

Building a Non-Eurocentric Anarchism in Our Communities

Dialogue with Ashanti Alston

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The following is an interview with Ashanti Alston Omowali, an African descent anarchist activist, who started his political militancy back in the '60s in the Black Panther Party. He was also a member of the Black Liberation Army, and because of his revolutionary activities spent more than a decade in prison. In prison he moved forward to anarchism and after his release he has participated with numerous libertarian initiatives and publications, and is one of the founders of Anarchist People of Color (APOC), a network that brings together anarchists of colour in the remarkably racist US. Ashanti also participates in a number of initiatives ranging from solidarity with political prisoners in the US to the Institute for Anarchist Studies.

This interview was done on March 9th, 2009, during the time he spent in Ireland when he came as a speaker for the 2009 Dublin Anarchist Bookfair. In the interview we talk about the APOC initiative, the links between exploitation and other forms of oppression, of the need to go beyond Eurocentrism and the place of people of colour and Third World struggles in shaping a really internationalist movement that learns from experiences everywhere. He also reflects on the roots and legacy of the Black Liberation Movement and of his own experiences in it.

1. How and why the idea of Anarchist People of Colour came about?

In the US the anarchist movement I would say since the '90s it grew a lot and a lot of people wanted to know what it was about, including many people of colour, because the traditional revolutionary groups that were Marxist-Leninist or nationalists were not appealing to them for being so rigid in their ideology and the loyalty they wanted you to adhere to, it was something that a lot of folks did not want. But folks that were moving into anarchism from Black, Latino and Asian communities, and even indigenous communities, found that their experiences within anarchist groups were racist.

It may have been good in the sense that they were practicing direct democracy, or they would be active in the street demonstrations, but they thought themselves to be "exoticised" within these predominant white groups, because they were from African, Asian, Latino or Indigenous descent that they were treated as if they were so special, that wasn't a good experience. Or the racism of white anarchists was just too much to put up with, and people weren't fighting racism.

So at some point towards the late '90s, the call went out to have a conference that would be for anarchist of colour, anti-authoritarians of colour, or people who were interested in something beyond traditional ways of organisations, so in 2003 it was the first APOC conference. And I said about 300 people came to Detroit, Michigan, in the US, to a university called Wayne State University. And that was a great conference which allowed many of us to see each other for the first time, and we realized we had so much in common, but we needed to work from foundation where we knew that we would respect each other, and we'd have a way to work in our communities in a more wholesome way.

2. You talk about having to face discriminatory or racist practices within the anarchist movement, which was often not explicit practices but part of a culture, we could say... how do you think that this racism that is entrenched in people's culture can be fought within the movement and within society at large?

In the anarchist movement we were basically asking to white anarchists to deal with racism within anarchist organisation. Many of them were not understanding that being born in a racist society, and if you were born white in that society, you were not only being raised with a sense of superiority but that you have privileges, and we wanted them to face that fact in their interactions with us, because most of them from the anarchist movement come from privileged background. So deal with the fact that you have some behaviours that come up very offensively to us, that are very insulting to us, since they have never lived the type of circumstances in which we've had to live in, and we want us just to be with you and not recognize that when we go back to our communities we are with our backs against the wall, but when we are with you things are pretty nice and you just want everything to always be pretty nice. We want to tell you that in the US you pretty much got communities of colour that are locked down. So we need to fight racism not only in the institutions, whether it is schools, around jobs or police brutality in communities of colour, but fight it within anarchist institutions, as a way to fight racism in the US in general, what's all still one struggle.

3. Women found the same experience within the movement, and they were pushed to form women only groups. How do you feel that this relates to the fact that there are other types of oppression that interact with class struggle, but in which class struggle alone does not explain everything... I feel some sectors within the anarchist movement seem to be blind to these other forms of oppression, what do you think about it?

Something I've learnt, and that I'm still learning by reading and listening to other people, is that we have to look at the fact that most of our understanding of anarchism comes from Europe. And I don't think that we realize that it may have taught us a lot, in terms of another way to live and organise, or how to be open to differences, but we don't really get that coming out of Europe it will also brings us a perspective on class struggle that they pretty much want to adhere to as if it was something Biblical, that if other struggles are anarchistic and they don't come out of working class struggles that does not make them any less anarchists because it is not workers taking it on. It may be peasants taking it on, it may be people tied to the land in other ways. So for me one cannot just read the anarchist classics coming out of Europe, but one have to learn from other people's living experiences and writings on their experiences. Even if those experiences and writings are not from people that say "I am an anarchist". But you can tell pretty much from their writings and experiences that these are anarchistic struggles, you know, that play a big

part even today in being at the forefront of some of the most challenging struggles against the Empire.

4. You have mentioned Chiapas as being a big influence to you. How do you think the struggle of the people of Chiapas relates to the type of anarchism you defend?

I think the struggle of the Zapatistas played a big part because it made you realize that revolutionary thinking can come from many social categories... for instance, in Chiapas you are talking about the South East of Mexico, which is one of the poorest regions of Mexico, predominantly Mayan people that have been written off by capitalism and imperialism. And yet here there's a struggle that is producing the most cutting edge thinking on revolution today. To me the Zapatista struggle really made important, for example, not only ethnic community struggles, but the struggle of women, struggle in the universities, struggles in the cultural field of life, and how all of these are part of a larger picture. But when they say that we can create a world where many worlds exist, they also want you to recognize that you are in a world where many worlds do exist and that no one world can come along and predominate over all the other ones, "I have the only solution, I have the only revolutionary way to go".

5. You mention other important point, and it is that classic socialist thought has been a struggle for a hegemonic thought for a uniform culture, and yet your views come from the opposite view, that is diversity. How do you think the anarchist movement can shape this view of diversity with the need for unity of struggle, so we can talk of a movement that while having unity preserves this diversity?

Well, it is interesting that some of the things that have allowed me to look at struggles around the world and even struggles in my own community differently, was me reading a lot of revolutionary thought that came out of some of the older liberation struggles and some of the most recent university struggles that may have taken place in France and Germany, so we are dealing with people like Michel Foucault, or we are dealing with German thinkers who were talking for example of hegemony and some other different concepts on the intersection of different oppressions and how we have to look at the world in a more complex way. What it tells me is that if anarchism wants to be vibrant, if anarchism is to remain vibrant it must be open to difference, it must be open to be enriched by other people's struggles, other people's thought, other people's practices which challenge even some of the core beliefs of anarchism proper.

So for me again the Zapatistas the thing around difference becomes so important, because you have to have struggles from people from different worlds, from different realities, yet we can figure out a way within the same space and push our commonalities forward but in a way that respects the individuality of the struggles. So if I'm an African in America, if I'm of African

descent in New York, I want to be involved with the Mapuche, I want to be involved with the struggles in Africa, Asia, the Irish Republican movement, in a way that they all see me in the way I am, and I see them, and we realize that we can still move in a common way that brings down the Empires that affect all of our lives.

But we've to do it in a way that we don't have to submit any part of our identity that makes us who we are. We are not all workers, we are very much multifaceted people wherever we come from, but our specific histories and specific space in time, makes us who we are, and with that comes out our richness and it has to be respected. We don't have to submit who we are like the Russian Revolution, the Chinese Revolution and even I would say the Cuban Revolution, and all the major so called revolutions wanted people to submit to a mass line, and if you did not fit there, if you were still living in traditional ways or what they may call the jungle, tribal ways, some State power is going to say no, you are coming to the modern world or we will wipe you out. Today we see that that's not the way we want to go.

6. What you say makes a lot of sense in terms of learning from other people's experiences. Anarchism was a very strong movement earlier in the XXth Century, then it declined and now it is certainly coming back with great strength at potentials. But somehow it seems that we largely ignore what happened in terms of struggles in the middle... Yes, we are going back to the Spanish Revolution, to the Russian Revolution but we forget that in the meantime the whole of the African Continent was in revolution. Yes, they did not lead to anarchist socialism, as neither Russia nor Spain did, but something came out of it in terms of experience, lessons, and a lot of other stuff... do you think there are experiences such as this that could actually enrich anarchist thought today?

It's like you say. When you can get away from all of the classic struggles that are pushed over and over for you to learn about, whether is China, Russia or Spain, we forget that there are struggles that are right around you most likely, or in local areas all around the world that provide examples. So for example in the US those of us in the Black nationalist movement, in the Black liberation movement, we studied the examples of the Maroon communities from the North American to the South American continent, of Africans who broke away from slavery, who were in many cases able to hook up with indigenous communities and formed free communities, communities in resistance, of resistance. They are worth studying. For instance, in Africa you also have the Igbo women's war in 1929. If one wants to see an anti-authoritarian struggle led by women against British colonialism, you have to start studying the Igbo women's war of 1929 in Nigeria.

These are just examples of how people dealt with their economic needs, the needs to feed themselves. In places in Africa where you have borders, you have folks that out of necessity,

who say, well, fuck the borders. We want to trade with folks across the border because we were connected with them until the Europeans put up an artificial borderline to our lands. But in them defying the borders they are creating new anti-authoritarian experiences where they say, we don't need borders. Borders are oppression. The Chicanos say all the time about the border between Mexico and the US that it is not them crossing the border it is the border crossing them. Because that border was artificially border was put there to oppress them and now the US has the balls to say that Mexicans coming over into the US is illegal, when they are really coming to what is historically their own land.

So there are many things we need to re look and study, and not just confine ourselves to certain areas that we feel can only give us an example of some kind of proper anarchist struggle or anarchist revolution.

7. In the US Anarchist Tradition you have some remarkable anarchists who were also people of colour... I'm thinking of people like Ben Fletcher, Lucy Parsons, who also was a woman... do you think that they made a sensitive contribution to the movement as such, what would you take from their experience and teachings?

Ben Fletcher you know is someone like workers in the US still don't know anything about him, neither do they don't know about Lucy Parsons. But Ben Fletcher was part of the IWW, the Industrial Workers of the World, an organisation which was so powerful in the US like in the 1910s, '20s and probably up to the 30s... and they were very effective because here there was a revolutionary movement that also fought to include many different ethnic groups, you know. So they had indigenous folks who were members of the IWW, they had folks of African descent, they had folks who spoke Spanish, the Italians were coming, everybody was making their way to the IWW. But a lot of people don't know that this movement waged a fierce battle against what can be called the labour aristocracy up to the government and the corporations at the time, who were brutally ruthless in their repression.

One of the things about Lucy Parsons that many people don't know is that she was a woman of mixed heritage... I mean, she was Mexican, African and Indigenous, and although at a time in her life she denied to have an African ancestry, to many people at the time it was obvious that she did. Yet, she was a woman who was extraordinary and played an extraordinary part in the growth of the anarchist movement within the US. She did things so outrageous as to marry Albert Parsons, who was a white man who was a part of the Confederacy, that was on the side of the racist who wanted to enslave Black folks, but at some point, like the soldiers who went to Vietnam, he came into a consciousness that it was the US and the capitalists who were the enemy, so he and Lucy Parsons married and they moved to Chicago. Both of them become outspoken proponents of anarchism for working class people. Lucy Parsons even though she may have had her problems with people calling her Black, she still spoke against lynching and for the rights of people of African descent in the US. So she goes down history in the anarchist movement as being a key figure, but few people to this day know about Lucy Parsons. But she was a courageous woman up to the day she day.

But it's like for her, Ben Fletcher, all these other people... there was also a very important Native American that was assassinated, but there's a lot of other heroes and heroines we need to know about, especially folks of colour, to see that there were many people that were inspired by anarchist ideas, what it basically is "we don't need bosses even though they should be considered themselves as revolutionary bosses; we need to be collective, we need to be communal, we need to be as they say today horizontal in all that we do". So I am looking for ways today to spread information about people like Ben Fletcher and Lucy Parsons.

8. You know better than me, but the two key figures of the African-American movement seem to be Malcolm X and Martin Luther King... what would you get from them and learn from them? And what would you reject from them?

They were definitely two very key leaders. I would also include among them people like Ella Baker, Fannie Lou Hamer and a few others... Ella Baker was key in the early Civil Rights Movement where she pushed for the students and the young folks to reject the older Black leadership that were pretty much held by the Black ministers, the preachers, you know, because they kept holding the students back. And Ella Baker, who was an old woman at the time, told the students: "you must become your own leadership" and she pushed for a kind of leadership that was community based. She wanted people to get away from the charismatic preachers or the leadership of the educated ones. Fannie Lou Hamer because she was just this poor Black woman who got involved with the Civil Rights Movement and became such a dynamic leader, because she brought everything she learned from being just a regular community person, a church person, in to the movement, what meant that she cared about people.

Malcolm X and Martin Luther King had a relationship with them. One of the preachers that Ella Baker criticized was actually Martin Luther King! Because he was part of that preacher leadership, no matter how great he was in many other ways. And here you have Ella Baker telling the students "be your own leaders, no matter how brilliant and charismatic they are, be your own". But Martin Luther King was great in other ways too. Because, just like Malcolm, they both showed that when they were challenged by a reality that they found hard to accept, they were willing to look at it and change their thinking and change their ways on it. So when Martin kept confronting the failure of the non-violent movement, he had a key thinking about the role of violence. When he was challenged to stop being so local and to start looking at the international scene, he began to look at the Vietnam war. When he was challenged to look at the role of workers, or the activity of workers, he began to support workers. And those three things, how he began to oppose the Vietnam war, how he began to support workers, and it was obvious even to the FBI that he was rethinking his position on non-violence, a lot of us believe that it was then when the system had him killed.

Similarly, Malcolm challenged us even like not to confine ourselves to thinking about civil rights. Malcolm said civil rights is when you keep everything in the hands of the enemy, we got to get out of that, we need to get our own thinking. Malcolm X also challenged us to think that if you want to be free, you must be willing to do it by any means necessary. This "any means necessary" part became so popular, because it gave us a way to really think that if we want to be

free, even if that means bring down the American system, we got to be willing to engage our life in that direction. But Malcolm's life too was one where when he saw that he was wrong, he had the courage to face it, admit it and move on. So many of us look at Malcolm as someone who's not that egotistical to keep on going on one path, even when it is clear that this path don't work. When his mentor, Elijah Muhammad of the Nation of Islam, started to obviously betray his own teachings, it took Malcolm a way, but when finally he had to face it, he had to reject the practices of his mentor and move on his own as it was necessary. But Malcolm was so important with moving people towards revolutionary thinking that when he went to Africa and other parts of the world, he came back talking about socialistic revolutions. He brought back messages saying that people were moving more towards socialism and getting away from capitalism. And that was important for us to know, because most of us did not think about that. We just wanted to get rid of racism, but he got us to see that there was a connection between racism and capitalism, that you can't get rid of one, without getting rid of the other. So Malcolm was really important.

If the two of them had come together in some kind of unity, we don't know how it may have changed the course of our struggle, but we can't live with that now, we just got to learn from them and just keep moving and learn from our own mistakes and go forward and figure out how we are going to win. They are dead, everything is on us now, the future is on us, but their lives they still are here, close to us.

9. If there's something you think was a crucial learning in your period in the Panthers, what is it?

Ok, then that would be sitting in prison as I did. This is the long stretching prison, this is like 12 years. And all that time you are turning that prison into a university; you got to think, you got to reflect on the past. It helped me to see the strengths and the weaknesses of the Black Panther Party (BPP). And I think that both of them are key to me to this day, because I think they are still relevant today.

The strength of the BPP was that we were willing to think about the revolution. We understood the role of criticism and struggle and we were willing to go into our communities with programmes. We were not the intellectual types that all we did was being intellectual towards each other, day in and day out. If you got something that you think is good, you put it into practice. Practice will tell you whether it works or not, if it doesn't, you go back to the drawing board.

I think the weaknesses of the BPP was that we were young, that our enemy was very experienced and that we did not have a strong enough what may be called a "decolonisation programme" whereas while we are doing this work in our communities, while we are combating out enemies, that we are consciously trying to work this system out of our bodies and out of our minds, and out of our most intimate relationships. Because I think those are the areas that our enemies use to bring us down: the sexism, the authoritarianism, the fears of freedom, the fears of death, all those things. We didn't have ways to deal with those areas and I think it weakened us a lot.

10. You are talking about the intimate relationship between capitalism and racism, sexism and other types of oppression... I think it's a tough one, because they are not necessarily linked in very obvious ways at all times. So do you think there is any single main link between them? How do they interact within a capitalist framework? How can you bring together a programme to end exploitation while at the same time finish all kinds of oppression what is the main purpose of anarchism?

Now, going back to prison, I did a lot of reading into revolutionary and feminist psychology, on Critical Theory that gave a lot of understanding on authoritarianism and a lot of the writers had been Jews who were put away in concentration camps. But what it helped me to understand, and this goes back to Franz Fanon, is that oppression gets internalized, that you are not just fighting a system out there, outside of you, is like when the anarchist say "you have to kill the cop inside your head". The capitalist system is also inside of you. So I think one of the most important lessons while in prison was thinking and reflecting on the movement, was that we have to find ways to combat the system inside of us, the enemy inside of us, as it comes out in our relationships. And I'm talking of relationships very broadly, because it is not only family, personal, intimate, friend relationships, but is also your relationships with your comrades, and what ways do you act out oppressions within your relationships.

So it is important, of course, to be anti-sexist, but we can't just take an anti-sexist verbal position; we got to really understand what is it about us men and the way we act that shuts down women, and shuts down people who are less powerful, because it also shuts down children and it gets into an ageist thing as well. If we say that we want to end white supremacist society and a lot of times you look at all the ethnic groups which are not part of the white race as inferior to you, but you may not realize it, you are doing it in an unconscious way. So when we organise, even the most simple type of organisation, a mutual aid organisation, we need to be conscious what we do with each other within that organisation that axe out the system that we are trying to bring down.

So if I'm in an organisation with women, I want to be aware of my sexism. If I'm in an organisation that is mixed in terms of ethnic groups, I want to be conscious of who has been historically silent within that group. If I'm in an organisation that has queer folks I want to be very mindful, if I'm not a queer person, what do I do that shuts that person down and make them feel unsafe. Because as an anarchist I want to be in organisation that in some way create the kind of world we want. So if I'm raising my kids, I don't want to raise them traditionally, the same way my parents raised me... I want to be very careful that I'm raising them in a manner as free as possible, no matter how insane that may be sometimes, but I want to make sure that their individuality and initiative is respected. I'm going to be careful, I'm the parent. But I'm going to make sure also that I don't make them just obey me, as an authoritarian preparation for the world we are going to release them into. We want to raise anti-authoritarian children, we want to raise children that have a deep love and respect for life. And at the same time we have to recover those same things within ourselves because we never realize how much we loss them.

11. How do you think that Anarchist People of Colour can play a positive role to make this movement you talk about a living reality?

I think APOC want to do two things: we want to push white anarchists and anarchists in general to deepen their understanding of oppression and liberatory practices. But also, within our communities, we know we got to deal with some oppressions that other folks don't necessary have to deal with: for example, in the Black community I have to deal with the low self-esteem of my community that has a history of four hundred years of being enslaved and having every American racist institution directed towards belittling us from the moment we are born. So it makes my struggle in many ways like a national struggle, you know, because there are certain things we need to do to help to raise our self-esteem and we need to see that we can self-organised without any white person involved at the same time we are always open to any kind of coalition work with any other groups, with white groups.

I think also in the US, anarchist of colour we can lead the way in terms of really being pretty good at being conscious on the oppressions that we act out on other people. So we try to be very conscious of shutting down women, shutting down queer folks, shutting down young folks. We seem to be more at to want to be very active in our communities, we seem to have more of a sense that our backs are up against the wall, so that we don't have all the safeguards to fall back on that many other groups may have. But we want other groups, especially white groups, to know that if our backs are against the wall, our tactics and strategy may be more aggressive at points. But whatever they be, we want our white comrades support. We don't want intellectual privileged ones to be in a position that they say, "well we don't like what you are doing, so therefore we are not going to support you; we don't like that you are going to try to stop the police from shooting you down in the streets with guns by arming yourselves". We want them to understand that whatever we decide to do, we have brains, we are intelligent as anybody else and we can figure out our own way.

Some of that they should have learnt from studying to liberation movements of the past and is that every person has a right to self-determination, every people has to be respected and can figure out their way forward, whether it fits other groups prescriptions or understandings or not. Every form of free society is not going to be the same, yet we hope that every free society is one that does not allow any small group to put the masses of folks in a position of being exploited or oppressed again. But I envisage a society that allows Muslims, Christians, Hindus, Bikers societies, whatever, to be able to create their own societies yet to be still part of the same community and that we'll use resources in a respectable way, that doesn't put anybody else at a disadvantage, because we may live over a field of uranium or oil... we can think about those things now, but we don't want to be in a position where those who feel they have all the intellectual readings on a particular thing can tell us what to do.

12. As you say there are many struggles, such as national liberation struggle, that a lot of folks dismiss because they don't necessarily fit into this perfect scheme of how an anarchist struggle should look like, but they are not willing to go with the people to see how far we can go... I feel that you have covered many issues on community struggles and resistance very well, but I'd like to know if there's anything you want to add to wrap up the interview, knowing that this will be read by comrades in many continents?

I want just to say thank you for the opportunity to talk with comrades from here to Brazil... I think the important thing is that folks understand that anarchism has to be vibrant, open to change, if it is ever going to be relevant... it has to be like jazz, I speak of US jazz a lot. Jazz comes out of African communities that are on the bottom in the US, where we were able to take nothing and create something. Obviously, part of the European experience and part of the Black experience come together and create this thing called jazz, which is improvisation. You know, for me is nothing but anarchy. People in the anarchist movement need to understand that anarchism takes different forms all around the world and all throughout history, whether they use the name or not. If we get holed up on whether a group publicly identifies as anarchist or not, we are no different from the Christians and the nationalists, and others who we are so quick to put off. I come from a Baptist family and I tell people that I'm close to the church, even if I'm an atheist, because it is very communal and that is even with the minister. If people can't see anarchism in their daily lives, act it out in many different ways, how people live and treat each other, we will never see how we can seize the moment, you know.

If the moment is being seized by everyone having to declare Kropotkin or Bakunin's anarchism in a particular day of crisis, that means nothing. But if we can see that people can seize their lives just adhering to what they really do on a day to day basis without authority, we'll see that anarchism is probably here more than we can imagine. So in Brazil, for example, you have struggles with the landless peasants and what the anarchists are doing there, and in Colombia, and in Mexico, to the US and across the world all the way over here, which finds me in Ireland, there are struggles going on a daily basis, communities living their lives, and you got to realize that the task is to figure out the way to bring all of this together. But we need to do it with respect for each people's struggles, so we don't feel that we have to bring everybody in line with our particular interpretation. So I hope to see if a general strike comes here as is being talked, for me, I don't look for that in terms of having to turn into an anarchist moment, other than an anarchist moment for me will be when many thousands of people in Ireland will realize that the solutions to the problems of Ireland lie on the hand of regular Irish people; that those who are bankers, those who are politicians, those wield the positions of power over the Irish people need to be the ones rejected. If they can see that, the anarchist will have done well.

If in the US, with Obama as president, if people come out of his term in office with this crisis affecting the US and just see that power lies with the people, it will be an anarchist moment. It will be what we need to do, as what Malatesta said: it ain't important that everybody joins your

organisation, but is important that we raise consciousness among people that they have to be their own liberators, their own leaders, their own authority and create conditions where never, never again, some people, because of money, because of the military, or politics can control our lives again.

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