

# State reform isn't enough, Our times demand Black anarchism

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Redress looks like power directly in the hands of people themselves.**

William C. Anderson

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At the present time, the world is at an impasse. This can only mean one thing: not that there is no way out, but that the time has come to abandon all the old ways, which have led to fraud, tyranny, and murder.

Aimé Césaire

I'm not here to explain Black anarchism, because Black anarchism explains itself. The times we're living in speak to its relevance. Politics that can conceive liberation only through the nation-state apparatus cannot truly serve people who always fall outside of its considerations.

Those who are the most marginalised are not being liberated by the state forms that have only ever killed, excluded and kicked them around. Poor people, stateless people, migrants and oppressed people of all sorts are rendered disposable by the world's ruling classes.

Radical transformation looks like power directly in the hands of people themselves, without minimising diversity in the name of borders, citizenship, and homogenising national identities.

What would it mean if people represented themselves directly, instead of the administrations of nation-states, politicians and ruling classes speaking on their behalf? In the US, during the civil rights and Black Power eras, this question led to the development of Black anarchism(s) and Black autonomy, through the work of Black radicals who turned to *stateless* socialism and more.

Lucy Parsons, a formerly enslaved Black woman, was one of the earliest identifiable Black anarchists. Pivotal in the labour movement of the 1920s and known as a powerful orator, she was described by the Chicago Police Department as "more dangerous than a thousand rioters". Parsons had a complicated relationship with her racial identity, which is part of her long, dynamic story.

Parsons came long before the breakaway from civil rights era reformism and Black Power era statist politics that represents modern Black anarchism. The US-based cohort responsible for developing this includes, but is not limited to, radicals like: Martin Sostre, Lorenzo Kom'boa Ervin, Kuwasi Balagoon, JoNina Ervin, Ojore Lutalo and Ashanti Alston.

Sostre, who died in 2015, was an internationally known, self-described “politicised prisoner” who almost single-handedly transformed the prison system through his lawsuits. He was a community educator and won victories for the rights of those in prison, from political and religious freedoms to restricting the use of solitary confinement, to contesting the censorship of prison literature.

Lorenzo Kom’boa Ervin, who was mentored by Sostre, is a former Black Panther and activist at the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, a key organisation in the American civil rights movement. JoNina Ervin, who eventually wed Lorenzo, is also a former Panther and was the last editor of the Black Panther Party newspaper.

Alston, Lutalo, and Balagoon were former Panthers and Black Liberation Army members. Lutalo was introduced to anarchism by Kuwasi, who brought his own unique perspective as a New Afrikan anarchist.

These are just some of the Black revolutionaries who decided that instead of choosing new representation, new reform and new masters, they wanted no masters at all.

I came into Black anarchism over ten years ago and sat with it quietly in the dominant state-socialist Left movement spaces where it didn’t fit. I watched anarchism in general be harangued as utopian, chaotic, white and impractical, while people regurgitated age-old political maxims about building a reformed or revolutionary state. I once held many of the same views about state-building and state-reform before I understood anarchism on its own terms, not based on popular misreadings or individuals.

The history of Black anarchism was completely neglected and, in retrospect, I see why it *needed* to be. Anarchism is a threat many can agree on. Not making populations an appendage of the nation-state poses a grave danger to the order of the world we know. The fact that statist factions on *both* the Left and the Right utilise the anarchist bogeyman as a target is crucial. Those who are preoccupied with attaining or weaponising state power for their own ends will regularly feel threatened by those who don’t see the state as the sole harbinger of liberation.

Black anarchism rejects *coercive* authority and oppressive top-down hierarchies as they exist across the entire political spectrum. It doesn’t pretend that anyone who claims (or has claimed) to be a liberator, speaking on behalf of the masses, cannot commit atrocities. And it recognises that acknowledging this, rather than denying it, is how stronger movements will grow.

In my new book ‘The Nation on No Map’, I expand my thinking around ‘the anarchism of Blackness’ as it’s appeared via the stateless condition of Black people throughout the African diaspora. This is not just about theory. What I’m highlighting is the reality of Black migration (forced or otherwise) and enslavement. That’s why in my book, I make a case for how Black anarchist history can appeal to a newly reinvigorated abolitionist movement, among other things.

The lives of many of the historical Black anarchists I have mentioned trace a familiar path of growth and development. Many traversed from the civil rights movement to Black nationalism and Black Power movements before arriving at anarchism. They are by no means one thing and should be allowed their diversity. There are multiple Black anarchisms, autonomies and anarchic tendencies. What they did with anarchism when they arrived at it is just as multifaceted as historic classical anarchisms are. A similarity many share is a rejection of what Sostre called “the wooden party line”. He rejected “some abstract political line or ideology” in favour of struggling for “human beings with lives to fulfil”.

Sostre is one reason that I see Black anarchism as a part of politics and history that’s not so nebulous it becomes incoherent. Rather, it’s realistic enough to hold the weighty truth of differ-

ence that has regularly gotten lost historically in the wills of individual leaders claiming to represent 'the people'. The people are the people themselves, not a rhetorical football for whomever hopes to make use of them. We are all part of 'the people'.

We are fighting for an existence where there are no states to deport, dispossess, murder, detain, imprison, pollute and police us on behalf of the ruling elite of the world. We're talking about destroying the machinery of oppression, not renaming it or repurposing it so that it can be used to oppress again. That's why for me, Black anarchism means moving away from and transcending all leftisms inundated with oversimplified 'either/or' sectarian binaries. We are struggling for something much greater.

There's a way out. It's an exit sign I'm pointing at – don't get stuck staring at my finger.

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