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PART V

Book Reviews

**Building Black Anarchist Futures:
A Review Essay on Lorenzo Ervin’s *Anarchism
and the Black Revolution* and William
Anderson’s *The Nation on No Map***

Huey Hewitt

Ervin, Lorenzo Kom’boa. *Anarchism and the Black Revolution: The Definitive Edition*. (Pluto Press, 2021).

Anderson, William C. *The Nation on No Map: Black Anarchism and Abolition*. (AK Press, 2021).

Black anarchists are having our moment. Once considered a fringe and illegible ideological element on the Left (when considered at all)—and sometimes even misunderstood or falsely characterized as being on the Right—black anarchism is, for the first time, experiencing some amount of mainstream recognition and dedicated literary production. Superstar academic Saidiya Hartman’s public declarations of holding to an anarchist politics were perhaps early steps toward a more widespread reckoning with black anarchist ideas and ideals. The 2016 digital publication by the Black Rose Anarchist Federation, *Black Anarchism: A Reader*, helped lay a partial foundation for political education on black anarchism. The 2018 AK Press book, *As Black as Resistance*, was another step in this direction, as was the 2019 online Anarkata Statement. Marquis Bey’s brief 2020 *Anarcho-Blackness*, also published with AK Press, provoked yet more public curiosity as to the meaning of black anarchism. Finally, the 2021 reprint of Lorenzo Kom’boa Ervin’s classic, *Anarchism and the Black Revolution* (originally printed in 1979), with Pluto Press, as well as the AK Press publication of writer William C. Anderson’s *The Nation on No Map: Black Anarchism and Abolition*, both of which this essay concerns, have left an indelible mark on the literary culture of the Left and future formations of Left politics.

Of course, for much of the nineteenth and some of the twentieth century, anarchism was the dominant ideological strain within the global socialist movement—especially in Europe and the Americas. But by the time twentieth-century decolonization struggles

challenged European hegemony, forms of state socialism such as Leninism and Maoism seemed, to many, like the only available models for building anti-racist socialist futures. The disappointments which came in the wake of the mid-twentieth-century revolutionary era—including the corruption of newly-installed state socialist regimes across the African continent, forces of international neoliberalization, and the rise of an unaccountable black political class within the United States—represented a major setback for radicals of all stripes. But disillusionment also led some of the survivors of that era to seek alternatives to authoritarian Marxist ideas. One such survivor was Lorenzo Kom'boa Ervin.

Ervin became an anarchist while serving time in prison in the late 1970s. In 1969, after allegedly trying to kill a Ku Klux Klan leader, Ervin had joined a list of other revolutionaries seeking political asylum in the Caribbean when he hijacked a plane to Cuba. It was there that he first became disenchanted with state socialism. Ervin left Cuba to go to the Republic of Guinea but ended up in Czechoslovakia, where he claims that Cubans turned him over to American authorities. After being captured, Ervin first escaped to East Germany before being re-captured, smuggled into West Berlin, and tortured for a week. Ervin was then brought back to the United States where he faced trial in a small town in Georgia. After being convicted by an all-white jury, he was given two life sentences. In prison, Ervin met Martin Sostre, a former member of the Nation of Islam and a Puerto Rican anarchist and prison rights organizer. Alongside Ervin, Sostre received support from anarchists internationally—especially the Anarchist Black Cross (ABC), an organization serving political prisoners. Both Sostre and Ervin were eventually released. Sostre died in 2015, but Ervin is a surviving elder of movements past who continues to struggle for collective freedom to this day.

Anarchism and the Black Revolution is part political autobiography, part old-school political education on anarchist theory, and part practical blueprint. The 2021 edition released by Pluto Press features two forewords, one by William Anderson and another by Joy James. James perceptively describes Ervin's book as a "corridor" through which we can "think more rapidly and more radically."¹ Anderson emphasizes Ervin's expertise as acquired through his life experiences working with SNCC (Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee), the Black Panther

Party, and prison organizing efforts. Anderson also details his intergenerational comradeship with Ervin: how they met and corresponded via Facebook, and how Ervin shaped Anderson's understandings of anarchism and black struggle.

The main body of Ervin's book contains an autobiographical introduction, a first chapter on anarchist theory and history, a second chapter analyzing racial capitalism, a third chapter on potential blueprints and models for black anarchist organizing, and a fourth chapter on building an international anti-imperialist and anti-capitalist movement based on the principle of intercommunalism. This edition also features an interview with Ervin, conducted by William C. Anderson, at the end of the book.

As a writer and thinker, Ervin shines brightest not when he is diagnosing our problem or analyzing the nature of gendered racial capitalism, but instead when he is outlining practical steps aimed at establishing libertarian socialist futures. Ervin calls for a new black protest movement that, like mid-twentieth century civil rights struggles, would rely on mass direct action toward non-reformist reforms (e.g., expanded union and worker protections, defunding the police, unemployment benefits, and more). For Ervin, this modern black protest movement would rely on tactics such as tax boycotts, national rent strikes, squatting, corporate boycotts, and a general strike. Alongside and through this black protest movement, organizers would establish autonomous community institutions and practices like community-run schools and a black survival program of free meals and housing, all of which would be defended by armed black militias. This latter point is worth pausing to consider with seriousness and intensity. In the face of a burgeoning underground and overground, armed, white supremacist militia movement, Ervin's emphasis on the necessity for armed black self-defense cannot be ignored.

In fact, both Ervin and Anderson place emphasis on armed self-defense. Whereas much of Ervin's book takes the shape of a blueprint, Anderson's *The Nation on No Map* finds ways to offer up potential strategies and tactics without necessarily providing a rigid outline for revolutionary struggle. His book self-consciously builds on the work of Ervin and other black radicals in offering an extended meditation on anti-state consciousness, black nationalism, and contemporary black struggle in the United States. Anderson characterizes Ervin as one figure in a wave of

black activists from the Black Power era who became anarchists as a result of disillusionment with the popular organizations of that period. His first chapter is an argument detailing the precariousness of black citizenship in the United States, where policing, poverty, and surveillance leave undocumented black people (especially Haitians) as well as black citizens vulnerable to immense state violence and abuse. His second chapter is a damning critique of the logics of royalty and celebrity, beginning first with an analysis of the mythos that—despite being subjected to enslavement—black Americans descend from royalty on the African continent. Anderson notes that not all enslaved Africans could feasibly descend from such royalty, and that the logics of domination inherent to monarchical structures are themselves undesirable. Anderson then extends his critique to contemporary black celebrities and alludes to the reality that some activists intentionally accrue and deploy social and literal capital for less than noble ends without the political integrity required to foment a mass movement. His third chapter elaborates on this in relation to a critique of authoritarian socialism. The book's fourth chapter reflects on the meaning of home and the New Great Migration back to the South. For Anderson, black folks are a “people with no place,” a nation on no map; we are continually displaced by political, social, and economic violence—from lynchings to gentrification to ecological catastrophe. Amidst this turmoil is the reality that any claims to black nationhood in the United States rest on settler-colonial logics and processes of indigenous removal and genocide. The only way forward, according to Anderson, is to make ourselves formidable enemies of the state, dedicated to the abolition of an illegitimate settler-colonial regime and the dissolution of borders. Chapter 5, “State of War,” elaborates on the intensity of this commitment to enmity. “Black people are not haunted by the specter of a possible race war: we are already living in one,” Anderson writes.² Up against a burgeoning police and surveillance state backed by white supremacist militias, Anderson soberly admits: “the left is severely underprepared.”³ Without romanticizing armed struggle, Anderson does not mince his words: we face an armed racist presence in the United States, and we must defend ourselves. But beyond defense, we must build alternative institutions and completely destroy old ones—prisons, police, the state, capitalism, and more. This “ruination” is the

subject of his last chapter, a short series of reflections on maintaining radical integrity and preventing “abolition” from being co-opted by liberals and reformists. The terms are simple: as he writes, “We can wait while this wretched machinery continues to do its work or we can destroy the gears.”⁴ In the face of climate change, the COVID-19 pandemic, and a renewed nuclear arms race between powerful nation-states, the stakes could not be any higher.

For Anderson as well as Ervin (and, for that matter, Saidiya Hartman, who wrote the foreword for Anderson’s book), black anarchism is but one lens through which to understand the reality that “Black people throughout the world have already long practiced anarchic principles and created anarchic projects out of necessity.”⁵ Furthermore, anarchism is a means of “asking the most basic questions about what power is and what gives anyone the right to control or oppress others, even those we share space with,” a philosophical orientation that gets to the micro level of interactions between people, in workplaces and organizing spaces and homes—where something like anarchism can give us the understanding needed to challenge unfair power imbalances that exploit us, or even our own impulses to exercise power or control over others.⁶ Black anarchism is, in a word, a method.

Both Anderson’s *The Nation on No Map* and the reprint of Ervin’s *Anarchism and the Black Revolution* are beautiful, important books and crucial contributions to black struggle today. Of course, there are critiques. Ervin’s analysis of racial capitalism, for example, resembles a classical Marxist account of racism under capitalism, wherein differences of color divide the working class—a functionalist explanation for racial formation that many other intellectuals would criticize. Likewise, Anderson’s emphasis on blackness as defined and experienced through the diaspora, particularly the United States, leaves histories of pre-colonial Africa unexamined; this is especially worth noting given that Anderson cites Cedric Robinson’s *Terms of Order*, wherein Robinson locates anarchic social systems amongst the Tonga people of Zambia and Zimbabwe. But these critiques merely engage—and do not discount or disparage—both of these intelligent and searching books.

As the Left reckons with life in the wake of the summer of 2020—the summer in which black rebellions brought abolitionist thought and practice into mainstream discourse—black anarchist

thought will be a necessary component of building up our struggles against anti-black state violence. Of course, there are links between black anarchism and other forms of black socialism that are not explicitly anarchist. Our movements should pay due attention to these links in crafting coalitions, organizational structures, and blueprints for struggle. From C.L.R. James's Johnson-Forrest Tendency to council communism to libertarian socialism, the terminology we use to describe our praxis matters less than the shared commitment to struggling against unjust hierarchies and authorities.

In outlining a black anarchism that is responsive to the material conditions of our times, both Anderson and Ervin have paved part of the pathway forward. Our job is to continue this collective work on the road as we walk it, brick by brick.

Notes

¹ Lorenzo Kom'boa Ervin, *Anarchism and the Black Revolution: The Definitive Edition* (Pluto Press, 2021), xviii.

² William C. Anderson, *The Nation on No Map: Black Anarchism and Abolition* (AK Press, 2021), 124.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid, 160.

⁵ Ibid, 177-8.

⁶ Ibid, 183.