did not simply criticize White supremacy but noted its close interplay with an exploitive economic system that drained Black communities of labor and wealth, and a government intent upon political suppression in election booths and on city streets. The Panther’s “Ten Point Program” articulated this matrix of race and class domination clearly (Newton, 2009). Also, many—although not all—Panthers were sensitive to the role of patriarchy in society as well as within the Party itself (Cleaver, 2001). The Panthers and other Black power exponents helped to build this “intersectional” analysis—critiquing state domination, class, race, and gender inequality. Thus, there are divergent interests among Blacks of different social classes, as well as between Black men and women, an observation echoed by the analysis of Black anarchists.

Finally, the Black power movement emphasized the importance of revolutionary nationalism in any analysis of race. Central to the pursuit of revolutionary nationalism is the value of cultural, economic, and political separation or autonomy from White society. Black nationalism, particularly the BPPs, argued that Black Americans should look to their own communities for their freedom (Alston, 2002a). While the BPP may be the best known example of an organization that included revolutionary nationalism,³ it was not the only one; other left-wing nationalist examples from the same time period include the Republic of New Africa, Revolutionary Action Movement, League of Revolutionary Black Workers, and the BLA (see Ahmad, 2007).⁴ Some of these revolutionaries advocated “armed struggle,” a political position that argues that violence

² To be clear, Black feminism’s emphasis on intersectionalism marks one of its first *academic* points of entry. However, these scholarly traditions did not themselves develop “intersectionalism,” as many American *activists*—including anarchists, as shown below—had a comparable analysis many decades earlier.

³ Black Panther Party’s (BPP’s) ideology also involved a variety of other influences—as will be noted later—including Marxist-Leninism, Maoism, and coalition building and community organizing. For more of these influences, see Brown (2011).

⁴ Revolutionary nationalism may be contrasted against cultural nationalism, such as that presented by the United Slaves (US) organization in Southern California.

is assumed to play a role in racial domination, but that violence was also a legitimate means of self-defense and social change. Since the Party's beginnings, an armed-struggle wing had existed, which aimed to serve as a future military unit for Black America. On the East Coast, many Panthers slowly begin to transfer over to the BLA, as the principal armed-struggle component of the Black power movement (Umoja, 1999)⁵ and Black anarchists Alston and Balagoon were affiliated with the BLA. The BLA's militancy (manifested as armed struggle) occupied the "radical cusp" between social movement collective action and political terrorism (see Beck, 2007). The armed-struggle elements of the Black freedom movement are usually absent from movement histories and narratives, just as they are in other countries (e.g., South Africa; Seidman, 2001).

These themes are crucial for understanding why and how Black anarchism emerged from the Black power movement. Next, I provide an overview of the recently White-dominated anarchist movement that Black anarchists were eventually to join. Following World War II, there was notable cross-fertilization between U.S. anarchists and Black activists. The civil rights movement in the 1950s was influenced by anarcho-pacifism, which was based around a number of newspapers that were edited and written by former conscientious objectors. For example, Martin Luther King contributed articles to *Liberation* magazine, alongside anarchists David Wieck, Dave Dellinger, and Paul Goodman. And the famous Black activist Bayard Rustin was fired in 1951 by the Fellowship of Reconciliation due to his homosexuality but was soon after hired by the anarchist-led War Resisters' League (Cornell, 2012). The anarchist aesthetic was active, even if unconsciously, in other Black freedom movement organizations. Paul Goodman was alleged to have described the SNCC as an "anarchist organization" (cited in Ervin & Abron, 2001), whose advisor Ella Baker was an advocate for self-determination and famously stated, "Strong people don't need strong leaders" (Ransby, 2003, p. 188). Although Baker encouraged youth involved in SNCC to remain independent of the mainstream civil rights organizations (especially the Southern Christian Leadership Conference) and influenced SNCC's decentralized structure, she never identified as an anarchist.

In certain respects, the Panthers were influenced by anarchism: They reprinted the pamphlet *The Catechism of a Revolutionist* (often attributed to Mikhail Bakunin, but most likely authored by Sergei Nechaev; Leier, 2006)⁶ and adopted a variation of the anarchistic San Francisco Diggers' free food distribution for their own well-known free breakfast program for children (Carr, 2002). Further illustrating patterns of cross-fertilization, the contemporary anarchistic organization Food Not Bombs (FNB) has since taken inspiration from both the Diggers and the Black Panthers in their own free food distribution efforts since the 1980s in protest of militarism and poverty (Heynen, 2009). More on the Panthers' impact upon contemporary anarchism will be discussed later in the article.

⁵ While no systematic analysis has been conducted upon the Black Liberation Army (BLA), data from the National Consortium START show 37 acts of "terrorism" attributed to the BLA, from 1970 to 1984, while 87% of all attacks occurred between 1971 and 1973. As an armed-struggle organization, the BLA (with an anarchist-compatible emphasis, however flawed) attacked state and capitalist targets; 49% of all targets were police and 38% were businesses (National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism, 2011). The epicenter for the BLA activity was New York City, where 62% of all BLA actions occurred.

⁶ David Hilliard also states that Panther leader Eldridge Cleaver quoted from *The Catechism* pamphlet (Hilliard & Cole, 1993, p. 181).

In the aftermath of the 1960s' Black freedom movement, very few Black political formations emulated anarchist methods. The closest may have been the MOVE organization in Philadelphia. Even though MOVE was very deferential to their charismatic leader, Ervin (1995) claimed that

their politics are anarchist, including environmental and animal rights platforms, they're against government as an institution, in favour of autonomous communities, co-operative lifestyle and society... MOVE were the first organization since the BPP to advocate black armed self defence and I have great respect for them. They have all the essentials of an anarchist political formation. (n.p.)

After previously adopting certain anarchist influences, the Black freedom struggle in return influenced anarchism during the 1960s and 1970s, the Black Panthers being the best example. After discussions about race occurring throughout the 1970s and 1980s, one of the first large, nationwide, and explicitly anarchist organizations in the United States to vigilantly discuss and prioritize the relationship of race with anarchism in the post-1960s' period was the Love and Rage Revolutionary Anarchist Federation in the 1990s.⁷ In fact, philosophical and political disagreements over race were one of the impetuses for the organization's eventual devolution (San Filippo, 2003). Ervin belonged to the organization and Alston wrote for its newspaper. Many in Love and Rage (1990–1998)—itself an organization predominantly populated by White members—adopted “race traitor” and “White abolitionist” perspectives in response to race domination in the United States.⁸ The NYC Love and Rage chapter wrote in its 1997 handbook (Love and Rage Revolutionary Anarchist Federation, 1997) that

[t]he system of racial power and privilege known as white supremacy was built up over the past 500 years through the process of the European conquest, colonization, genocide, and enslavement of the peoples of Africa, Asia and the Americas. Elements of racist ideology can be traced to before the period of European expansion and those ideas have since been adapted to the needs of non-European oppressor groups around the world. (p. 30)

While this was the first time that many noticed the American anarchist movement directly grapple with issues of race and to put racial domination on par with forms of domination that derive from capitalism and the state, it was not the first such attempt since the 1960s to do so. Black activists, most formerly affiliated with the Black Panthers or other Black power organizations, did so earlier, formulating a “Black anarchism” borne out of their reaction to certain qualities of the BPP.

Next, this article focuses upon activists from the Black freedom struggle who defected from the BPP's Marxist-Leninism and Maoism (see Brown, 2011) to anarchist positions. To understand

⁷ Love and Rage began as a newspaper in 1990, became a network in 1991, and turned into a continental federation in 1993 (and disbanded in 1998). Others, of course, discussed issues of race and Black anarchists, even in the 1970s, including the Social Revolutionary Anarchist Federation's (1972-1980s) paper *Revolutionary Anarchist #3* who covered Martin Sostre's arrests. And other anarchistic organizations like Movement for a New Society and the George Jackson Brigade focused on race, too.

⁸ According to Preston and Chadderton (2012), the “race traitor” perspective (see Ignatiev & Garvey, 1996) must be situated within the context of Marxist and anarchist politics, especially the autonomist Sojourner Truth Organization in the United States (see Staudenmaier, 2012), and would benefit from a synthesis with critical race theory.

this socio-political development, I utilize ideas from radical factionalization theories. I conduct a historical analysis on movement documents, memoirs, and press. I also utilize new and pre-existing interviews with key figures close to the Black anarchist tradition. For this analysis, I rely upon figures who were prominent self-identified anarchists, many of whom also wrote in detail about Black anarchism, including Alston, Balagoon, Ervin, Lutalo, and Sostre.⁹

Radical Factionalization

Radicalization—for example, of certain Black Panthers toward anarchist political positions and identities—has been a topic of focus for social movement scholars. It is not uncommon for social movements to fracture into different ideologically oriented or tactically based configurations—especially when factions compete for the same constituencies, in an environment lacking in cooperation (Della Porta & Diani, 2006). For movement organizations representing a society’s numerical minority, complete victory is often rare and much debate occurs about the “proper” way to achieve goals. In this view, liberalism’s perceived shortcomings often lead to movements developing a broader set of processes that involve mainstreaming, majority cleavages, and strategic re-orientations. Factionalization has typically occurred when movements witness their progress stymied and activists must re-evaluate their methods. Even successful organizations often reassess previous strategies, sometimes with drastic means. For example, organizations as diverse as the American Federation of Labor, Earth First!, Students for a Democratic Society, and the SNCC experienced internal fissures—often facilitated by external environmental factors—that led to substantial membership flight (Balsler, 1997). Although the oligarchization of formalized social movement organizations is not necessarily guaranteed, less formalized or centralized groups are more likely to become radical (Rucht, 1999). Membership flight and oligarchization both occurred with the Black Panthers and led directly to the creation of Black anarchism.

According to Della Porta and LaFree (2012), radicalization is “an escalation process leading to violence” (p. 6). While a somewhat hyperbolic definition, Della Porta and LaFree wisely regard such radicalization as part of a pattern of behavior and attitude, not just affecting isolated individuals but people who exist in the context of organizations and other social structures. Thus, radicalization occurs in a broader web of interaction with societal conditions, and often in conflictual relations with state forces, especially police. Radicalization within the Black freedom movement did not always translate into calls for violence (let alone actual violence) but did involve a polarization of political attitude. Much of this radicalization was driven by perceived shortcomings of the liberal civil rights movement and by police violence against the movement (Umoja, 1999). Armed struggle—as advocated by the BLA and many Black anarchists—is best seen as “a means of last resort, employed after all other forms of political action have been met with severe state repression” (Dudouet, 2012, p. 99), as happened very visibly to the Black Panthers.

⁹ It bears repeating that these five individuals have many differences, in terms of their audiences and strategies for social change. The oldest, Sostre, wrote and contributed to interviews, in addition to providing a community resource with his Afro-Asian Bookstore. Ervin continues to be a community organizer after his release from prison; in addition to writing the well-known *Anarchism and the Black Revolution*, he has authored numerous essays—in particular for *Black Autonomy*—and participated in many anarchist organizations. Balagoon died in prison, and most of his “writings” are drawn from scattered sources, such as the prison-abolitionist journal *Bulldozer*. Alston has been active in various movements following prison and wrote for his journal, *@narchist Panther*. While imprisoned, Lutalo, communicated via the Anarchist Black Cross (ABC) and was video interviewed.

Different processes can combine together to propel radicalization. According to Alimi's (2011) application of Charles Tilly's "relational dynamics" theory, radicalization results from competition for power between movement actors, an unfavorable ratio of opportunity to threat between a movement and the political system, and response/counter-response escalation between a movement and the state. Within the Black freedom movement, there were struggles between proponents of nonviolence, self-defense, and armed struggle, and between those who wanted civil rights from the state and those who wanted autonomy from the state. By the late 1960s, the U.S. state was less willing to provide the Black freedom movement with concessions, especially as the movement went into Northern states and began focusing on issues of poverty and social class. Frustrated by a lack of progress, many movement activists became more assertive with their demands and strategies, only to find local police forces and the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) arrayed against them. As the 1960s progressed, shoot-outs between police and Panthers became more common (although far more Panthers were negatively affected by this interplay) and the full weight of state control—especially the FBI's Counter-Intelligence Program (CointelPro)—arrayed against the movement.¹⁰

Radicalization of the Black freedom movement had curious effects. The growing influence of militants in SNCC and the Congress on Racial Equality principally benefited moderate groups (e.g., the Urban League and National Association for the Advancement of Colored People). For example, urban riots encouraged corporations to donate money to organizations like the Urban League and not more radical ones (such as the Black Panthers), in the hopes of stemming further radicalization of Blacks and disruption (Haines, 1984).

Factionalization occurred in a variety of Black freedom organizations. In the case of the Black Panthers, the Party fragmented into at least three groupings: an electorally oriented group in Oakland, autonomous Panther groups throughout the United States, and a New York-based group affiliated with Eldridge Cleaver who formed "the heart of the BLA" (Rosenau, 2013). Some of those who fractured from the Party—and not just those affiliated with the BLA—were to become anarchists after receiving their political baptisms in the Party. Of course, most factionalization sent BPP activists in directions other than anarchism, including toward cultural nationalism, community organizing, the Revolutionary Communist Party, and the Democratic Party.

Initially, Balagoon writes favorably of his early contact with the Panthers: "when the Panthers came to New York, I checked them out, and found the ten-point program unquestionable, and the fact that it was community-based a good thing" (Balagoon, 1971, p. 270). But, eventual Black *anarchists*, including Balagoon, later criticized the Panther's leadership model and decision-making structures, reflecting an anti-authoritarian analysis. According to Ervin (1993),

I feel [the Black Panther Party] partially failed because of the authoritarian leadership style of Huey P. Newton, Bobby Seale and others on the Central Committee ... [M]any errors were made because the national leadership was so divorced from the chapters in cities all over the country, and therefore engaged in "commandism" or forced work dictated by leaders ... There was not a lot of inner-party democracy, and when contradictions came up, it was the leaders who decided on their resolution, not the members. (pp. 92–93)

¹⁰ Note Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) Director J. Edgar Hoover's remark that the Panthers were the top security threat to the "internal security" of the United States (Churchill & Vander Wall, 1988).

Balagoon (2001) was to later characterize the Party as a “hierarchy” that had undeserved pretensions of grandeur (p. 115). What devastated the Party’s effectiveness most was when it

turned away from its purposes of liberation of the black colony to fundraising. At that point, the leadership was imported rather than developed locally and the situation deteriorated quickly and sharply ... The leaders began to live high off the hog while the rank and file sold papers, were filtered out leaving behind so many robots who wouldn’t challenge policy... (pp. 75–76)

With the decline of the BPP, former leaders like Bobby Seale “sold-out”; according to Sostre (1976), “After advocating destroying the pig system, [Seale] tried to join it” (p. 13). Alston (n.d.) later identified his own uncritical acceptance of BPP leadership:

I realized that there was a problem with my love for people like Huey P. Newton, Bobby Seale, and Eldridge Cleaver and the fact that I had put them on a pedestal. After all, what does it say about you, if you allow someone to set themselves up as your leader and make all your decisions for you? What anarchism helped me see was that you, as an individual, should be respected and that no one is important enough to do your thinking for you. (n.p.)

Accordingly, Alston (2004) observed that the Marxist-oriented liberation movements of the 1960s became “less inclusive, less spontaneous, less democratically participatory” (p. 5).¹¹ Sostre (1976) stated that many Marxist-Leninists defended “repression and restrictions on human rights,” in pursuit of overthrowing capitalism (p. 28). As noted by Dragadze (1996), separatists have often rejected Marxists’ appeals to unify in the fight against capitalist imperialism, instead choosing to wage this fight independently of Marxists (p. 345).

Consequently, former BPP members who later dissented and became anarchists characterized the BPP’s key problem as oligarchization. According to Johnson (1998), who borrows from Robert Michels’s (1949) “elite theory,” the Panthers declined, in part, due to their organizational centralization and cult of personality.¹² Specifically,

the Party changed from a large, decentralized, revolutionary organization to a small, highly centralized, reformist group. By 1974, great responsibility had been placed in the hands of a single individual—Huey P. Newton—who often used this power irresponsibly and destructively. (p. 392)

Ervin (1993) observed that “many times leaders have one agenda, followers have another” (p. 93). Thus, it is unsurprising that the “leaders” of the Black freedom struggle were not among those who would drift toward anarchism but rather members of the movement’s rank-and-file.¹³ The discomfort felt by some rank-and-file with the Panthers’ organizational and authority structure provoked reflection that eventually resulted in Black anarchism.

¹¹ Huey Newton (1968) explicitly endorsed a vanguard party and condemned anarchists’ emphasis upon a non-state revolution. In response, Bookchin (1969) challenged Newton’s interpretation of the 1968 Paris Uprising and raised the problem of using hierarchical means to achieve liberatory ends.

¹² State repression is prominent among other factors attributed to the BPP’s decline.

¹³ In fact, many former Panther leaders headed in reformist and sometimes reactionary directions, the most dramatic example represented by Eldridge Cleaver’s transformation as a born-again Christian, Ronald Reagan supporter, and advocate of Black integration into American capitalism (Lavelle, 2012).

Origins of Black Anarchism

Black anarchism did not emerge autonomously within the largely White anarchist movement in the United States, but instead fractured away from the Marxist-Leninist-oriented Black freedom struggle. Certain conditions seemed to aid in this process. First, many Black anarchists had comparable experiences of incarceration, which in some cases created favorable opportunities for political transformation. Due to government suppression (particularly the FBI's Cointel-Pro), former Panthers faced uniquely high incarceration rates among 1960s' movement activists (Churchill & Vander Wall, 1988). This was particularly true for those in the most militant wings of the Black freedom struggle (Muntaqim, 2002). The geographic and spatial distance from outside movements and extra time to re-assess previous strategies may have played a key role for the creation of Black anarchism. Balagoon (2001) states, "Once captured for armed robbery, I had the opportunity to see the weakness of the [Black Panther] movement and put the state's offensive in perspective" (p. 75).

Prison-based transformation is not unique to the Black anarchists. Malcolm X famously converted to the Nation of Islam while in prison (X, 1990), which was one of Malcolm's many "reinventions," according to Marable (2011). Prison activist and BPP member George Jackson originally was politicized once in prison (Jackson, 1994).¹⁴ Former Weather Underground member David Gilbert (personal correspondence, October 21, 2012) states that prisons in the 1960s and 1970s were less distracting for inmates than the outside world, thus encouraging political reflection and reading—also beneficial were the period's active social movements and lack of TVs in cells. Still, the impoverished and dominated conditions of prisons and urban Black neighborhoods were so analogous that the radicalization taking place within communities outside of prisons easily translated to and seeped into prison communities (Johnson, 1975).

Word-of-mouth was a key pathway to the adoption of anarchism for these Black activists. While Ervin (1993) mentions encountering anarchism when arrested in East Germany and then receiving anarchist literature while a prisoner in 1973, he says his first serious consideration of anarchism occurred through meeting Martin Sostre in 1969.¹⁵ Sostre, who owned an Afro-American bookstore in Buffalo, New York, and was sentenced to prison on trumped-up drug charges (see Copeland, 1970), may have been the first Black anarchist convert in the post-1960s' wave of the movement:

Believing that a Black audience would have difficulty accepting the language of anarchy, in 1972 [Sostre] wrote of his unwillingness "to introduce foreign terms [such as anarchy] into the ghetto-colony which sisters and brothers cannot relate to" ... As an anarchist, he admitted to being a novice. By 1972 he had read only "sketches

¹⁴ Compare this to religious conversions in prison (e.g., Maruna, Wilson, & Curran, 2006). As such, common features between prison-based religious and political conversions may include the ability to adopt a new, transformative identity; receive direction and meaning during incarceration; and potentially feel empowered.

¹⁵ Alston (2002b) also reported receiving anarchist literature in prison: "These little anarchist pamphlets were easily available from info-shops in Detroit and Canada, and they were getting to us in the prisons. I was no longer averse to reading and learning from them. But I only saw them as making a lot of good and interesting critiques of capitalism [*sic*] and authoritarian opposition groups, like unions and vanguard parties... These readings eventually led me back to reading and re-reading anarchists works as a serious study of its frame of references, its principles, its style, and its contemporary relevance" (pp. 19, 21).

of Kropotkin, Bakunin and others [and] as yet have never read an entire book on anarchism.” (Schaich & Hope, 1977, pp. 294–295)

Sostre (1976) felt that the problem was the Marxist-Leninist “party-line” and “the whole structure” (p. 28), which replaced ruling elites but did not further human freedom. Alston (2002b) adopted anarchism via his relationship with Frankie Ziths (who was to become a renowned photographer later in life):

My own independent studies, provoked by Panther Frankie Ziths ... gave me my first anarchist reading ... Frankie’s hand-written notes on the sides of these readings would always relate the “lessons,” for example, on the Maknovists’ betrayal by the Russian communists, to our possible betrayal by white communists and other privileged white activists. (p. 19)

Lutalo credits Balagoon for introducing him to critiques of Marxist-Leninism in 1975, specifically the “ineffectiveness of Marxism in our communities along with repressive bureaucracy that comes with Marxism” (“Free Ojore Lutalo,” 1992).

Anarchism began to make sense to some former Panthers who were frustrated with the oligarchical direction of the Party. According to Balagoon’s former prison mate David Gilbert (personal correspondence, October 21, 2012), Balagoon not only was critical of bureaucracy and the repressiveness in Marxist-Leninism, but he also “was [a] free spirit in many ways, often very creative and not one to boss people around ... [He] had a lot of faith in people’s ability to take charge of their own society.” Likewise, Alston (2011) writes that he increasingly wanted “power to the people where it stays with the people.” Lutalo (2004) described his new anarchist beliefs saying,

I just believe in the consensus process, I believe in the autonomous process. I believe that people are intelligent enough to govern their own lives and make their own decisions without somebody collecting untold billions of dollars of taxes and telling you what should and shouldn’t be. Most organizations of the Left and the Right they want to repress, they have power ambitions, they power hungry, money hungry. And they’ll do anything to retain that particular power. They don’t consult with the lower class people, they make decisions for them and I feel that’s wrong. So that’s why I became an anarchist.

This more micro-analysis of BPP leadership led these individuals to identify with anarchism, as opposed to macro-level and philosophical rejection of the legitimacy of sovereign states. While some—notably Ervin in his widely read *Anarchism and the Black Revolution*—described themselves as “Black anarchists,” other labels were also used. Balagoon and Lutalo identified as “New Afrikan anarchists,” to note that they were *Africans*, who happened to be living in America, and thus were not “African Americans” (Balagoon, 2001; Ervin, 1994). Alston adopted the label of an anarchist Panther, which also became the name of the ’zine he published during the 2000s.¹⁶ While their identifications as *anarchists* is a key observation to make, just as crucial is that—unlike many other anarchists—they also had an important racial identity to assert; thus, the “Black,” “New Afrikan,” or “Panther” monikers attached to their broader political labels.

¹⁶ Olson echoes much of my analysis here in his footnotes, as does Organise (“From Panther to Anarchist,” 2009).

Black Anarchism's Vision and Relationship With White Anarchists

The vision of Black anarchism reflects some of the Black power movement's skepticism of liberal reform, an emphasis upon the matrix of domination in its analytical lens, and the prioritization of revolutionary nationalism. Crucially, as hinted above, Black anarchism—as with more mainstream anarchism—is resistant to the influence and intervention of so-called leaders, even if only charismatic authority figures. This analysis was a principal reason for Black anarchist's radical fracturing away from the BPP. Alston (1999) writes that

Top-down organizations [and] leadership organization[s] are relationships based on some being the brains and most being brainless and therefore IN NEED OF those with the brains. I reject that. I love myself and I love People and therefore we all got brains and together are smarter than any small group of muthafuckas claiming to be my/our leaders. (pp. 3–4, emphasis in the original)

Even while rejecting the BPP's authoritarianism, the Black anarchists retained the Panthers' emphasis upon community organizing. Ervin (1995) advocated an anarchism that implemented “survival programmes,” which would win anarchists “respect” among disadvantaged populations. Consequently, these populations must not only be protected, but they must be thoughtfully self-organized. Ervin (2000b) states that “we should arm [the people] then not just with guns, but with revolutionary ideology. They make the revolution, not a vanguard underground force. There are no heroes or condescending saviors; we must act as our own liberators” (p. 25).

A key component to the new Black anarchism was its critique of multiple institutions of domination.¹⁷ For example, Balagoon (2001) noted that anarchists were not merely anti-statists but refused to “recognize borders” and were thus anti-imperialists, too (p. 118). More broadly, Black anarchism is intersectionalist.¹⁸ Capitalism and racism were clearly enemies of Black anarchists, but ultimately “all kinds of negative ‘isms’” warranted fighting against (Alston, 2002a). Ervin (1993) makes these connections even more explicitly:

Anarchism means that we will have more democracy, social equality, and economic prosperity. I oppose all forms of oppression found in modern society: patriarchy, white supremacy, capitalism, state communism, religious dictates, gay discrimination, etc. (p. 98)

The way for Black Americans to fight these multiple forms of domination, according to Ervin, who Heynen and Rhodes (2012) refer to as an organic Black intellectual, is to engage in time-tested anarchist methods of resistance, such as a popular refusal to pay taxes, participation in rent strikes and general labor strike, to boycott American businesses, and end police brutality. Community needs should instead be provided by community members themselves—and if the community is a Black community, then Blacks should be the ones in control of these efforts.

¹⁷ Incidentally, anarchists in general emphasize intersectionality (Williams, 2012). For example, see Bookchin's (2005) focus on “the domination of the young by the old, of women by men, of one ethnic group by another ...” (p. 68).

¹⁸ Intersectionality occupies a prominent position in the to-be-mentioned Anarchist People of Color and its two-volume work called *Our Culture, Our Resistance* (Aguilar, 2004).

Ervin advocates constructing local community councils to make political decisions, the creation of mutual aid banking societies and housing cooperatives, and exerting community and worker control over food systems, workplaces, and educational institutions (Ervin, 1993). These efforts amount to revolutionary Black nationalism, whereby community members supplant the state and capitalism to provide for their own needs.

For Alston (2002a), even with the shortcomings of Black nationalism (“historical sexism, hierarchy, or its modernist trappings”), it was still the force that routinely unites Black Americans and provides important resources and direction for social change struggles. Alston views nationalism as being potentially anti-state (like anarchism). Any hierarchies internal to a nationalist movement are the obligation of revolutionary nationalists (who belong to that “nation”) to solve. Therefore, Black anarchism is “black” in a similar way that Black feminism is—it places an emphasis upon Blackness in the anarchist milieu, or a “pole” from which to critique White privilege in that milieu. Not all anarchists are comfortable with the introduction of nationalist themes into anarchism, particularly insofar as nationalism leads to the formation of new states or the simple swapping of dominant and subordinate groups.

While “there is a new understanding among at least some Anarchists about how White supremacy is both structurally and ideologically a weapon which prohibits the building of a true freedom movement in this land” (Ervin, 1993, p. 3), Black anarchists and their emphasis upon racism were not always accepted by all fellow American anarchists. Struggles faced by some racially under-represented participants in the American anarchist movement illustrated the need for emphasizing anarchism’s intersectional analysis, particularly of racial domination. Today, it is most likely the case that most anarchists (White or otherwise) accept the Black anarchist focus on racism, but more are critical of the revolutionary nationalist themes that may accompany it.

Balagoon was critical of

the predominantly white North American anarchists who didn’t support national liberation for the oppressed and who were generally weak on racism and in not understanding the deep structure of white supremacy. A lot of his [Balagoon’s] focus in his last year [before his death] was on arguing anti-racism to the anarchist movement. (D. Gilbert, personal correspondence, October 21, 2012)

As Alston (2002a) has argued, perhaps this is because the majority of [White] American anarchists do not understand Black Americans’ experience in a White supremacist society.

Such ignorance affected the ability of White anarchists to be good anti-racist allies to Black Americans. According to Ervin, the anarcho-syndicalist union Industrial Workers of the World and the Love and Rage Revolutionary Anarchist Federation were resistant to Ervin’s attempts to create “Black/people of color workers organizing” groups or “semi-autonomy people of color organization[s]” within both larger organizations. He felt he received “chastisement” from key activists and that his proposals were rejected for advocating “separatism” (Ervin & Abron, 2001). This hesitancy and unwillingness to incorporate people of color on their own terms has led to “real serious problems in [the anarchist movement’s] inability to interact with peoples of color,” as well as expressions of “outright racism,” and “condescension and pandering” (Ervin & Abron,

2001).¹⁹ Consequently, Ervin expressed feeling out-of-place within the movement, despite his anarchist politics.²⁰ “The Anarchist movement in North America is overwhelmingly White, middle-class, and for the most part, pacifist, so the question arises: why am I a part of the Anarchist movement, since I am none of those things?” (Ervin, 1993, p. 92). These efforts were motivated by Ervin’s (1993) predictions that “Blacks and Hispanics will surely constitute the backbone of the US anarchist movement in the future,” and thus, he wanted “to apply anarchism to the black community” (p. 92). In response to his sense of isolation, Ervin worked to create spaces within the anarchist movement for people of color.

Black Anarchism’s Influence Upon Modern Anarchism

The term *Black anarchism* implies an interaction between “Black” and “anarchism.” As such, it has brought together separate traditions in creative ways. Although the above describes Black anarchists’ rejection of the BPP’s hierarchy, many contemporary anarchists share certain BPP values, foci, and activities. For example, the Party targeted the most egregious manifestations of racism—in particular local politicians, police, and business people—as well as subtle forms of racism. Compare this to the anarchist-friendly and majority White organization Anti-Racist Action (ARA), which today focuses upon opposing the organizing efforts of fascists and White racists, like neo-Nazis, the Ku Klux Klan, and racist skinheads. However, while ARA was formed to confront fascist and White racist organizing efforts, Ervin (1996a) was critical of it for focusing on overt, individual racists, to the neglect of other institutions (e.g., police, courts, landlords, and others) who produce racially unequal and discriminatory outcomes, but often without racist rhetoric (pp. 3, 13). Other critiques of 1990s’ era ARA have suggested that activists present an anti-racist form of color-blindness (O’Brien, 1999). Many local ARA chapters have created Cop Watch programs—comparable to the BPP’s infamous neighborhood patrols that monitored police misconduct—although now with the aid of modern technologies, such as video cameras. Just as the Panthers believed and advocated for armed self-defense and for political prisoners, the Anarchist Black Cross (ABC) also supports the rights of people to self-defense and armed struggle²¹, as well as supporting many political prisoners and prisoners of war²² who were members of the BPP and the BLA, most of whom do *not* identify as anarchists. Anarchists and ABC are some of the few on the Left to do political prisoner support and activism for 1960s’ movement activists. And, as mentioned above, the anarchistic FNB distributes free food to people, which echoes one of the most prominent BPP survival programs, the Free Breakfast for Children Program.²³ While FNB was not directly inspired by the BPP, FNB’s work has been referenced as having goals compatible with the Panther’s programs.

¹⁹ Ribeiro (2005) associates the predominantly White North American anarchist movement with the Brazilian *senzala*, where Black slaves were isolated on their masters’ plantations.

²⁰ Later, Ervin (1996b) was to note increasing support among White anarchists, writing, “To their credit, the white anarchists and anti-authoritarian leftists have been generally supportive of the Black struggle by comparison [to Marxists].”

²¹ See Lutalo’s (1998) defense of organizational autonomy of local ABC chapters to advocate armed self-defense, regardless of public perceptions or the refusal of other ABC chapters to do the same.

²² Prisoners of war are those, such as Balagoon (2001), who reject the legal jurisdiction of the United States over people of color, and who are engaged in struggle against the legal and military forces of the United States (as with the BLA). Numerous ABC groups throughout the world supported Ervin while he was in prison (Ervin, 1993).

²³ For more on the BPP’s survival programs, see Abron (1998).

Perhaps the most prominent ideological commonality between anarchist and BPP values is the shared emphasis upon autonomy and community control, although the meaning of “autonomy” implies “racial autonomy.” Just as Panthers and others in the “black power” movement demanded racial self-determination with their slogan “black power now!” so do anarchists value “people power,” and in doing so rejecting the demands of the civil rights movement or other liberal pressure organizations that sought to simply extend legal rights to citizens.²⁴ The coincidental convergences between anarchism and the BPP are numerous, as Heynen (2009) notes,

Like anarchist traditions in which organizing was or is not simply about scaled tensions between the state and the local groupings of people collectively producing alternative ways of life through direct action, the BPP’s organizing recognized the power of mutual aid politics within the local environment like never before seen in the United States. (p. 414)

Since the demise of the BPP (and the BLA), the Black anarchism synthesis has become more explicit. The degree to which the BPP possessed certain anarchistic characteristics may explain some of the appeal felt by former BPPs for anarchist movements. Ervin and others formed the Black Autonomy Network of Community Organizers (BANCO) and Federation of Black Community Partisans (FBCP),²⁵ and published the 1990s’ newspaper *Black Autonomy*. With chapters in Washington, Michigan, Tennessee, and elsewhere, these configurations introduced anarchist ideas into community struggles, especially those involving the issues of racial inequality and discrimination. *Black Autonomy* published numerous pieces by Ervin during its 4-year run, thereby introducing a largely anarchist audience to more ideas from the person known by some as the author of *Anarchism and the Black Revolution*. Edited by Greg Jackson, the newspaper was noteworthy for its treatment of contemporary issues (urban insurrections, the Million Man March, and other racialized topics of the time), radical reflections and reporting of news on police brutality and the Black freedom movement, and an exposition of anarchist ideas from the perspective of Black radicals.²⁶ Jackson (1995) wrote at the end of the introduction to the first issue of *Black Autonomy* published in 1995, “It is time for us to pick up where the Black Panther Party left off!!!” (p. 3). The label *Black autonomy* is itself an effort to downplay certain aspects of “revolutionary nationalism” from the Panthers that anarchists consider problematic, such as the desire to create an independent, Black nation-state (e.g., the Republic of New Africa).

Finally, the most recent attempt to broaden anarchism’s racial lens has coalesced around APOC initiatives. While taking much inspiration from Black anarchism and an initial invitation circulated by well-known individuals like Ervin, APOC included racial minorities of a variety of backgrounds (Black as well as Asian and Latino). APOC has held a number of national conferences (including the first in Detroit during 2003 with over 100 attendees), had multiple local collectives

²⁴ Chris Crass (2001) points out the curious racial discrepancy between the famous [White] anarcho-punk band Crass’s (no relation) demand in 1982 to “Destroy Power!” with the BPP’s “All Power to the People!” slogan (which Alston [n.d.] has been fond of introducing to anarchist audiences).

²⁵ Federation of Black Community Partisans’s (FBCP) “provisional program,” published in the second issue of *Black Autonomy*, appears modeled on the Panther Ten Point Program, although it is more explicit in naming its enemies: the nation-state, capitalism, imperialism, and White supremacy. Later, Jackson wrote that the FBCP “barely even started” and was an “organization in name only” (Lewis, 2004, p. 79).

²⁶ Jackson stated that White anarchists were usually the ones to tell him of the inspiration they took from reading *Black Autonomy* (Lewis, 2004).

formed in cities across the United States, and published a two-volume edited collection called *Our Culture, Our Resistance*. According to Aguilar (2003b), APOC serves as a safe space for people of color who are anarchists to share stories and provide each other solidarity, to strategize about how to overcome internalized oppressions, and to have a buffer between them and the overwhelmingly White anarchist movement, which still includes people with racial prejudices. Ribeiro (2005) refers to APOC as a *quilombo*—which were autonomous zones in Brazil where escaped slaves congregated and created more egalitarian social relations—and considers APOC a “conscious project of self-determination for people of color.” Consequently, the space created by APOC allowed people of color who are anarchists to both articulate an anarchist vision to fellow people of color as well as advocate for a stronger analysis of race and ethnicity within the anarchist movement. While APOC had only a tenuous axis within American anarchism, it resulted in many positive consequences: most importantly, reminding the movement that race was a crucial issue, identity, and source of domination. The first APOC conference was widely supported by the anarchist movement, even with White anarchists fund-raising for it and offering to provide security after Nazis threatened to attack attendees (Aguilar, 2003a).

Conclusion

Black anarchism developed autonomously within the United States’ radical Black freedom struggle, partly inspired by the BPP’s community organizing, but also partly in repulsion to its leadership methods. The strongest theoretical frameworks for understanding these developments are radical factionalism and critical race theory—especially the latter’s rejection of liberalism, its intersectionality, and its prioritization of revolutionary nationalism. In particular, Black anarchists continued the critiques of radical Black Panthers regarding the shortcomings of the liberal, reformist civil rights movement. At the same time, they took the BPP to task for its patriarchal tendencies, as well as channeled the BPP’s critique of the American state through the lens of anarchism. Finally, Black anarchists emphasized the revolutionary nationalism pioneered in the Black power movement that advocated for Black-run neighborhood councils, syndicalist unions, and community defense units. They also desired autonomy from capitalism and the American state, far more than the eventually electorally oriented Oakland-based BPP.

Theories of radical factionalization help understand the ways in which some Black activists developed anarchist political positions and moved away from Marxist-Leninist ideology. Specifically, the anarchist critique of hierarchy and authority facilitated the Black anarchists’ analysis of the BPP leadership. These Black anarchists interpreted the BPP’s leadership as authoritarian, and became disgruntled with the later party’s reformism and cult of personality, all of which were key issues leading to the Black anarchists’ fragmentation away—ideologically and physically—from the BPP. As suggested by prior research, fragmentation took many different shapes and trajectories, of which only one was Black anarchism.

The most influential contemporary source of anarchism’s broadening views on race is the legacy of Black anarchist activists and authors who are cited herein. Consequently, American anarchism is no longer a nearly exclusive Whites-only affair, although it has taken many decades for race to be positioned more centrally within the movement’s analysis and activism, and issues of race, White privilege, and racism remain concerns within the movement. Yet almost as significant for American anarchism in the 1990s and 2000s was the writing of Black feminist

authors. In addition to the five male Black anarchists discussed in this article, the work of Angela Davis, bell hooks, Audre Lorde, and others were also key inspirations for further developing anarchism's intersectionality. Also, while Black anarchism has had influence outside the United States, it would be erroneous to presume that it speaks for Black people throughout the world, particularly in Africa (see Mbah & Igariwey, 1997, for a much clearer attempt).

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