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Senzala or Quilombo

Reflections on APOC and the fate of Black Anarchism

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by Pedro Ribeiro from the Furious Five Revolutionary
Collective San Jose, CA www.furiousfive.50megs.com Note
for our international comrades: APOC is the Anarchist People
Of Color organization based mostly in the US.

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In years past, when the slavery of the children of Africa was carried out by chain and whip instead of uniforms and patrol cars, black people in Brazil had only two places where they could be – in the Senzala or the Quilombo. The Senzala was a small hut placed outside the master's house, a shack in which the slaves would stay from after sunset to before sunrise, chained to the walls and behind locked doors. The Senzala was their home; there they raised their children and grew old. In secret, they practiced their language, religion and culture away from white eyes. The window of the senzala would always face the main quad of the plantation where a single post could be seen emerging from the earth's belly. The Pelourinho – the mast in which rebellious slaves were tortured into submission or death, whichever came first. This was the Senzala.

But, every once in a while, a laborious and dedicated group of slaves would defect from the generosity of the slave master's whips and chains and senzalas, and go into the jungle. They would run, day after night after day after night, into the mata, deeper into the forest; away from the treacherous Capitaes to Mato, the black or mulatos overseers responsible for captur-

ing escaped slaves. In the jungle, they looked for hope. In the jungle, they looked for freedom. In the jungle, away from the white man, they looked for the Quilombo.

Quilombos were city-states created in the heart of the mata by escaped slaves. The most famous - the largest and the one whose name was whispered in secret in the dark by those in search of freedom - that was Palmares. Palmares had a estimated population of twenty to thirty thousand, structured in eleven different villages. In Palmares, as in other Quilombos escaped slaves held the majority. Natives and poor whites were also accepted into the Quilombo, with and shared the same rights and duties as anyone else. Decisions were made by village assemblies, in which every adult, man or woman, of every race, could (and most would) participate.

No, Palmares was no utopia. It was no communist society in which the decisions were as horizontal as possible and in which all were seen as equal. Palmares had chiefs, one for each village. The chief of the capital, Macacos, was the king of Palmares. But this is neither here nor now. The now is the quilombo as opposed to the senzala.

Palmares died in flames. It fought until the last person was dead. It had been fighting for its sovereignty and independence for over one hundred years. It gave its blood to defend what it cherished most - its freedom and its self-determination.

Whatever drove the Palmarinos to fight is what I am interested in talking about. A friend of mine said something that struck a cord in me. He said: "People are always talking about dying for this or that. You gotta die for the cause if you are militant enough, if you are really bad ass you should die for your beliefs. But nobody asks, what are you living for? Not dying, but living - what is your life for?"

The Palmarinos were living for something. They were living for their freedom and their collective autonomy. They were living for their right of self-determination, to do away with the chains that held them slaves in the past and to decide by them-

selves the path of their life. If they died fighting for that, they died for what they were living for. They died the death of free people.

We now call ourselves Anarchists. We say we want the end of all chains and the extermination of all oppression. Yet, in the Anarchist “movement”, black folk and other folks of color are still in the senzala. We are still having to disguise ourselves, call whitey “Massa” and chain ourselves to the wall. No, don’t talk about racism unless is in that very abstract sense of “we-are-all-equal-let’s-sing-kumbayas-and-pretend-the-color-of-our-skin-does-not-matter” racism. While there might be nobody yelling “die, nigger, die!”, you can hear a very clear “shut the fuck up, nigger, just shut the fuck up.”

We pretend that racism is just a minor problem, something that, like the Leninist State, will wither away if we will it to. The intrinsic racist characteristics that infect Anarchism, specially North-American Anarchism, cannot be questioned without one being seen as some kind of authoritarian nationalist, or even worse, a Maoist. Red-baiting, of all things!

Like in the real senzala, our resistance to racism needs to be covert. It needs to be hidden and made like it is something else. It cannot be what it needs to be, it cannot do what needs to be done, or the senzala would break apart and the master’s house would be set aflame. No. Like capoeira, our fight against white supremacy inside North American anarchism needs to disguise itself as a dance in order to become a martial art.

And you know how the rap goes: if we talk about empowerment we are power hungry. If we assert our self-determination, we are authoritarian nationalists. When we expose how white Anarchism is, elitist white Anarchists generally come with excuses like “Hey, I saw a black anarchist once!” or the classic, “well, we need to outreach to communities of color.”

Let me tell you something, the reason why the masses are not flooding to your Anarchism is exactly that one – it is your Anarchism. It is a white, petty-bourgeois Anarchism that can-

not relate to the people. As a Black person, I am not interested in your Anarchism. I am not interested in individualistic, self-serving, selfish liberation for you and your white friends. What I care about is the liberation of my people. The collective liberation of the children of the African Diaspora, those that have been beaten down and treated worse than dogs all across the world.

So, no, we are not interested in your anarchism. We need to create our own. Understand this, if the whites in Palmares were allies and died with the blacks and the natives it is not because they invited the blacks and the natives into their structure, into their society and said unto them: "We are all equal." It was because the blacks and the natives created their own structure - their own society - in which power relations were different so that whites could not longer by the sheer force of their privilege impose their view of how the society should be run. To try and integrate people of color in your society or your movement, like there would be no culture clash and no confrontation - it is naive, senseless and can lead nowhere but into deception.

In the senzala of contemporary Anarchist theory and practice, the only place for Blacks and other folks of color is the chain in the wall or the Pelourinho. To question the structure of this "movement", why is it really composed mainly of white suburban boys, is a invitation to the Pelourinho - or to the Quilombo.

Some escaped slaves decided to create their own Quilombo in the forest of North America, and they called it A.P.O.C. - Anarchist People Of Color. APOC was a necessary step on the beginning of the self-determination of people of color inside the movement. This self-determination we seek is to analyze the problems of race inside and outside the movement in our own perspective. To create our own analysis of authority and what it means for us to be Anarchists. What does it mean for those that have always felt odd at an Anarchist event while looking around and thinking are they made the wrong turn

Pedro Ribeiro, a class-struggle anarchist.

somewhere and ended up in a white only area of segregated Mississippi.

When an anarchist tells me about how the cops are fascist pigs, I stop for a second and think. A lot of times I'll have some experience in a protest against this or that corporate meeting or something, in which the cops tear gas the crowd and whoop some ass and I think, man, you got it easy. I remember in my neighborhood in Brazil, where if you got only an ass-whooping, you would consider yourself lucky. I remember the day they shot my uncle dead. I remember this one cop that used to follow me around and scare the life out of me because I thought he was going to cap me and there was no way in hell I was approaching no authorities to complain because then I would surely wind up dead. I remember the police invading my grandma's house, guns in hand, while my cousin was still a baby and was sleeping in my aunt's bed. Even here, in my neighborhood in East Palo Alto, you can always hear the cops fussing around at night and you know they are not looking for no black-bloc kid from some protest or another. So tell me again how the cops are fascists...

The fact is, we know oppression. We live it, we experience it. In one form or another, one extreme or another. We do not conceptualize it. We do not sit down and intellectualize about pain because our people have been hunted down and shot, and burned and beaten and we lost the need to understand pain philosophically when we learned it physically.

So why are the people not filling the ranks of the Anarchist movement? What is it that prevents those people of color that have been feeling the brunt of police brutality, and have been living off the scraps of what capitalism leaves behind, why have they not joined the movement?

The answer is simple: because it is not their movement. It can never be their movement while it is being created by and for white middle-class kids with a Jesus complex who think they can save the world (or the ones with Buddha complex who

think they can get wet by talking about water). You cannot hustle the movement and you cannot hustle the people. Revolution is not a game in which you can pretend to listen to the voice of the people of color only when is convenient and shut them off when they start questioning your privilege.

APOC, as any revolutionary step, spurned an immediate reaction, a counter-revolutionary step. The amount of voices in the Anarchist “movement” that have been raised to criticize, put down or, in any other form, discredit APOC (most, if not all of them, white, by the way) have been, if small, consistent and bold. To incur and cite these criticisms is irrelevant to today’s discussion. I am not here to defend APOC. I am here to talk about why I don’t need to do it.

APOC is our Quilombo. Our keep, our fortress, where we can meet as people from oppressed background and not only share our experiences and how they are relevant to each other, but also how they are relevant in the larger scheme of things. APOC is more than a safe zone for people to feel good about not being in a room without white folk, but is a conscious project of self-determination for people of color. It is a step closer to our freedom as a people and the materialization of the idea that community comes from something in common, something we can share.

No, APOC is no utopia. It is not even close. But that is neither here nor now. We may stumble, we may fall, we may even break our heads wide open. But at least we are walking on our own two feet.

It is pointless for me to try and convince white Anarchists of the need for APOC because white anarchists have not experienced what we a people of color have experienced. It is like trying to convince my boss of the need for Socialism – a more often than not fruitless endeavor.

And while there are white Anarchists out there who remember that only the oppressed can liberate themselves and the end of white supremacy cannot be brought about by white people

– there are those that, in their arrogance and shortsightedness, will not yield and cannot tolerate the thought that maybe there is something that Anarchist people of color need to discuss that does not include white people.

And if, for a moment, I thought that APOC needed to be approved by the white anarchist scene that would be the moment in which APOC would lose its appeal to me. Because is not about being accepted, being cherished, being “on the good side” with the white Anarchists – that is the Senzala. It is about self-determination and it is about resistance. It is about creating our own culture, our own analysis and dictating our own future. APOC for me is not about seeking a way to make white people love us, or hate us.

I have to tell you a secret about APOC: it is not about white people at all. It is not, and it should not be ever. I am tired of talking about white people, thinking of white people, analyzing white people and worrying about white people. I want to know what I have in common with my Korean sister and my Guatemalan brother. I want to know about the great struggles for liberation in Uganda and how the Filipino resisted imperialism. What can we learn from each other as people of color? What does my bairro in Rio de Janeiro has in common with a Latino barrio in East Side San Jose?

This is something I wrote for my sisters and brothers at APOC. We need to understand ourselves in order to understand the world around us and be able to fight and destroy the bourgeois plague which eating away our homes, our lives and our cultures.

As a black person, my anarchism is Black Anarchism. As a member of the exploited class, my anarchism is Class-Struggle Anarchism. As a person who wishes for a better future, my anarchism is Anarchist-Communism.

Vamos a ela, porque temos muito, muito para construir.

Não tá morto que peleia!

Viva a Anarquia!