

Anarchism and African American Liberation

Wayne Price

December 4, 2001

Contents

LIBERAL INTEGRATIONISM	3
BLACK NATIONALISM	4
SOCIALIST VIEWS OF BLACK LIBERATION	8
A HISTORY OF OPPRESSION AND STRUGGLE	9
THE REVOLUTIONARY PROGRAM AND WHITE RACISM	14
BLACK ORGANIZATION	16

“If you have come to help me, you are wasting your time, but if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together.”—Words of an Aboriginal Australian Woman

Approaches to Black liberation start from many perspectives: that racial oppression is the basic issue, that class oppression is the basic issue, that national oppression is basic, or gender oppression, and so on. My starting point is that it is *oppression itself* which is the essential problem. It is the existence of a hierarchical society in which some dominate others which frames and reinforces racial oppression.

Historically the dominant programs in the Black liberation movement have been varieties of “integration” or “nationalism.” Usually these are explicitly pro-capitalist, but sometimes they are posed in a way which is influenced by Marxism. There is much truth in each of these programs but ultimately both are inadequate to achieve complete freedom for African-Americans. They need to be brought together in a holistic, multidimensional, anarchist perspective, one which sees racial oppression as an important facet of a total authoritarian society (other facets being capitalism, statism, sexism, etc.). I am making two claims here: that racism is part of an authoritarian total system and that it is an *extremely* important part .

Both integrationism and nationalism can be understood in either a broad or a narrow way. The broad way is how they are understood by most people, and includes their positive aspects. The narrow way is the specific programs into which they are crystallized and elaborated by various middle class groupings. These ideological groups intend to use their pro-grams to win leadership over ordinary people and advance their own interests. Usually these would-be leaderships are very sincere, combining idealism and opportunism.

LIBERAL INTEGRATIONISM

For example, most Black people are “for” integration, in the sense that they are for civil rights and liberties, including the right to work where they want, to live where they want, to shop anywhere, to walk in any part of their city without being attacked by White mobs, to drive or walk down any street without being stopped by cops, to go any-where without being shot by cops. They want the rights promised to all by the great bourgeois-democratic revolutions, including the U.S. revolution. They want the rights enshrined in the Declaration of Independence and the Bill of Rights—and expressed by the values of Western Christianity as commonly understood, including the infinite worth of each individual and the need for community and solidarity (“brotherhood”).

To an extent these rights were won by the Civil Rights Movement. The legal form of Jim Crow segregation was overthrown—which had existed in half the country, enforced by local police as well as by night-riding Klan terrorism. But discrimination and White prejudice are still widespread, public schools are more racially separated than ever, and African-Americans remain at the bottom of society. The continued fight against prejudice and discrimination, for equality and civil rights, is the valuable part of the integration struggle.

But as a developed middle class program, “integration” implies merging into *this* society, as it is—accepting this social system—with its capitalism, sexism, militarism, and imperial-ism—except for its racism. Integration implies cultural assimilation, adopting the values of middle class White America and criticizing Black people whose sexual and work standards do not fit those U.S. standards. And integrationism includes apolitical strategy of appealing to what’s left

of the liberal wing of the U.S. capitalist class. This requires working within the Democratic Party and carrying out a pacifist, nonviolent, approach to struggle.

To their credit, it was the integrationists who organized mass demonstrations in the fifties and sixties, who mobilized large numbers of Black people to struggle against racism. While the nationalists sat on the sidelines and criticized, integrationists led the struggles in the South which broke down legal Jim Crow. This does not mean that Black people bought the whole integrationist program. For all their respect for Dr. King, few African-Americans ever believed in pacifism as a political philosophy. The nonviolent Civil Rights marches were followed by the violent urban rebellions—so-called Black riots—North and South. The integrationists did not approve of the mass rebellions; instead King supported the (violent) National Guard which suppressed them. (Not that the nationalists organized the rebellions either. The uprisings had no “leadership” or “organizers.” This was both their weakness and their good fortune.)

Integrationism is often based on an analysis of Black oppression as a “caste” system. Like the Asian-Indian caste system, Black and White are categories into which people are born and which they cannot get out of—unlike economic classes. A middle class person may rise into the rich (although it rarely happens, Bill Gates aside) or fall into the poor, but Black people are Black no matter how they other-wise succeed or fail (leaving aside the very few light-skinned Blacks who can “pass” in each generation). The programmatic implications of this analysis is to break down the caste barriers, to abolish the rigid, inherited, categorical differences between the races—that is, integration. Integrationists say that African-Americans should become part of this predominately European-American society, just like everyone else (in other words, just like White people).

It is true that racial differences are rigid and caste-like. But this analysis leaves out the relation of racism to other facets of authoritarian oppression. Black people are almost entirely in the working class, and mostly in the poorest part of the working class. If tomorrow, all African-Americans were to magically turn White (leaving aside whether this would be desirable), most of them would still be poor, living in slums, and working at the worst jobs. Meanwhile the racial prejudices of the White majority are created by the oppressions from which they suffer, the breeding grounds of their hatred and bigotry. Their prejudices will not end just by enlightened education—but by directing their anger at their real enemies, the ruling rich, and eventually by creating an egalitarian, cooperative society.

BLACK NATIONALISM

The historical alternative to integrationism has been Black nationalism. This also has a broad and a narrow meaning. Broadly, African-Americans have maintained their own institutions, including churches and colleges, and have no intention of abandoning them. They have called for pride in their looks, which do not simply fit European standards of beauty, and pride in their history and historical achievements. For generations, they have made their own music which has been an enormously creative force in world culture. They have organized themselves as communities and as a people in order to win gains in the White-dominated society. This broader nationalist current has been expressed in terms such as *race pride* or *Black pride* or *Black consciousness* or *Black power*.

But Black nationalism has also been expressed in narrow, specific political programs which call for African-Americans separating out and forming their own country, either in Africa or in North America. Ideological Black nationalism's great strength has been its rejection of White society, its radical perception that the existing system will not accept Black people, will not grant them equality or freedom. Contrary to the integrationists, the nationalists at their best reject liberal illusions in favor of revolutionary opposition to the existing state. And yet nationalism, as a fully developed program of separatism, has never been popular among more than a tiny minority of African-Americans. This may be compared, for example, with the French-speaking people of Quebec, Canada, historically an oppressed people in North America. Over the years, support for separatism among the Québécois has varied from a large minority to a majority, at times enough to elect the nationalists into power. Separatist nationalism has never come close to this among U.S. Blacks.

Mainly this is because the nationalist program is based on an error. African-Americans are not a (distinct) nation. They share the language, religion, and culture of the rest of the country. Like most U.S. citizens, they speak English, they are Christians—mostly Protestants. Blacks are no doubt a cultural minority in many ways—more precisely, a U.S. subculture—who have infused both English and Christianity with their own experience, creating their own, unique, versions. But in many ways they are quintessential Americans. Because they are central to U.S. history, they are at the core of the U.S. experience, and are at least as “American” as anyone. If Blacks are not “Americans,” then who is? Of course, Blacks have been excluded and oppressed by the U.S., but exclusion and oppression are also part of the U.S. experience—for so many people.

Besides the cultural aspects of their existence, Blacks lack the “material” basis for a separate nation. They do not have a common land even partially capable of sustaining an independent economy, of creating a commodity-producing national community. In the early thirties, the Communist Party advocated “Self-Determination for the Black Belt,” an agricultural region (so-called for its soil, not for its Black population) cutting across several Southern states. It mostly had Black people, and had most of the U.S.'s Black people. Whatever the merits of that position (U.S. Blacks were never asked whether they wanted independence for the Black Belt region), it no longer applies. African-Americans are now scattered across the U.S., mostly living in the North, mostly living in urban areas North and South. Only a minority still work on the land. (Only a minority of anyone in North America still works on the land—less than 2 percent.) There is no separate Black economy exploited by U.S. capitalism, the way Western imperialism exploits the national economies of Africa or Asia. Blacks work for U.S. companies. They are “integrated” into the U.S. economy—at the bottom. The call to build “Black capitalism” by the nationalists is an admission that a Black colony—the basis for national independence—does not exist. “Black capitalism” is a pro-gram to create a colony—not to free one.

The point of this argument is not to deny that African-Americans could create some kind of independent nation, under conditions of great social stress. Nations have been formed in the past which lacked various of the usual pre-requisites of national existence. The most famous example is the way Zionism succeeded in creating the nation of Israel. It pulled together a (then) mostly European, mostly middle class, scattered people who more-or-less shared a religion and culture and the condition of being repressed, to build a nation by settling on someone else's land. (But the Israelis are still completely dependent on Western imperialism.) There are other examples, such as Pakistan, created by dividing out the Muslim Indians from the Hindu Indians—who had never been two nations in the past. For that matter, what is the United States? It comprises people

from all over the earth, calling themselves the “Americans” (as if the rest of the people of North and South America are not Americans), living on land torn from the Native Americans and the Mexicans.

Similarly, it is possible that a large number of African-Americans could come to want an independent nation in conditions of upheaval and chaos, of collapse of the existing system, of revolution and counterrevolution, where revolutionary anarchism, Stalinism, and fascist racism become the main forces struggling for supremacy. Unfortunately, such a situation may someday develop in the U.S. In such conditions, many Blacks may come to feel that they need separation from the Whites, on the one hand, and that it is possible for them to successfully seize a part of the U.S., on the other. Anarchists, Black and White, would then support this demand. Whether or not they agreed with the idea of independence, anarchists believe in freedom and self-determination, and would have to support the right of the Black population to separate out if it chooses.

Actually anarchists have held contradictory positions on “national self-determination.” As internationalists, they have opposed nationalist ideologies. What is the advantage, they ask, in getting rid of the foreign exploiter in order to be ground down by a native exploiter (who will make a new deal with the foreign exploiter anyway)? In particular they have denied that oppressed peoples can find liberation by creating new states. These new states only continue the history of oppression, often oppressing national minorities within the new nation (as Communist Vietnam oppressed the Chinese-Vietnamese minority within its borders, causing many to flee as boat people). The independent nations of Africa are mixtures of national peoples, sometimes living peacefully with each other and sometimes in murderous conflict with each other (the recent Tutsi/Hutu wars of East Africa being among the worst)—locked within the prisons of the states.

On the other hand, anarchists are opponents of imperial-ism, of national oppression, and of international centralization. They have always advocated the right of communities, regions, and nations to secede from broader associations. Kropotkin argued for the right of national independence by saying that, as anarchy meant the independence of individuals from each other, so a free internationalism required the independence of countries from each other. “If we say no government...how can [we] permit the government of conquered nationalities by the conquering nationalities?” (quoted in Miller, 1976, p. 231). Guerin (1970) goes so far as to claim that Lenin adopted his idea of support for national self-determination from the anarchists (Lenin, 1970a)! Based on the experience of African nationalism, two Nigerian anarchists conclude, “Anarchists...support struggles for national independence in Africa and around the world... However, anarchists also insist that the usefulness of ‘self-determination’ will be very limited as long [as] the state system and capitalism—including Marxist state capitalism—are retained” (Mbah & Igariwey, 1997, p. 106).

National independence for a would-be Black nation could not be won easily. The U.S. ruling class has no intention of losing a significant part of its workforce nor of giving up any part of its national territory. Besides, it could not permit the example. What if Chicanos wanted to do the same in the Southwest? Or the Native American nations? Or if people just generally got the idea that they could break up the mighty U.S. state? Black nationalists argue that Blacks need their own nation because they cannot trust the Whites—any Whites. But they do not explain how, then, the White rulers would be willing to let Blacks separate. They have no strategy, except the religious nationalists who call on Allah or Jehovah to do it for them.

Given the world power of the U.S. rulers, the only way national independence for Blacks could be won would be in the context of a revolution by the whole multi-national U.S. working class

and oppressed people. That is, the power elite would have to be overthrown and broken up before Blacks could separate. There would have to be a united struggle by Black, White, Asian, Latino, and Native American people, straight and Gay, women and men, young and old, able-bodied and “disabled,” workers and oppressed people of all sorts—the coming together of many struggles over many issues. The revolution would have to be international; forces from Mexico may well be fighting on our side. Faced with the mightiest state on earth, nothing less will do.

The same point applies after independence. If a separate Black nation could—somehow—be won without over-throwing the U.S., then its new, weak, economy would be dominated by the imperialist U.S. just as are the economies of Africa today—or the rest of the world. Again, true independence would require the overthrow of the existing U.S.—and world—imperialist system by a unified struggle.

A unified struggle is just what the nationalists do not believe in. Which is what makes them nationalists. The grounds for this are not hard to understand. There is plenty of reason for Blacks to distrust Whites. Blacks tend to have a higher political consciousness than European-Americans. Even in quiet times, most African-Americans understand at least that there is a great deal of oppression and injustice in a way which most Whites do not. Racism is widespread among Whites, whether of the extreme or the mild-liberal varieties. As a result, it is positive for Blacks to build an independent movement, to feel pride in themselves, to organize their communities, to assert their right to decide for themselves. The problem arises when this is hardened into a program which rejects working with other sections of the oppressed, White or otherwise.

The nationalist approach tends to see the U.S. as two solid blocs, the European-Americans versus the African-Americans. This overlooks the splits in both blocs, such as the class conflicts within each or the gender conflict in each. Black feminists have complained about the sexism which has historically been strong among nationalists, but this is a natural tendency among those who see the Black population as a single entity. Denying the splits and oppressions among Blacks, they do not focus on the oppression of Black women by Black men (and, of course, White men).

Nationalists also tend to overlook groups which do not fit into the Black/White conflict. Latinos (Hispanics) are not a “racial” group, although it is often convenient to lump them into “people of color.” They include people of Native American, African, and European ancestry. They come from a wide variety of national cultures. U.S. people of Asian-Indian background are of various skin shades, languages, and cultures. East Asian-Americans (Chinese, Vietnamese, Japanese, etc.) are a “racial” group, but they too come from a wide variety of countries and cultures. Many of them have merged well into the U.S. White culture, rising rapidly into the middle class and above. Yet many are stuck in some of the worst, most exploited, sweatshop jobs in the country. Blacks also have their national conflicts, such as U.S.-born versus West Indian Blacks. Nor are Whites really a homogeneous group.

Consider the Jews, who are currently merging into the White population. Yet, because of their different religion, they remain vulnerable to being victimized by far-right racist fanatics in conditions of crisis. In brief, the nationalist view of the U.S. as basically composed of two racial blocs is misleading.

SOCIALIST VIEWS OF BLACK LIBERATION

The Marxist view has often been to turn the caste analysis on its head, portraying Blacks as essentially a super-exploited section of the working class. This ignores the racial aspect of their oppression. It also ignores the fact that many Black people are not in the poor, super-exploited class but are middle class white-collar workers or in other classes (consider Vernon Jordan, the well-off friend of Bill Clinton). Historically this perspective has opposed any struggle for Black rights on the ground that these rights would automatically be achieved by working class revolution. Even the early Socialist Party of Eugene Debs declared, "We have nothing special to offer the Negro." Some radical Marxists still hold this view, which is in fact racist because it subordinates the Black struggle to the interests of the White workers. In practice it tells Blacks not to raise their own issues because these may rouse the prejudices of White workers and upset class "unity." But it is really the Whites' racial privileges which interfere with real class unity. True class solidarity can only be built around the interests of the most oppressed, those who have no special privileges which tie them to the ruling class. They are the ones who have "nothing to lose but their chains" (in the concluding words of Marx's *Communist Manifesto*).

Other radical Marxists (some Trotskyists) have advocated "revolutionary integrationism." That is, they support integrationism but argue that it can only be won by means of a social revolution. The goals of equality and non-discrimination can only be fully won by revolution. But integrationism is a consistent program which means more than that. To advocate "revolutionary integrationism" is equivalent to advocating "revolutionary liberalism," which is gibberish.

A socialist and class-based analysis of the position of African-American workers must begin with their dual role. On one hand, they are among the most oppressed, super-exploited, section of the working class, paid the lowest wages for the hardest work. In this way, extra profits are squeezed out of them, beyond what the bosses would get if they had to pay for White workers. On the other hand, they have been used against the wages of the White workers. Due to racism, the workers are divided, with the Whites feeling privileged just for being White, and foolishly opposed to joining unions or pressuring the (White)capitalists. Therefore the U.S. workers have fewer benefits (such as child care, unemployment benefits, health care, or union rights) than the West European workers (who have been able to create more unions and social democratic parties). The workers in the U.S. South, the most racist region, have the least benefits of all. In other words, racism hurts Black workers most of all, but it also hurts the whole working class, including White workers. This has been true since Blacks were dragged here to work as slaves.

Among socialist programs, anarchism has had minimal influence in the Black movement. A few ex-Panthers have developed anarchist politics. In recent years there has been an explosion of anarchist groups throughout Africa, which may lead African-Americans to see anarchism as more than a "White" program. The Civil Rights movement itself was mostly local, decentralized, and bottom-up in character, with the would-be leaders following the ranks more than the other way around. Its main method was civil disobedience. That is, it was often anarchistic in structure and methods.

The position I have developed here is an extension of the ideas of the Black revolutionary C.L.R. James, who went from being a pan-Africanist, to a Trotskyist, and finally to a libertarian Marxist (James, 1978, 1996, 1999; Trotsky, 1978, which includes discussions between James and Trotsky). They are also based on a consideration of the ideas developed by Malcolm X, especially in his last year (Breitman, 1968; Gordon, 1979; Malcolm X, 1965, 1966). These ideas were further developed

in a series of discussions on Black liberation by the Revolutionary Socialist League (Landy, 1972; Revolutionary Socialist League, 1973, 1984)—which evolved from an attempted revolutionary-democratic version of Trotskyism to anarchism.

I recall sitting at a literature table at some demonstration, when a fellow with a Mao pin in his cap came over, glanced at the material, and focused on a pamphlet I had written (Gordon, 1979), *Malcolm X: "Revolution Knows No Compromise."* "That's anarchist," he sneered, and walked away. That Maoist was right. I would not reject all com-promises during a struggle, because we must be flexible in tactics. But we should be unswerving in principle, and in this sense anarchist revolution is the end of political compromise.

A HISTORY OF OPPRESSION AND STRUGGLE

From its beginnings, the oppression of people of color has been a central fact of Western capitalism. Hideous war was waged for generations against the tribal, "primitive" nations of Africa and the Americas. The First Nations of the Americas ("Indians") were enslaved and/or exterminated, their lands stolen and their resources looted (such as gold). Black Africans were kidnapped en masse, forced to undergo the middle passage which killed so many, and then coerced into slavery in the Americas. Eventually almost all of Africa would be divided up into colonies "owned" by European states. Similar policies of warfare, robbery, oppression, and colonization were carried out against the more developed nations of North Africa and Asia. (This contradicts a simplistic Marxist view that history develops in an automatic pattern from slavery to feudalism to capitalism. Actually, the development of capitalism caused a vast expansion of slavery, greater than the Roman empire!)

These events happened simultaneously with the uprooting of European peasants, through enclosure and poverty, the destruction of European villages and communities, and the creation of a White working class in Europe and the U.S. The enormous wealth squeezed out of the colonies and slaves was important in setting up capitalist industry which could exploit White workers. In turn the European and U.S. workers served in the industries which used the raw materials from the colonies and slaves (such as the British and French cotton industries), thereby requiring further imperialism and racial exploitation. The exploitation and suffering of White and "colored" workers of the world fed off each other.

This view contradicts the simplistic theory that all of the White population—capitalist, middle class, and working class—lives off the working people of the colonial world, as though, for example, the U.S. was South Africa. The White workers of the U.S. and Europe are exploited. Unlike South Africa, the majority of the work force in the U.S. is European-American. The mostly White workers do most of the work which keeps U.S. capitalism rolling.

The (relatively) high standard of living of the U.S. population is partly due to the super-exploitation and robbery of the "Third World" workers, including the imported cheap clothes and the undervalued oil. But it is also due to the high productivity of U.S. industry. U.S. workers produce a great deal, so that they can be given a lot of material goods even though they still receive only a small fraction of the total value which they produce. Therefore they are exploited although they have a higher living standard than most of the world. (The relatively high living standard is also due to ecological destruction, including the using up of limited raw materials as well as the pollution of the environment, without preparing for the future, when this will have

to be paid for.) The industrialization of Southern Asia is due to the capitalists' combination of the low standard of living of the Asians with the high productivity of U.S. technology. This may raise the standard of living of the Asian workers somewhat, while providing cheap goods for the U.S. population, but it will weaken the U.S. workers, as jobs go overseas.

I do not mean that imperialism or high productivity have automatically resulted in a higher living standard for U.S. workers. Rather they have produced super-profits for U.S. capitalists, which made it possible for them to provide higher wages and social services *when under pressure from U.S. workers, White and Black*.

The Black slaves in the U.S. faced a "White bloc," a majority European-American population which was united against them. From Jefferson to Jackson, the poor White farmers and workers joined with Southern slave owners against the rich Northern capitalists. Uniting in what became the Democratic Party, the Northern White poor were either hostile to Blacks or—at best—did not care about them. For their part, the Northern merchants and bankers were also heavily involved in the profits of Southern industry, first from the slave trade (the "triangular trade") and later from the selling and transporting of cotton and other slave-produced goods. Under these conditions, the Southern slavocracy was able to dominate the national government in all its branches, for generations. Struggle as they might, the slaves were surrounded by enemies.

The opening for the slaves occurred with the breaking up of the White bloc in the 1850s. Northern industry developed which did not depend on the Southern slave system, and along with it, an expansion of the White working class. There also developed a whole region of White farmers in the Midwest (then the "West") whose interests diverged from the slavocracy. They needed national help in transporting their goods ("internal improvements"), such as railroads and canals, while the Northern industrialists needed national banks and tariff protection for their industries—all opposed to the slave masters' interests and program. This does not mean that most Northern and Western Whites cared about the slaves or stopped being hostile to Blacks, but they became hostile to the slave masters and the slave system which supported them. In this atmosphere, there grew up a revolutionary minority which completely opposed slavery: the abolitionists. The split in the White bloc became a political crisis, the Democrats split, the Whig party collapsed, and the Republican party was created. In 1860 Lincoln was elected and the Civil War was on.

Black people played a central role in this crisis. For generations there had been repeated slave uprisings, put down with vicious violence. There had been a constant rebellion in the form of slave escapes through the Underground Railroad. Attempts by the slave owners to get their escaped slaves back from Northern states (the Fugitive Slave Act) polarized the Northern population against the South. The Black population in the North was a major support for the abolitionist movement, subscribing to its journals, writing literature about the life of slaves, and contributing leaders, especially Frederick Douglass. During the Civil War, two hundred thousand Blacks served in the Union army and another two hundred thousand served as teamsters, ditch diggers, and cooks, without being enlisted. These four hundred thousand Blacks made up the largest slave uprising in the history of the world!

Following the Civil War, there was the Reconstruction era, when the Northern bourgeoisie had the opportunity to wipe out the legacy of slavery. Southern Blacks had organized themselves into liberty leagues and armed militias. Controlling the national government, the Republicans could have broken up the landed estates of the ex-slave-masters, giving land to the former slaves as well as to poor Whites. They could have guaranteed the right to vote to all ex-slaves. But they did neither of these things. Facing growing rebellion by the White workers in the North, the

capitalist politicians did not want to go further in attacking property rights. They let the Klan destroy Black organizations, with fire and blood. Without land, Blacks became sharecroppers, virtually re-enslaved. They lost the right to vote. Powerless, they were unable to build coalitions with poor Whites. Northern White workers, in their battles with the capitalists, became willing again to ally with Southern Democrats. Eventually the Republicans and the Democrats made a deal, ending Reconstruction and reestablishing the White bloc.

For a while, in the 1880s and '90s, it looked like the White bloc might be broken by the Populists. Separate organizations of Black and White farmers, in the South and the West, allied against the capitalists. They called for nationalization of the railroads, an end to government support of the banks, and cheap money in order to pay off their debts to the capitalists. They sought for an alliance with industrial workers in the North. They formed farmer cooperatives and a national party independent of the Democrats and Republicans. Their votes grew with each election. The Black-White alliance became closer.

Naturally the capitalists could not permit such a movement to spread. It was destroyed. During the campaign of William Jennings Bryan, the Democrats adopted the least radical of the Populists' demands, and then the capitalists made sure the Republicans won the election. An upturn in the economy took away much of the populists' appeal. The unions did not ally with the populist farmers. And White populist leaders, such as Tom Watson, were turned from opposition to the rich toward opposition to Blacks (and Jews and Roman Catholics). The movement was buried in racism. The threatened White bloc was reestablished.

The White bloc was not disturbed again until the 1930s, when the Great Depression hit the U.S. and the world. Large popular struggles broke out in the U.S., as elsewhere. There were vast struggles to form unions in the major industries, and a growth of the radical left, mainly the Communist Party. A wing of the capitalist class responded by legalizing unions and providing some social services—the New Deal of Franklin D. Roosevelt. Unlike most of Europe, which was torn between the workers' parties and fascism, the U.S. rulers had enough wealth to part with some of it (under great pressure). This served to prevent revolution while maintaining capitalist democracy. They did not need the dangerous adventure of fascism.

With the White workers fighting the capitalists and the capitalists fighting politically among themselves (conservatives versus liberals), the White bloc was cracked. African-Americans mobilized widely. They joined unions in large numbers, in spite of efforts by conservatives to use them as strikebreakers. A significant minority joined the Communist Party (Kelley, 1990; Solomon, 1998). Following their leaders' advice (Black community leaders, union officials, and the Communists), they switched from the Republicans to Roosevelt's Democrats. Meanwhile, Roosevelt maintained a coalition with the racist Southern Democrats and refused to support anti-lynching bills or to integrate the armed forces. He led the U.S. in World War II with a segregated military, while interning thousands of Japanese-American citizens in concentration camps, for no other reason than their national ancestry.

With the coming of World War II, Roosevelt declared the New Deal (that is, liberal reform) over. Many Blacks were opposed to the war and even more adopted the slogan, "Double V for Victory": Victory against fascism abroad and racism at home. There was a movement throughout the Black community for a mass march on Washington to force the Roosevelt administration to desegregate the war industries. The liberal president was forced to promise a fair-employment program (barely enforced in practice) and the liberal Black leadership (particularly A. Philip Randolph, a reform socialist) called off the march. The Communists had opposed it all along, as they

opposed strikes during the war. They were against anything which “weakened” the all-class “national unity” in the war fought in alliance with Russia’s dictator, Stalin (their leader and god). They became the worst finks and red-baiters possible. Between the Communists and the liberals, the White bloc was repaired.

After the war, the White bloc was solidified, this time with-out the Communists, by Cold War anti-Communism. Communists and other leftists were driven from the unions, from universities, and from government employment. Support for Black rights (and peace, unionism, gender equality, etc.) became identified with Communism, the enemy of “Americanism,” and driven out of political discussion for most of the fifties.

What broke the White bloc next was the world-wide movement against imperialism. This included the Chinese revolution, the Indian struggle for independence, the Korean war, the nationalist revolts in Africa against the British and French colonialists, the Cuban revolution, and the Vietnamese national liberation war against France and then against the U.S. The U.S. power elite was replacing the British as the leading capitalist state and therefore opposed the old British and French colonialism in Africa, Asia, and the Pacific. The U.S. sought to reorganize these colonies as officially independent states. Their economies would be dominated by U.S. capitalism through its control of the world market (that is, neo-colonialism, or imperialism without outright ownership of colonies). This is how the U.S. had long ruled Latin America. Meanwhile the (weaker) Russian imperialists sought to increase their international influence by sup-porting anti-U.S. nationalists. (At the same time, the Russians maintained an empire of non-Russian countries within the Soviet Union and among their satellite “allies” in Eastern Europe.) The Communists kept on pointing out U.S. racism and Jim Crow segregation. This seriously weakened U.S. claims for democracy and its attempts to compete ideologically with the Communists and radical nationalists.

The world-wide anti-colonial revolt shook up the U.S. power structure. It especially inspired the U.S. Black population. Black nationalists were deeply impressed and attracted. Inside the U.S., African-Americans were a minority. But they were, it could be seen, part of a big international majority which was in revolt against Western imperialism and White racism!

The integrationist wing was also impressed by the world revolt. The integrationists’ nonviolence was consciously based on the methods Gandhi used to win Indian independence from Britain. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., attend-ed the independence ceremony of Ghana, in Africa. Under the leadership of Nkrumah, the Ghanaians had also won their freedom from Britain by a Gandhian-type of nonviolent campaign. This served as a model for Dr. King and other integrationists.

Black people of all political points of view knew that the U.S. rulers were hypocritically claiming to be for freedom and democracy around the world while maintaining a repressive, racist, one-party system in half the U.S. This hypocrisy made the U.S. power elite vulnerable to an anti-racist struggle. At the same time, the post-war boom meant that the U.S. rulers, as a whole, could afford to make concessions to the Black population, and the poor in general—provided the rulers were put under enough pres-sure by mass demonstrations and popular unrest. The Southern White power structure did not want to make any concessions to Blacks. Neither did the most conservative of the national leadership. But the national, liberal, and even conservative U.S. rulers were willing to. They had no direct investment in maintaining the Jim Crow-legal segregation form of racism. If necessary, they could let this embarrassment go. Some mild anti-discrimination laws could be passed even for the North. And they could provide an increase in social welfare benefits (the “Great Society” of Johnson), to further calm the Black and White poor.

The White bloc split from top to bottom. Part of the U.S. White working population—especially but not only in the South—became rabidly, even hysterically, racist. They supported the right wing of the U.S. rulers and participated in extralegal violence. But other European-American workers became more sympathetic to Blacks and embarrassed at their own racism. They supported the liberal wing of the bourgeoisie. The U.S. population as a whole was drastically shaken by both the Civil Rights/Black liberation struggle and the anti-imperialist struggle. This appeared as the Vietnam war: the resistance of the Vietnamese to U.S. imperialism and the growing movement against the war within the U.S. Inspired by both U.S. Blacks and the Vietnamese, European-American young people (on and off college campuses) became increasingly oppositional, radical, idealistic, and even revolutionary. People started to be aware of oppression in other areas: the oppression of women, of youth, of Gay men and Lesbians, and so on, and to be conscious of environmental degradation.

Often led by Black people, there was an upsurge of unionization, particularly in government employment and in the hospitals. (Dr. King was shot while helping the mostly-Black Memphis sanitation workers fight for union rights.) There was also a wave of wildcat strikes (unauthorized by union officials) in heavy industry and the post office.

There was a great upheaval in the miners' union which threw out the entrenched bureaucracy and began massive strikes. This worker mobilization of the sixties and seven-ties was not as wide as in the thirties, but many workers became radicalized for awhile. (This labor upsurge is often overlooked in reviewing the period.)

The Black movement as a whole became more radicalized. The liberal wing of the movement had won its great victory in defeating Jim Crow, but had no idea how to fight Northern-style racism, unemployment, and poverty (now the norm North and South). Liberal integrationism became discredited as irrelevant in dealing with the misery of the urban ghetto. Much of Black militancy turned into a nationalist direction, especially with the rise of the Black Panthers (who were willing to work in coalitions with White radicals).

But the nationalists also had no program for changing the conditions of U.S. Blacks. They did not know how to concretely turn the international anti-colonial revolt with which they identified into an effective revolution against the U.S. racism. Some nationalists, the Panthers included, were also attracted to revolutionary Marxism. Like most White radicals, this took the form of attraction to Stalinist governments (China, Vietnam, or Cuba). Aside from being morally bankrupt, this gave little guidance to making a revolution in the U.S. Unfortunately, the struggle among the White majority of workers was still at too low a level to pull most radicals toward a working class socialism (Marxist or anarchist).

In the mid-sixties, Malcolm X had developed his own Black liberationist position which rejected both integrationism and nationalism and moved in a pro-socialist direction. He parted with the Nation of Islam, mainly because he became increasingly rebellious at its lack of participation in the Black struggle for rights. (Actually he was expelled for saying at a news conference that he was not "sad" about Kennedy's assassination.) His *Autobiography*, as heavily edit-ed by Alex Haley, gives the impression that Malcolm X was then so impressed by the racial equality of orthodox Islam that he became an integrationist liberal. This is a distortion. As can be seen by his speeches from his last year (Malcolm X, 1965), he remained as militant and radical as ever. And while influenced by orthodox Muslims, he was also impressed by "Third World" revolutionaries of various nationalities and races.

For example, when he was in Ghana he was impressed by the ambassador from Algeria. Malcolm X respected this man as a genuine African revolutionary who had fought French colonialism, but "...to all appearances he was a White man"(1965, p. 212). How did such people fit into Black nationalism? "...I had to do a lot of thinking and reappraising... Can we sum up the solution to the problems confronting our people as Black nationalism? And if you notice, I haven't been using the expression for several months" (1965, pp. 212–213). In the same period, he abandoned his call for a separate Black state. He—and the small group around him—rejected both integrationism and nationalism in favor of "equality" and "human rights." Malcolm X was struck by the fact that the anti-imperialist revolutionaries he observed in Africa and the Middle East almost all regarded themselves as some sort of "socialists"(in fact, state socialists). As his last speeches indicate, he became, at least, pro-socialist as well as internationalist. How he would have evolved cannot be known, since he was gunned down as his thinking was still in process. In many ways, the Black movement—even the Panthers—never again reached the level of theoretical clarity that Malcolm X achieved, in his internationalist rejection of both nationalism and integrationism.

THE REVOLUTIONARY PROGRAM AND WHITE RACISM

This brief, encapsulated, version of U.S. Black-White history has several implications. The African-American struggle constantly presses on the cracks in the White bloc. It presents an alternative to the acceptance, by White people, of the rule of the corporate rich and the patriarchal state. In turn, advances in the Black struggle require splits in the White bloc, to give Blacks the leverage they need. The White oppressed need to ally with Blacks, not only for moral reasons, as important as these are, but in order to oppose capitalist exploitation, patriarchal sexism, war, and ecological destruction. As developed programs, neither liberal integrationism nor various forms of Black nationalism are adequate for Black or White.

With the end of the Civil Rights movement, there has been a continual attack on the gains of African-Americans. The assault on affirmative action has targeted the new Black middle class. "Welfare reform" (the abolition of most of the welfare safety net) has attacked the Black poor. The "war on drugs" and prison expansion has attacked the Black poor as well as youth. Meanwhile there has been an ideological offensive against Blacks (exemplified by *The Bell Curve*; Herrnstein & Murray, 1994), portraying African-Americans as innately stupid, lazy, and criminal.

The aim of these attacks has been to re-cement the White bloc against the Black population. But it has also been an attack on the White workers and oppressed. It has been an effort to "soften them up" and to "set them up" for greater attacks. By bringing the befuddled Whites further under the domination of the White rich, the White workers are made increasingly vulnerable to anti-labor, anti-women, and anti-ecological attacks. The very years that saw the rise of the Republican right by racist appeals also saw a drastic decline in the percentage of workers covered by union protection, attacks on abortion rights, and decreases in environmental protection—all parts of the same program. The attacks on affirmative action for Blacks also weakens the affirmative action opportunities of women of all races. This is to be expected. There is not that much money to be saved for the ruling class by cutbacks on welfare spending on Blacks. A serious improvement in the profitability of the rich requires these other attacks—on White workers, White women, and the environment. Racism is not good for the Whites, besides not being good. The real interests of the White majority run with those of the Black population—if the Whites can see it.

The racism of European-Americans can be of different kinds, which is sometimes confusing. There is the hot, hysterical, active hatred of the extremists. Especially with the end of Jim Crow, this has become fairly marginalized. Only a few Whites really feel strong antipathy toward Black people. These strong haters are there, occasionally going out to kill someone, but mostly they are on the fringe. As society falls apart, they will, no doubt, grow and be mobilized as fascist forces. So they must be taken seriously in the long run. But right now, even the incipient fascists of the Christian right make a point of denying that they are anti-Black.

More widespread is a cold liberal racism, of Whites who turn their faces away, who ignore Black people. They act like Whites are not so much superior to Blacks as that Whites are the only people around. They treat Blacks as nonexistent. Their dislike of Black people is mostly class prejudice: they imagine that all Blacks are poor people and then they express their dislike of poor people (lazy, irresponsible, too many children, etc.). They have little dislike of middle class or upper working class Blacks, who can be imagined as people like them (the Whites). They ignore their Blackness.

This is sometimes difficult for African-Americans to realize. After all, the effects of racism on them is something they are quite conscious of. It can be hard to realize how much European-Americans can be unaware of the evil they maybe doing. When something happens to Blacks, such as the flooding of their communities by drugs, some Blacks may see this as a White conspiracy to harm the Black people. Actually the Mafia or contra businesspeople are callously looking for a market among oppressed people, just as do the legal tobacco and liquor businesses, which also focus on the Black market. The rest of the White community just does not care. They don't give a damn.

Especially among nationalists, this misperception has lead to charges of "genocide" against African-Americans. The word "genocide" was invented after World War II to cover a specific crime: the attempted extermination of a people. Throughout history this has been rare. Usually masters have sought to keep the oppressed alive. But occasionally there have been efforts to utterly wipe out a people. This includes, of course, the Nazi attack on the European Jews, as well as the Turkish assault on the Armenian people and the U.S. destruction of the Native Americans. More recently have been the Hutu attacks on the Tutsi in Rwanda.

Genocide does not include the way the White rich brought Africans here to work as slaves. The Whites did not want to destroy the Blacks but to *increase* a Black population. The Whites were, however, willing to kill some of the Blacks—the more assertive ones—in order to terrorize the rest into submission. This is an old pattern. And if many Africans died on the Middle Passage ships, the Whites did not really care. So today, the White capitalist state sup-presses Black people, sends military-like cops against their homes, and jails their youth in a so-called War on Drugs. This is to control the Black population, but it is not to wipe it out. The Blacks still serve useful purposes for the capitalists and the state, nor would most Whites accept an actual extermination policy (that is, death camps).

It is important to make this distinction between a vicious racial hatred, with its possible policy of genocide, and the cold indifference of most European-Americans. Without such a distinction, Blacks will not be prepared to fight against the real danger of a fascist movement if it develops (as if the fascists and liberal democrats are the same). It is also easier to imagine a break in the White bloc, and a possible Black-White alliance, if we realize that most Whites, for all their blindness, do not burn with hatred for Blacks.

BLACK ORGANIZATION

To fight for their needs, African-Americans will—and should—use all sorts of organizations. All-black organizations will be useful. Black communities will be organized by Black organizations, just as steelworkers are organized in a steelworkers' union. Black people have special interests as Blacks and therefore have a need to organize themselves. All-Black organizations are not the equivalent of all-White organizations. Black organizations are organizations of the oppressed, while White organizations—*when organized as Whites*—are organizations of the oppressors. (This is not the same thing as a club of Estonian-Americans or a union local of teachers in an all-White town in the Mid-West; these are not organized as Whites.) Nor do all-Black organizations necessarily contradict the goal of equality. Historically, Blacks have often used their community organizations to spearhead struggles for racial equality.

There is also the likelihood of Black organizations within broader, multi-racial, organizations, such as unions or political organizations. Black caucuses are self-organizations within broader organizations. They have a certain ambivalence about them. On the one hand, they may aim at including all the Blacks within the organization, representing their interests. On the other, they may (as “caucus-es”) be based on a specific program, with which all the Blacks in the union (or whatever) may not agree. How much of a contradiction exists depends on several factors (how detailed is the program, or how much disagreement, if any, exists among the Black members). It is also possible for an organization to set up an official Black “department,” an office or committee representing the organization in its work with Black members or outside contacts. Often the needs of Black within-organization organizations can be met by periodic conferences with little or non-going structure between meetings.

Yet there is also a need for multi-racial, multi-national organizations. I have already mentioned cross-racial interest groups, such as unions or women's organizations, or community organizations in multi-ethnic neighborhoods. But also there will be political organizations of minorities voluntarily associated around common political programs (ultimately these are also interest groups, since their programs will benefit one section of society or another). One such minority is those who believe in anarchism and anti-authoritarian socialism. These people, Black and White and of other racial and national backgrounds, need to unite—not to become the new rulers but to struggle against the parties and groupings who stand in for new or existing rulers. The libertarian socialists/anarchists must pool their resources in order to advocate the most popular self-organization possible. Believing in an internationalist, pluralistic society, they themselves must build an internationalist, pluralist revolutionary organization. A revolution in North America will only happen if it includes every oppressed grouping in the country, including people of every race and nationality. Building towards this is only possible with a revolutionary organization committed to this goal. We need each other.

A revolutionary movement will need European-Americans from many walks of life, but especially from oppressed sections of society. They are not oppressed as “White” people but are as workers, as women, as youth, as Gays and Lesbians, as people who need a safe, clean ecology and a world without war. Rebelling includes breaking their White bloc with the ruling corporate rich and allying instead with oppressed people of color.

A revolutionary movement and organization will also need those regarded as “people of color,” or as “oppressed nationalities” or “peoples” or “minorities.” In the U.S., this includes African-Americans, Hispanics, Asians, and Native Americans; in Canada it also includes Québécois; in

Mexico, Native American communities. These peoples show enormous national and racial differences among themselves as well as differences within each people. But overall they are defined as different from the white/Anglo mainstream. The majority of U.S. people of color are at the bottom of society—from the Black ghettos to the barrios. All together, oppressed peoples are a large minority of the population, concentrated in strategic parts of society. Overall they have fewer privileges to lose than the European-American population. While most are not yet revolutionaries, they have the fewest illusions in the system.

Others have advocated a multi-racial/multi-national movement. A few elections ago, for example, Jesse Jackson ran for the Democratic Party's presidential nomination while calling for a "Rainbow Coalition." This idea was enormously popular among African-Americans (so popular that most nationalist organizations supported Jackson), as well as among other oppressed groupings—including some White farmers and unionized workers. But the Rainbow Coalition died as an organization when Jackson's campaign ended. Its purpose had been to elect someone to office, so he could do politics for the people. It had been tied to the liberal, pro-capitalist and pro-statist, politics of the dying liberal wing of the Democratic Party.

It is not, then, enough to be for "unity"—the question is, "unity on what program?" The only firm, lasting basis for multi-racial/multi-national unity is on an internationalist socialist and anarchist program: the overthrow of capital-ism, the state, patriarchy, and white supremacy—and their replacement by a self-organized, radically democratic and decentralized, cooperative society. That is why there needs to be a multi-national anarchist organization to fight for this program.

This society will face economic crisis and decay; its stability will crack. The mainstream politics of conservatism and liberalism will be discredited. Millions of people from all sections of society will be in motion. They will be interested in new, "extremist," ideas. Many deluded European-Americans will listen to those who blame the crisis on African-Americans, Hispanics, Asians, as well as Jews, blindly unaware of their real corporate enemies. Many deluded African-Americans and others will listen to pro-capitalist/pro-statist crackpots like Farrakhan or his successors, who blame their problems on Asians and Jews and an undifferentiated "White" society, also ignoring their real corporate enemies. A reformist socialist movement is likely to arise, calling for a multi-racial/multi-national movement, based on the fragile program of reforming capitalism and the state.

To compete with these forces, there will need to be an organization trying to persuade people of anarchist ideas. It cannot be assumed that anarchism will automatically win out. That has never happened. Freedom must be fought for, argued for, and organized for. Wherever possible, anarchists should find ways to work together on common issues with other organizations (liberal, social democratic, Leninist, nationalist, etc.). Socialist anarchists do not have all the answers and must be willing to learn from others—with-out abandoning their goal.

At first, any North American anarchist organization will probably be mostly White and middle class, with a few exceptions. To turn itself into a multi-racial, multi-national organization, where African-Americans of working class background can feel comfortable will not be easy. It will require work and political commitment. It will be made a little easier by the growth of anarchist groups in several African countries.

Anti-authoritarians are rightly concerned with any signs of condescension or elitism, of anyone "telling" others "what to do," especially of Whites lecturing to Blacks. It has been argued that White anarchists (such as myself) have no right to "tell" Black people "what to do," and therefore should keep quiet. Unfortunately, the Black community is already politically organized, and

by Black people with ties to various White-dominated institutions. In particular, the dominant political organization is the Democratic Party, which is an agency of the White capitalist power structure. The most influential institutions are the church-es (often affiliated with White church federations). Whatever their virtues, they usually preach submissiveness and acceptance of the status quo. Then there are the various nationalists (who would create a Black colony of White America) and the Marxist-Leninists (who would create a new Black and White ruling class, if they could). And so on. Are all these agencies of oppression to speak freely among Blacks but anarchist revolutionaries should keep quiet? The issue is not the need for tact or a willingness to work with churches, etc., but the need to win over Black people to anti-authoritarian socialism—for everyone's sake.

The Anarchist Library
Anti-Copyright



Wayne Price
Anarchism and African American Liberation
December 4, 2001

Retrieved on 6th May 2021 from utopianmag.com
Published in *The Utopian* Vol. 2.

theanarchistlibrary.org