

To be ungovernable

On the history and power of Black anarchism

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25 October 2022

From the raging tempest of the pandemic to the battering nature of the Police and Crime Bill to the devouring tides of the cost of living crisis, the last two years have brought a flood of instability to the UK. These attacks on our everyday lives cannot be seen as woeful accidents, but rather as events within the ongoing cataclysm of capitalist control, domination and greed.

As Black folks, we have consistently fought back against the pernicious marginalisation of our bodies. It is within our collective histories and current struggles that we can see the rhythms of anarchism appear. It is here that we can learn how to move forward.

Anarchy simply means “without ruler” – the abolition of the state, private property and all violent and oppressive systems of control. It is living outside of the structures created to entrap us in a cycle of exploitation.

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For centuries, Black people have been fighting the systems that have always excluded them and only came into existence through the subjugation of Black bodies. As early as 1512, African people who had been forced into the Americas broke away from white Europeans’ control. Those who escaped enslavement and set up their own communities on foreign soil were called “maroons”. They lived across the Americas using the harsh surroundings as shields to protect themselves from colonial violence as well as to fight back.

Maroons preserved their native language and cultures through rituals, storytelling and spiritual practice, all while raiding slave plantations, killing slavemasters and encouraging freedom for other enslaved people. They were fugitives who did not acknowledge European settler sovereignty. Instead they chose to live by their own self-determination – one that strove for freedom away from coercion and inviting others to do so too.

This idea of ungovernability is reflective of anarchist philosophy. Anarchists believe that we can’t just replace existing governments with radical ones, as it is the very nature of the state that is putrid. “To be ungoverned is not to oppose governance; to be ungoverned is to operate beyond governance, to become disaffected by it, not even acknowledging its legitimacy, being, in other words, ungoverned by governance,” wrote Black queer academic Marquis Bey in *Anarcho-Blackness*.

If the creation of modernity is based on the enslavement of Black people, then we must accept that the modern state is soaked in the blood of racial violence. Therefore, the idea of assimilating into hegemony – or a social contract – is one of appeasement to get a seat at the master’s table. “Black exclusion from the social contract is existence within a heavily surveilled and heavily regulated state of subjection,” explain Zimbabwean-American writer Zoé Samudzi and American author William C Anderson in their 2017 essay *The Anarchism of Blackness*.

The social contract theory was developed by white philosophers of the 17th and 18th century Enlightenment, such as Hobbes, Locke, Kant and Rousseau, which looked at the function of the state as a body that offers citizens protection (namely, for private property) in exchange for the submission of certain liberties. This means essentially signing a “mutual” contract (often unconscious) between citizen and state.

Yet Black philosophers such as Charles W Mills, working 200 years later, called out the whiteness of these ideas and argued they were fuelled by a colonial view of liberty and citizenship that skimmed over the grand contradiction of Black enslavement. This developed into the racial contract theory, which instead put forward that the real contract was in fact signed by white people to be complicit in the brutalisation of Black people.

Anarchists also reject replication of structures that act similarly to the state, leading to their refusal to accept vanguardism. A key feature of many Marxist ideologies, vanguardism is the belief that a group of people, those who are the most politically conscious, must lead the revolution. It extends to the idea of the transitional state, which puts forward that once power is seized, the state will be run by a vanguard that will eventually “wither away” as society is reordered. Anarchists see this as “counter-revolutionary and sheer power grabbing”, writes Black anarchist Lorenzo Kom’boa in *Anarchism and the Black Revolution*.

Queer anarchist Kuwasi Balagoon cited vanguardism as one of the reasons he left the Black Panther Party in the 1970s. After being imprisoned for attempting to shoot police officers in a New Jersey bank robbery, Balagoon became disillusioned with the BPP due to its bureaucracy and hierarchy, and his belief that the organisation’s main function had become managing legal aid for trials. He left to join the more militant Black Liberation Army and pursued the idea of “New Afrikan anarchism” – spun out of the amalgamation of traditional anarchism and Black radical thinking.

Balagoon’s type of anarchism reflected anti-authoritarian thinking while arguing for the acquisition of land from the southern states of “Amerikkka” in order to establish an autonomous zone known as “New Afrika”. Instead of asking for this land, Balagoon’s practice was one of taking. Similarly to the guerilla combat of the maroons centuries before, Balagoon’s actions led him to bank robberies, shootouts with the cops and prison breaks (such as aiding the escape of Assata Shakur and escaping prison himself multiple times). When he was put on trial, he openly rejected the notion of “criminal” and the legitimacy of the courts.

“We can demand of the state, or we can act to create our own autonomous power, our own liberation, against and outside of the confines of the state and capital”

Anarchism is targeted. Although direct action can often be expressed through violence as self-defence and self-preservation against a brutalist colonial order, it is reductive to solely force the tactics of anarchism within these lines. Anarchism is about throwing fire upon Babylon, but it’s also about crafting new ways of being. Direct action can be expressed through other means,

such as building mutual-aid networks, starting co-operatives, striking and boycotting, squatting land and buildings, guerilla gardening, setting up radical education programmes and creating countercultural spaces.

Key examples of these actions can be found in the histories of the Windrush generation. When African Caribbean people came to the UK following the Second World War, their dreams of streets paved with gold were obliterated by a cold reality of police brutality, wage slavery and ubiquitous racism. Faced with socioeconomic hardship and exclusion, the new arrivals set up their own structures which allowed them to survive and hit back at the system that short-changed them.

These communities created mutual-aid networks to financially support each other when banks refused; they engaged in squatting when they were denied suitable housing, taking over properties and turning them into community hubs, as Olive Morris did in Brixton. They started planting herbs on the side of inner-city roads when they had little access to green spaces; they opened Saturday schools to radically educate children about Black history and support them against a racist education system. And they established soundsystem culture to resist white domination of the music and entertainment industry. They were inherently anarchic, disregarding hegemony to live in a way that actualised their own needs and desires.

“To push through radical change, we need to revive our own histories to teach us that these actions are capable of being practised by Black folks”

In *Reparations As A Verb*, an essay by the Salish Sea Black Autonomists, a network of Black anarchists and anti-state rebels based in the Pacific Northwest, they write: “We can demand of the state, or we can act to create our own autonomous power, our own liberation, against and outside of the confines of the state and capital.”

The stories of those who strove to break the chains of governability are pertinent in navigating our current surroundings in a world of crisis. But conversations around anarchism are dominated by white thinkers – Bakunin, Kropotkin and Goldman, and white histories shadowing the voices and struggles of the marginalised. To push through radical change, we need to revive our own histories to teach us that these actions have not only been practised and are capable of being practised by Black folks, but are an automatic reaction to exclusion.

To be ungovernable or to be anarchist (or whatever word you want to use) is to choose to live how you want by transgressing the constraints drawn to trap us. It means abolition, not in the sense of merely destroying prisons or the police – a notion which it has naively been reduced to – but to bulldoze the system that causes these things to exist.

While humans like to strive to know all the answers, it would be impossible to draw a blueprint for an anarchic world, because we cannot leave the parameters of capitalism until we destroy it. As Marquis Bey puts it: “There is no ‘end’ because to *know* the end is to think one knows the totality of the landscape, a line of thinking that cannot account for that which falls outside the dictates of legibility.”

This idea is not expressed to conjure nihilistic pessimism, but rather to open up the continual possibilities of change outside of imposed hierarchies, so we can evaluate our conditions in order to not become complicit. Ultimately, anarchism is the idea of completely deshacking oneself from the oppressive system and walking into the expanse of the unknown. It is realising that the fight to be ungovernable runs through the fabric of our collective history.

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Retrieved on 10th September 2023 from gal-dem.com
Published in the *gal-dem* issue 7 (UTOPIA / DYSTOPIA).

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