

Self-Criticism: How I Became a BAR (Black Anarchic Radical)

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Jun 26, 2022

We should never be afraid of self-criticism. Not only where we fall short in practice, but also, equally importantly, where our theory falls short of reality. To stick to wrong ideas in the face of a changing world is to betray dialectics itself.

Truth is not something that exists inside the subject. It's not a matter of figuring out basic principles in our own head, and then applying them to the world.

Truth is not something that exists outside the subject, in the world. It's not a matter of recording what exists out there in the world directly on our brains, as if our minds don't also shape (and often distort) what's received into them.

Truth grows from the interaction of the subject with the object over time. We work on the object, and it is changed by our conscious action on it, making it other than what it originally was. The object also changes on its own, and the new, unexpected forms that it takes (hopefully) change us, too; helping us form a better idea of the object, and of ourselves, so that our practice is truly *living*, not just a respectful museum display of yesterday's answers.

So the path to truth is necessarily reached through many errors – assumptions about ourselves, and about our object of knowledge, that are based on limited ideas, formed in the moment that we must act. Error is an in-built feature of authentic knowledge, not a bug.

This is why we should never be afraid of self-criticism. Not only where we fall short in practice, but also, equally importantly, where our theory falls short of reality. To stick to wrong ideas in the face of a changing world is to betray a basic misunderstanding of the method of dialectics, really to betray dialectics itself.

Other than dealing with material challenges (soon to be resolved), the past ten months has been a whole lot of me rethinking – in some cases clarifying, and in others, trashing – many of my long-standing political assumptions, after trying to put my Pan-Africanist ideas into practice in my own modest way for the past four years, as an organizer with the Third World People's

Alliance. For almost six years prior to that, I had considered myself an Nkrumahist, a follower of the philosophy and political program of *Osagyefo* Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana.

I was never uncritical of certain aspects of that theory and program, though. For one thing, my study of Frantz Fanon's political writings had convinced me that Third Worldism, rather than the Cold War politics of loosely defined "socialist" versus "capitalist" camps, was the pathway to real decolonization – and I knew that this was a major point of contention between Fanon and Nkrumah in their own lifetimes. I also believed that Fanon was basically correct about the pitfalls of the one-party state. Sometimes I would have confusing arguments about its practicality with contemporary defenders: "you mean I can't advocate for an Nkrumahist mass party in states that are already controlled by Marxist-Leninist parties?" The critique was always about more than that, obviously. But that point definitely stuck out as a problem for somebody who hoped that Africans everywhere would one day unite in one global party, under the Nkrumahist banner.

And then, I also felt that some of the basic assumptions of scientific socialism, as advocated by Nkrumah, but rooted in the dialectical and historical materialism of Marx and Engels, needed to at least be updated, since they were based in the fledgling social science and cultural standpoint of the nineteenth-century industrializing Europe of the founders. For example, I knew that the industrial proletariat was not a significant factor in the successful revolution in Algeria; their role was practically non-existent on the ground in Guinea-Bissau and Cape Verde, and in the revolutions of other Portuguese colonies in Africa, which were among the least industrially developed nations in the world. I thought that we should at least reconsider what this means for the relationship between the masses and the Party that represents the proletariat's interest *as the universal interest of society*, according to the political theory of Marx, Engels, and Lenin. I didn't believe it was enough to just scrap that one tenet and keep moving with the rest of the assumptions of Leninist theory and practice that made their way into Nkrumah's own practice.

I felt that this kind of questioning was consistent with dialectics, as I had studied it for many years. I knew that our categories for understanding the world can't stand still, but have to develop alongside the changing objective reality; and that we have to carefully re-think the relationship between those categories when any one of them drops out of the picture. I felt that this was in the spirit of Nkrumah, and of his teachers like Padmore and James and Dunayevskaya, who were always re-thinking and updating the theories they inherited from Marx and Lenin.

I didn't come across many Nkrumahists who agreed with me at all. Some were respectful, others were arrogantly dismissive. But whatever the reception, I found it increasingly hard to identify with Nkrumahism as I had learned it from endless re-readings of his own writings, and the speeches and writings of his political secretary, Kwame Ture. It wasn't easy to admit this, especially since it meant parting ways with the only practical framework I had known as a Pan-Africanist and communist. I still have the utmost respect for the legacies of the figures I mentioned, despite coming to strong disagreements with positions they held. But I knew I had to find a different form for my politics, if I wanted to keep its content alive.

I now consider myself a Black anarchic radical. Despite what I have heard people say about anarchists, based on limited study and stereotyped politics, that doesn't make me "anti-organization," whatever that's supposed to mean. I continue to organize within my formation (TWPA), and in fact it was discussions within our organization that gradually moved me to

anarchism. But I do believe that revolutionary cadres today can only act as electrifying currents within the spontaneous and self-organizing movement of the masses...not as its leaders, giving “scientific” direction to otherwise irrational or “unconscious” rebellions.

We can make recommendations, we can teach those who want to learn what we know and believe – they can teach us a whole lot, too – and we can try to model certain direct-action practices, and advocate for ideas on how to overthrow the power structure. But we cannot separate ourselves as another promethean power, on which the entire fate of the African Nation or the working class depends. That attitude leads to bureaucratism, elitism, ideological fetishism, and ultimately to the supposed vanguard or mass party falling behind the spontaneous movement of the masses, in their heroic confrontation with the State.

I used to believe the truth of what Kwame Ture said, that “the task of the conscious is to make the unconscious, conscious” – that is, of the ways that they rebel without even realizing it. But this is not even true from the standpoint of *idealist* dialectics, let alone dialectical materialism, which is supposed to be more democratic. According to Hegel—who was not a political democrat, but who hated philosophical elitism—natural (or pre-philosophical) consciousness is *already* conscious in its everyday interaction with the real world. The task, even for Hegel, is not to *make* a people conscious, but to develop its *self*-consciousness, which is an intersubjective project. One that includes the transformation of humanity’s would-be teacher, by the student whose equal self-consciousness has been denied (*Phenomenology of Spirit*, A.V. Miller translation, 111–119).

This means that one self-consciousness – in our case, that of the revolutionary organization, which is somewhat certain of its own ideas and of its own capacity to advance struggle – has to be *modified* in its interaction with the Other: the self-consciousness of sections of the masses, which is always (in principle) distinct from ours, and free to accept or offer resistance to the self-concept of the revolutionary cadres. It *has* to happen like this, for us to reconcile our subjective viewpoint with our objective being, and thus achieve authentic knowledge (of ourselves and our world). This means that the Other always has something to teach us that *we* did not know about *ourselves* – which is definitely not how I see the mass parties and vanguards of today moving in relation to our people.

We might laugh, and point out the idealist origin of this scheme, and I’m sure some very materialist reader out there will do exactly that. But I’m less sure they also know that this is where Marx got the idea for his own philosophy of praxis, as outlined in the *Theses on Feuerbach*; which describe revolutionary praxis as a *continual process of education* of those who want to transform the material conditions of society:

III. The materialist doctrine concerning the changing of circumstances and upbringing forgets that circumstances are changed by men and that it is essential to educate the educator himself. This doctrine must, therefore, divide society into two parts, one of which is superior to society. The coincidence of the changing of circumstances and of human activity or self-changing can be conceived and rationally understood only as revolutionary practice.

It’s obvious – or should be – that here Marx is describing a preferred relationship of *mutual transformation* between the self-consciousness of revolutionaries and that of the society they want to change. His own early conception of practice for the Communist Party, which translated “society” into a concrete relation with the proletariat, was not the one-sided action of an

enlightened or “conscious” group, on the passive social classes that stand apart from it. If Marx can rightly be considered a vanguardist, then it is all the worse for “mass parties,” that don’t understand themselves as vanguards, to have a more vertical idea of political transformation than he did.

CLR James, Nkrumah’s early teacher in Marxism and revolutionist methods, was one of the keenest interpreters of Marx in the 20th century. In 1950, he and his comrades in the Johnson-Forest Tendency argued that the intelligentsia myth –and it’s only a myth, not scientific truth – that *we* have to raise the consciousness of the dis-organized masses to make revolution, is a relic of the same bourgeois *rationalism* that historically reduced workers to thoughtless matter; to be managed by property-owners (whether private or state-bureaucratic), according to flawless plans for transforming labor into wealth, power, and civilization (*State Capitalism and World Revolution*, 96–97, 102–104).

That is the “development” game that Party bureaucrats are still playing with the levers of the State throughout the neocolonial world, with the brutalized masses as board pieces. And those masses are fighting back, in the name of better social visions, in the name of real autonomy, not in the service of reaction.

Because of my exaggerated stress on organization as the only way to raise consciousness, I used to think, again with Kwame Ture, that the most important thing is for Black people to join organizations, *even if they were bad ones*, because bad organization is better than no organization at all. I even said so in my article on the 2020 uprisings, “*Black Powder/Red Spark*,” and named several organizations – including, shamefully, the Party for Socialism and Liberation – as options for us, with the caveat that we *must* choose if we want to get free.

I couldn’t have been more wrong. Stepping away from organizing to give yourself time to figure out *how* you can directly participate, with which groups (if any), and to clarify why *you* believe in revolutionary struggle, is far better than joining organizations that might compromise you in the people’s eyes, before you have even figured your own self out. Some of these orgs will beat you up emotionally or even physically for living your gender or sexual truth, or for calling out predation and abuse, and excuse it all in the name of party discipline. Some will funnel your energy and resources into an endless project of making revolution that’s always just around the corner, but which the party apparatus will clearly never be ready for: focused as it is, decade after decade, on panel discussions, tailing famous national bourgeoisies, and fundraising for the lifestyle of the leadership.

What do I now believe, in my evolving views as an anarchist, that’s consistent with my previous thoughts on organization?

I still believe in dialectics as the key to truth. So it would be one-sided for me to act like there’s nothing of value in the legacy of state socialist projects in the Third World. Clearly there is a lot for us to learn from anti-colonial movements that took a nation-state form, though I do think that this historical action has oftentimes misunderstood itself, leading to impasses of theory and practice in the neocolonial age. That is *also* a dialectical insight; and I hope that those who base themselves on practice from a hundred or sixty years ago will start to think more seriously on the relationship between Time and the Concept.

I still believe in the organization of revolutionary cadres, though I don't think – not sure I ever thought – that any one of them needs to be the major or the decisive element in the success of a revolution. Because their bureaucratic apparatuses are only *essential* given the seizure of State power, and have no relevance in the more radical scenario of the State's dissolution – to be replaced by directly democratic, local councils of oppressed and exploited masses, coordinated through federalism, instead of the monstrosity of the modern State.

I don't pretend to have all the answers to questions of revolutionary socialist practice. I never did, and never will. But in trying to find my way through some of the questions, I have found the most help these days in the Black radical theory of Sylvia Wynter and Cedric Robinson (more compatible, in my opinion, with Black anarchism than any other tendencies of struggle); in the autonomist visions of CLR James, and Kimathi Mohammed and Modibo Kadalie; in the de-centralized and grassroots practice of Ella Baker; in the ungovernable politics and lives of anarchic prisoners like Martin Sostre, Kuwasi Balagoon and Lorenzo Kom'Boa Ervin; in the huddled warmth of *kilombo* and *palenque*, in the historical lessons of stateless revolt by Njinga (with the Imbangala) and Queen Nanny of the Maroons; in Marsha P. Johnson and Sylvia Rivera's revolutionary understanding of spontaneous Queer revolts, and their local defense and material aid to the trans, houseless subjects of the domestic colony, that all the Vanguards ignored; in the radical traditions of Black autonomy, African trans-feminism, street defense and mutual aid, synthesized in the thought and practice of Anarkatas.

Above all, I'm guided and encouraged by the constant creative activity of the Black masses, who made all of our movements, and will break the so-called leaders who betray them. Who are never a homogenous mass, but are the wild possibilities of each individual Black human, gathered in a mighty force of a billion and more, by authoritarian systems that want to crush us all down into the Same. The masses who forever are producing, from their own local politics, their own society, their own culture, some powerful new challenge to the mind/body labor divisions, enforced by elites of all colors; and who will inevitably produce their own liberation. *With* our help as revolutionary cadres, if we can get on their level; but easily *without* it, if they gotta get us out their way.

This period of self-criticism and study is the major reason why I have mostly been silent, outside of my last article (where anarchist ideas were only implicit). The next time I have any positive political views to share with y'all, it will be in the context of a collective statement.

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<redvoice.news/self-crit-how-i-became-a-bar-black-anarchic-radical>

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