

The Anarchism of Blackness

**Review of Zoe Samudzi & William C. Anderson, “As Black as Resistance;
Finding the Conditions for Liberation.”**

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There are almost no books on anarchism and African-American liberation, which makes this an exceptional work. In the last period of radicalization (the “sixties”), very few radicals, African-American or white, were anarchists or other types of libertarian socialist. Almost all radicals were attracted by the apparent anti-imperialism of Mao, Ho Chi Minh, and Castro, and the leaders of liberation struggles in Africa. Therefore those who organized and theorized about revolutionary African-American liberation were overwhelmingly Marxist-Leninists and/or statist nationalists. If I had to think of someone who did not fit this category, I would have to go back to the Black revolutionary, C.L.R. James, who was a libertarian (autonomist) Marxist (James 1948). (Anarchists **were** involved in the U.S. Civil Rights movement, but mainly as anarchist-pacifists. They were perceived as nonrevolutionary pacifists.)

After the height of this period, there were a number of African-American militants who had been members of the Black Panthers and the Black Liberation Army. When in prison a small number reconsidered their politics and philosophies. Mostly unconnected to each other, they turned to revolutionary anarchism. (See Black Rose Federation 2016.) Meanwhile, there had been a general failure and conservatism of the “Communist” states, from the Soviet Union to China to Vietnam and Cuba. Among those who rejected the oppressive, racist, and exploitative status quo, there was now a rejection of Marxism-Leninism. There was a revived interest in the other revolutionary tradition, that of anarchism.

This short book is a product of the new period. It is an expansion of the authors’ essay, “The Anarchism of Blackness.” They quote repeatedly from one of the Black anarchists, Lorenzo Kom’boa Ervin (but, surprisingly, not from any of the others). Their main point is that African-Americans are not and cannot be fully merged into U.S. society, a white supremacist state established as a colonial-settler society. Black people remain essentially outside of and oppressed by this society. Despite the end of legal Jim Crow, the passage of anti-discrimination laws, and various forms of “affirmative action,” African-Americans remain primarily on the bottom of society, among the most oppressed and exploited parts of the population. Meanwhile there are on-going attacks on whatever gains have been won (such as the right to vote). Therefore the struggles of African-Americans, pushing upon established order from below, continue to fundamentally threaten the whole system of “law and order,” of established politics, and the normal electoral alternatives. They point in a different direction altogether.

“We are Black because we are oppressed by the state; we are oppressed by the state because we are Black.” (Samudzi & Anderson 2018; 9) “Black people’s place in the fight against white supremacist capitalism is unique since so much of structural violence entails anti-blackness... Blackness is the anti-state just as the state is anti-Black... Black Americans [are] a group of people upon whose suffering the state is constructed.... Understanding the anarchistic condition of blackness and the impossibility of its assimilation into the U.S. social contract, however, could be empowering.” (112–113) This points to a goal of “a complete dismantling of the American state as it presently exists...” (3) and “creating an alternate system of governance that is not based on domination, hierarchy, and control.” (xvii)

This rejection of “assimilation” as a goal does not lead Samudzi and Anderson to adopt Black nationalism. Partly because they believe that “*Black nationalism in the United States can sometimes entail these quasi-settler claims to the land...*” (25) This raises “*the question of the fate of the Native American communities in those states*” (26) “*We are not settlers. But championing the creation of a Black majoritarian nation-state, where the fate of Indigenous people is ambiguous at best, is an idea rooted in settler logic.*” (28) They also doubt that a nationalist approach is adequate to deal with the dire threat of world-wide environmental catastrophe caused by the system. And they point

out that the upholders of Black oppression are not only European-Americans. “*There are many politicians and state operatives of color, Black and otherwise, working for white supremacy.*” (13)

Samudzi and Anderson especially object to “*Black nationalism’s frequent exclusion of*” Black and other women and LGBTQ people (70–71). “*We must also explicitly name different gendered and sexual identities within blackness. Any truly liberatory politics must speak to the unique needs and vulnerabilities of Black women and girls, especially Black queer and transgender women and girls.*” (68)

Others have rejected both total assimilation (“integration”) and Black nationalism, such as C.L.R. James and Malcolm X in his last year. Probably most African-Americans do not want to separate from the U.S.A. They mostly want to win the democratic rights promised by the U.S. tradition—but without giving up their Black identity and pride and their special organizations (such as the Black church and communities).

However, under the great pressures and upheavals which might lead to a revolution, **it is possible** that many African-Americans **might** come to want their own separate country (whether with its own state or as an anarchist community). If this should develop, surely anarchists should support their right to have this if that is what they want. **We believe in freedom.** This is not discussed in the book.

Samudzi and Anderson advocate “*a truly intersectional framework and multifaceted approach to Black liberation.*” (28) “*Our work to end the deterioration of nature must be understood as a necessary and inseparable component of a global anticapitalist movement.*” (35) They call for a more united U.S. Left. “*There is not a unified Left in this country...If we do not build that functionally cohesive Left...the rights of all people oppressed by capitalist white supremacy will inevitably continue to erode.*” (17) But the book is weak in terms of how to build that unified Left as part of a global anticapitalist movement—nor does it distinguish between the statist, authoritarian, Left and a libertarian, anti-statist, Left. They are undoubtedly right to raise a pro-Black, pro-feminist, pro-LGBTQ, and pro-ecology orientation. (They have a discussion of armed self-defense and gun control which I found rather confused.) But how can these be integrated into an “intersectional and multifaceted framework”?

African-American Liberation and Class

The weakest part of the book is its lack of analysis of **why** African-Americans are oppressed, and **what functions** this oppression performs for the system. This should lead to an analysis of the economic role of white supremacy in producing a surplus of wealth to maintain the ruling class, the corporations, the state, and all other capitalist institutions—a surplus of wealth which is squeezed out of the working population. They refer frequently to “capitalism” and sometimes to “classism,” but do not see that **the capitalist class system is a system of exploitation**, of draining wealth from working people.

Africans were not brought to the Americas in order for white people to have someone to look down on. They were kidnapped and enslaved to become a form of worker (chattel slaves). They were bought and sold on a market so they could be used to produce commodities (tobacco, cotton, etc.) to be sold on the world market.

With the end of slavery, African-Americans continued to be oppressed, serving two functions. **First**, they were kept as a vulnerable group which could be super-exploited. They were paid less

than the rest of the working class and given the worst jobs, therefore producing a large amount of profit. **Second**, they were used to keep the working class as a whole divided and weak, so long as the white workers accepted the “psychological wages of whiteness,” namely feeling superior to someone. While the white workers got some small benefits (more job security, slightly better pay, etc.), they paid a high price in economic and political weakness. (Their inability, to this day, to win universal health care, unlike in every other Western imperialist country, is only one example.) The hopeful aspect of this situation is that it is in the immediate material interest of white workers to oppose racism—as well as being morally right. This gives anti-racists something to appeal to.

On the second function of racism: In the 1800s, the great Black abolitionist, Frederick Douglass, wrote about his experiences as a rented-out slave on the Baltimore shipyards, surrounded by racist white workers. While well aware of the difference between chattel slavery and wage slavery, “*Douglass keenly grasped the plight of the white poor. In their ‘craftiness,’ wrote Douglass, urban slaveholders and shipyard owners forged an ‘enmity of the poor, laboring white man against the blacks,’ forcing an embittered scramble for diminished wages, and rendering the white worker ‘as much a slave as the black slave himself.’ Both were ‘plundered and by the same plunderer.’ The ‘white slave’ and the ‘black slave’ were both robbed, one by a single master, and the other by the entire slave system. The slaveholding class exploited the lethal tools of racism to convince the burgeoning immigrant poor, said Douglass, that ‘slavery is the only power that can prevent the laboring white man from falling to the level of the slave’s poverty and degradation.’*” (Blight 2018; 77) To this day, the “crafty” capitalists continue this game of divide-and-conquer, between white workers and African-American workers, and also among Latino, Asian, and immigrant workers.

While not referring to this key aspect of capitalist racism, the authors do discuss the relationship between the oppression of African-American women and exploitative labor. There has been, and is, a “*raced and gendered labor extraction [in]...the functioning of capitalism...Black women’s labor was central to the development of the capitalist state and the American slaveocracy... Gendered anti-blackness formed the cornerstone of Jim Crow modernity...*” (71) African-American women faced a “*triple labor (domestic, industrial, and sexual...)*” (72)

This is entirely true and very insightful. It is odd that the authors do not further discuss the “raced labor extraction” from Black workers (of all genders and orientations) which plays a central role in the “labor extraction” from the entire, multiracial, multiethnic, multinational, and multigendered, working class. Historically, **Black workers, female and male, have played key roles in U.S. working class struggles, as well as in broader African-American struggles.** An intersectional working class strategy should focus on this (which was the point of James 1948).

The Revolutionary Goal?

The book lacks a strategy for African-American liberation, beyond broad insights. “*People may ask for answers as though there are distinct formulas... The solution to capitalism is anticapitalism. The solution to white supremacy is the active rejection of it and the dual affirmation of Indigenous sovereignty and Black humanity.*” (114) This is not good enough.

It is not clear whether their rejection of the U.S. state and white supremacist capitalism implies a revolution to them. I do not mean a popular insurrection as an immediate goal, but as a strategic

end-in-view, a guiding goal of eventually overturning the state and all forms of oppression. “*It is possible that a people’s liberation is a perpetual project and must constantly be renewed and updated.*” (114) Samudzi and Anderson write of “*a long struggle [in which] meaningful steps toward liberation do not have to be dramatic.*” (115) Fair enough, but they do not speak of how to get to an eventual destruction of the institutions of racist-sexist-antiecological-capitalism. **A revolution may be a “long struggle” but not “a perpetual project.”**

It is not clear whether they are anarchists. I do not mean that I doubt their sincerity, since I take them at their word. But they themselves waffle on whether to call themselves anarchists. They took “anarchism” out of the title of their book (from the original essay), and write, “*We may choose not to limit or misrepresent the diversity of our struggle by explicitly naming ourselves as anarchists...*”(66) Their values and perspectives seem to be consistent with anarchism. They were clearly influenced by Black anarchists. I do not raise this point to condemn them—they may call themselves whatever they like. But this wishy-washy attitude toward owning the “anarchist” label weakens their revolutionary perspective. Similarly, while they repeatedly refer to “anticapitalism,” they never write of “socialism” (let alone “communism”).

Conclusion

There are very few writings on anarchism and African-American liberation, which makes this an interesting work. It clearly places racial oppression at the center of U.S. society, interacting and overlapping with all other forms of oppression and exploitation. It insists that Black liberation will mean the destruction of the present U.S. state and sexist-racist capitalism. Its main weaknesses are a lack of a strategy and a failure to integrate a class analysis of capitalism into its program and perspective. They fail to see the special role of African-Americans in the working class and in the U.S. revolution.

References

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