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Beyond Nationalism But Not Without It

Ashanti Alston

1999

“What motivates me more than anything else about anarchism and its relevance to Black revolution is that it has offered me some powerful insights into why we have not been able to recover from our defeat (the 60’s revolution) and advance forward to the kinds of unities, organizations and activities that make for invincible revolutionary movements.”

– Anarchist Panther, Vol. 1 #1

“...we have been taught either to ignore our differences, or to view them as causes for separation and suspicion rather than as forces for change. Without community there is no liberation, only the most vulnerable and temporary armistice between an individual and her oppression. But community must not mean a shedding of our differences, nor the pathetic pretense that these differences do not exist.”

– Audre Lorde

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This great Audre Lorde quote, taken from Arsenal #4 (p. 4), introduces their discussion on the same theme. As a Black anarchist TIRED of primarily white anarchists just dismissing nationalism, I truly appreciate Arsenal and ONWARD taking this on as two of the newest newspaper/mags on the scene.

There are all kinds of Nationalisms and there are all kinds of reactions to nationalism. Personally, I have moved through and grown within some of the Black Nationalisms specific to the Black Community.

Black nationalism saved my life, in a sense, as a teenager in the 1960s. It “jarred” my unconscious acceptance of amerikkanism dogging my peoples and helped me see the larger picture. I am a 60’s child. There was Malcolm, there was H. Rap Brown and Stokeley Carmichael of the Black Power movement, and then there was the Black Panther Party. All were nationalists, all represent an evolution of nationalism within the black community. Because of the totally racist, genocidal dynamic within this Babylonian Empire, the black nationalist understood that we must primarily look to ourselves to free ourselves. And none of these thinkers felt it was necessary to ‘check in’ with The White Man – from the ruler to the revolutionary – to see if it was okay. It was about our survival as a people, not as that mythical “working class” or that equally mythical “citizen.” For me, as this teenager who had just witnessed the 60’s Rebellions in my own thoroughly racist hometown, nationalism was a lifesaver: “WE MUST LOVE EACH OTHER.” “BLACK IS BEAUTIFUL.” “WE MUST CONTROL OUR OWN COMMUNITIES.”

As an anarchist searching for some good anarchist shit from the 60’s to hold up and show “proof” that the anarchists were better on the position of Nationalism than the Marxists and Leninists, I found hardly anything! I found some positive stuff from a “libertarian” publication, but, to my surprise, they represented the “anarcho-CAPITALIST” tendency! Yet, I found them to be on point and consistent on RESPECTING nation-

Harlems / Spanish Harlems / Watts / hip-hop communities / villages of the Carolina coast / college communities / gay-lesbian-bisexual-transgender communities / zulu nation / new afrikan / religious communities that come together mainly on Saturday or Sunday / squatter communities / outlaw communities / kemeti communities / ibo-ghanaian-sierra leonean-ethiopian-rasta neighborhoods / nomadic poet-artist tribes / and then those of us who just be plain ignorant and harmless and crazy when we have to be and fun-loving and like to journey through and between communities and sometimes just create new mixed ones ... WHAT IF? ... and HOW?

Ella Baker said we can do it if we can trust ourselves and get away from leadership-led revolution; Kwesi Balagoon said we can do it if we willing to create a chaos that will shut this mutha down; Audre Lorde said we can do it if we LEARN TO LOVE AND RESPECT OUR BEAUTIFUL DIVERSITY and reject the tools of our oppressors; Harriet Tubman said, ain't a better way to live THAN AT-WAR FOR A RIGHTEOUS CAUSE; and Franz Fanon said if we smack that mutha across the face, drive that pig outta our territory at the point of a gun, it IS LIBERATING FOR THE SOUL.

Through the Imagination, All is possible.

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alism and national liberation. (The Libertarian Forum of the late 60's and early 70's. Karl Hess, Joseph Peden, and Murray N. Rothbard). They at least understood that black people's nationalist struggle was a struggle against the State, the Babylonian state. They also looked at what the nationalist groups were doing in their actual grassroots practice, like creating concrete defenses against repression and alternatives in survival institutions. Thus, they liked what the Panthers were doing on the ground through their programs and supported that kind of nationalism as being compatible with "anarchism on the ground." Paul Goodman made similar observations of the early civil rights movement groups. But it was understood that these groups were dealing with issues of survival against genocide, and that these groups were developing their own analyses and programs to rally their communities. The libertarians of LF were, interestingly enough, critical of the Panthers when the Party turned toward Marxism and other authoritarian ideologies because in their "on the ground" practice, the survival programs were no longer spontaneous responses to specific oppressions but were increasingly kept under the tight control of the Party. Power to the People -vs.- Power to the Party?

Nationalism and statism are different because nationalism can be anti-state. But they can have commonalities in that nationalism may only be against a particular kind of state, such as a Racist State, or a Fascist State. Anarchism and nationalism are similar in that they are both anti-statist, but what does it mean when the specific anarchist movements within a specific country are racist and dismissive of any and all nationalism, be it reactionary or revolutionary? For me, even the nationalism of a Louis Farrakhan is about saving my people, though it is also thoroughly sexist, capitalist, homophobic and potentially fascist. Yet, it has played an important part in keeping a certain black pride and resistance going. Their "on the ground" work is very important in keeping an anti-racist mentality going. As a black anarchist, that's MY issue to deal with cuz they'se MY

FOLKS. But it points to where anarchism and nationalism have differences: most anarchists in the U.S. have NO understanding of what it means to be BLACK in this fucked up society. We do not have the luxury of being so intellectual about this excruciating boot on our collective neck, this modern-day middle-passage into the Prison Industrial Complex and other forms of neo-slavery.

As a postmodernist anarchist, identity politics is important to me. Every time I hear someone talk about my people as if we are just some “working class” or “proletariat” I wanna get as far away from that person or group as possible, anarchist, Marxist, whatever. As a postmodernist anarchist I also find my people’s experience the foundation from which we will find our way to liberation and power. That’s what I get from being the “insurrection of subjugated knowledges.” My nationalism gave me that kind of pride because it was such a rejection of White thinking or at least a decentering of the primacy of white thought, capitalist, socialist, whatever. Folks outside of our experience need to respect that they ain’t got no monopoly on revolutionary thinking and damn sure ain’t got none on revolutionary practice. It is easy to sit back and intellectualize about our nationalism from the modernist, eurocentric framework of rational, scientific, materialist models. While one does that, it is our nationalism that constantly rallies our people to come together, remember our history, love ourselves, dream on and fight back. Black anarchists and anti-authoritarian revolutionaries understand the limitations of nationalism in terms of its historical sexism, hierarchy, or its modernist trappings in general. But we also recognize anarchism’s modernist trappings in the form of American racist/class privilege when it comes to people of color.

The efforts of Lorenzo Kom’boa Ervin, Greg Jackson and others to build an organization/federation of black community partisans/organizers is an example of uniting black revolutionary nationalism and anarchism. The Black Fist organization

and publication, even if called generally a people of color or third world anti-authoritarian organization, understood the necessity to be grounded in the experiences of black and brown communities. Thus, the experiences of the Panthers and the Brown Berets and similar groups were essential. The question seems to be whether white anarchists and anti-authoritarians can work with such groups. Even if those two groups no longer exist, their experiences are important.

White folks need to deal with being ANTI-RACIST ALLIES to folks of color communities and activists. Activists in particular because we are usually whites’ entry point into any possible relationship with our communities. Anarchist theory and practice cannot take the form of a mere adherence to the founding fathers and canonical practices, such as Kropotkin, Bakunin, and the Spanish Civil War. Tired of hearing it! Anarchism HERE in Babylon must reflect our unique problems and possibilities for struggle. Our struggles are not just against capitalism. Too simple. Our struggles are not just against racism. That’s also too simple. There are all kinds of negative “isms” we are fighting against and, just as important, all kinds of worlds we are fighting for. That’s why the whole idea and practice of “convergences” and “spokescouncils” are so important to activists in general to learn from and enhance because they are about making space for all “Voices” to be heard and factored into the decision-making so that whatever activities comes forth from it prefigures the kind of new worlds we truly want.

I end this by advising: WHITE ANARCHISTS: DEAL WITH BEING THE BEST ANTI-RACIST ALLIES YOU CAN. WE NEED YOU – AND YOU NEED US – BUT WE WILL DO THIS SHIT WITHOUT YOU.

To my folks of color: COME ENVISION: envision a world of worlds within our world where there’s principled co-existence within the wonderful diversity of the Black Community.