

prominent figures in twentieth- and twenty-first-century image theory. In part due to this wide range of references, the book also provides a vital link between philosoph-

ical reflection and historical-artistic studies. *Looking Through Images* is a must-read for anyone with a stake in the theory of image, media and imagination.

Tullio Viola

Black anarchism's history and future

Lorenzo Kom'boa Ervin, *Anarchism and the Black Revolution: The Definitive Edition* (London: Pluto Press, 2021). 224pp., £85.00 hb., £19.99 pb., 978 0 74534 580 2 hb., 978 0 74534 581 9 pb.

Should the state be the source of freedom? Should it be a wellspring for the affirmation of humanism? The modern anarchist tradition has repeatedly answered these questions in the negative, thereby distinguishing it from proponents of liberal democracy as well as Marxism-Leninism. Anarchism at its core is anti-statist, arguing that social stability and progress are best gained through more immediate forms of direct democracy and mutual aid. A fostering of and dependence on local community is positioned against bureaucratic state assistance and intervention. Unsurprisingly, anarchism has consequently appealed to activist-intellectuals and communities that have been marginalised by states and, often as a matter of routine, have been policed by states through violence.

These elements provide an explanation as to why anarchist politics would appeal to Black activists. Yet the Black anarchist tradition remains under-examined as a critical position within the history of Black struggle, in addition to being underappreciated as an approach for present and future politics. Lorenzo Kom'boa Ervin's *Anarchism and the Black Revolution* is a vital intervention designed to rectify this situation. It addresses what makes Black anarchism distinctive. 'What sets Black anarchism apart from classical or European anarchism is that it was born out of a rejection of the hierarchical, messianic, and authoritarian embraces that limited so many Black movements prior', William C. Anderson summarises in his foreword to Ervin's book. 'This makes Black anarchism special because it was already doing the terribly undervalued work of internal critique'.

This internal critique emerged from Ervin's own life. His path to anarchism was eventful, mirroring a number of the most important events and organisations during the second half of the last century. Born in Chattanooga,

Tennessee, in 1947, he came of political age during the era of the Vietnam War and civil rights movement. His childhood was shaped by Black and working-class life in the Jim Crow South – his father was a chauffeur and his mother a domestic worker. He joined the military during the 1960s only to become an anti-war activist shortly thereafter, leading to a court martial and discharge. Ervin went on to become involved with the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and the Black Panthers. The crackdown on Black radicalism at the time prompted him to hijack a plane to Cuba, where he was imprisoned by the government, including a stint in solitary confinement. He then fled to Czechoslovakia, followed by East Germany, after which he was deported back to the US. These fraught international experiences with socialist states, combined with the suppression he was subjected to by the US government, contributed to his growing disillusionment and skepticism toward governments generally as providing solutions to social problems, whether racism or class inequality.

Time in federal prison further reinforced this critical perspective. Yet it also fortuitously presented him with a new set of ideas. Upon his return to the US, Ervin encountered the attorney and famed prison abolitionist Martin Sostre (1923-2015), who introduced him to the concept of anarchist socialism. The life of Sostre requires its own biography. Black Puerto Rican in background, Sostre began his activism as a member of the Nation of Islam during the early 1960s. He went on to become politically involved on several fronts, including advocating for prisoner rights and education during the 1960s and 1970s as well as opening the Afro-Asian Bookstore in Buffalo, New York, in 1966. He himself was imprisoned before and after this latter moment, including his arrest

in July 1967 and sentence to forty-one years on a range of falsified charges including assault and drug possession. Sostre subsequently gained a reputation as a political prisoner with Amnesty International adopting his case in 1973, which led to his sentence being commuted in December 1975 and his release in 1976. In the introduction to *Anarchism and the Black Revolution*, Ervin not only attributes his embrace of anarchism to Sostre but credits him, along with figures like George Jackson (1941-71), for establishing the prison movement that led to the 1971 Attica Prison Rebellion and the continued struggle for prisoners' rights and against mass incarceration today.

Ervin wrote the first edition of *Anarchism and the Black Revolution* while serving a sentence of life imprisonment in a federal penitentiary following his return to the US. Despite these conditions of confinement, the book was published in 1979 as an 84-page pamphlet. Released after fifteen years of his sentence, Ervin published a second edition in 1988 and eventually a third edition in 2012 through presses connected to the Industrial Workers of the World. This new edition from Pluto Press therefore marks the fourth iteration of the book and the first with a publisher with wide international distribution. As a consequence, this latest republication is intended to introduce Black anarchism to a more global audience. It does so by providing a mix of personal history, a summation of key concepts, discussion of issues facing the Black community today, and, above all, an insistent argument as to why anarchism delivers the best approach for addressing such matters.

Consisting of five chapters (including the introduction) plus two forewords and a concluding interview with Ervin, this definitive edition of *Anarchism and the Black Revolution* goes substantially beyond its first appearance as a pamphlet. The introduction offers a brief autobiography by Ervin before going through a list of ten reasons why Black anarchism remains important for revolutionary struggle in the present. These reasons include its role in the prison movement, but also its enduring critical stance against states and state violence, whether the past authoritarianism of Marxist-Leninist governments like that in the Soviet Union or in present-day liberal democracies like the United States, which regularly police their citizens through the threat and practice of violence. Ervin criticises the left liberal wing of the US Democratic Party for this latter reason, but he also directs ire toward

Black leaders like Jesse Jackson and Al Sharpton for hijacking the ideals of the 1960s Civil Rights Movement as defined by SNCC and the Black Panthers. He argues that such politicians have diminished their radicalism in favour of alliances with bourgeois interests. Ervin similarly lambasts the founders of #BlackLivesMatter for accruing private homes and monetary wealth for themselves, thus selling out the principles of anti-violence and Black humanism which established the movement. In short, Ervin delivers a sustained critique of the past several decades of Black politics in the US for its reliance on government intervention and legislation as a means of salvation for safeguarding Black rights and livelihood.

Anarchism and the Black Revolution is not purely a work of criticism, however. Supplementing these strident positions are methodical discussions of how and why anarchism provides a meaningful alternative, particularly through its concepts of autonomy, mutual aid and direct democracy. In Chapter One, titled 'Anarchism Defined', Ervin begins by initially describing anarchism as libertarian socialism, though he follows up this characterisation by carefully going through the various types of anarchism, distinguishing, for example, between anarcho-syndicalists, who focus on labour politics, and anarchist-communists, who focus on revolutionary politics. These distinctions can overlap, of course, but Ervin's main point is to undermine the pejorative, essentialist stereotype of the bomb-throwing, nihilistic anarchist. Ervin goes to great lengths to explain the intellectual richness of the anarchist tradition. He also argues for the affinities between anarchism and Black political organisations like SNCC and the Black Panthers, given the aspects of direct democracy and mutual aid that each cultivated. In the case of the latter party, it was only when the leadership style of Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale became more authoritarian, in Ervin's view, that the movement started to falter internally. Rather than parties, Ervin promotes the anarchist concept of 'affinity groups' which number between three and fifteen people and are organised around collective practices of mutual aid, education, political action and unity. Ervin refers to them as 'groups for living revolution' – the idea being utopian conditions do not come *after* struggle but are created *during* and *through* struggle.

The remaining chapters further explore the challenges and opportunities for Black anarchism.

Chapter Two, 'Capitalism and Racism', promotes 'Black Autonomy' as an alternative strategy apart from conventional trade unionism, which overlooks racism, and Black nationalism, which indulges a misguided sense of political separatism. Ervin writes that the term 'Black' in his usage refers to 'all existing peoples of colour' with Black Autonomy consequently comprising a new type of 'revolutionary organisation' within the anarchist movement that reflects 'a new radical consciousness of race and class'. Structurally, Black Autonomy resists vanguard parties, personality cults and 'any type of Black nation-state', which can result in the reinforcement of hierarchies. Chapter Three, 'Anarchism and the Black Revolution', outlines what the aims of Black anarchism are if establishing a new state is not the primary outcome sought. Central among these, in principle, are collectives and communes that constitute 'liberated zones' beyond the control of capital and the state. Tax boycotts, rent strikes, urban squatting, abolishing militarism, rejecting sexism, community food systems, community councils and labour caucuses, among many other measures, provide complementary techniques for avoiding dependence on existing state and economic structures. Echoing the legendary query of George Padmore regarding Pan-Africanism versus communism as a strategy for Black internationalism, Chapter Four is entitled 'Pan-Africanism or Intercommunalism?', in which Ervin addresses the challenges of building a Black anarchist internationalism. Drawing from the experiences of projects like the Black Autonomy International, he acknowledges the logistical difficulties of building a decentralised, transnational anarchist network. Still, he remains unwavering in his commitment to the possibility and importance of such an endeavour.

The main argument of Ervin's book is clear – namely, the anti-statist political alternative anarchism provides for Black and other activists of colour. Since the Occupy Movement over a decade ago, anarchism has received more mainstream attention through the writings of activists and intellectuals like James Scott and the late David Graeber. In contrast to these thinkers, Ervin's book provides an important intervention by stressing how an-

archism provides a strategy not just against global capitalism and the forms of inequality it has created, but also against systemic racism, which has been an accomplice in such disparities. Indeed, there have been numerous publications of late regarding the fact and history of racial capitalism as a concept and condition, but there have arguably been fewer treatises on possible solutions, especially those that offer new ideas and tactics. Though written in a spirit of militancy, *Anarchism and the Black Revolution* is oriented around formulating practical responses to this issue through the essential tenets of anarchism. In the concluding interview with Anderson, Ervin proposes the need to be 'ungovernable' – not in the sense of political chaos and disorganisation, but as a situation and means for reconstituting politics and society through direct democracy and forms of reciprocity, rather than top-down statist measures approximating a revolution from above.

Taken together, *Anarchism and the Black Revolution* is at times repetitive, reflecting its multiple editions over time. As a manifesto, it can also be more speculative, rather than experientially grounded. Some readers will want to learn more about the practicalities of organising through firsthand examples. Nonetheless, Ervin is committed to praxis, not simply theory. He envisions and promotes the idea of a present-day 'practopian' society, generated through everyday practices, rather than an elusive, future-oriented utopian society. As Joy James writes in her introductory essay 'Catalyst', the anarchism that Ervin espouses is revolutionary through its grassroots orientation. Rejecting notions of the vanguard party and the dictatorship of the proletariat, Ervin favours the 'catalyst group' comprised of an 'organic collective', consisting of 'ancestor and survivor; elders/youths; activists; intellectuals; rebels; [and] revolutionary lovers' – their common denominator being 'painfully accumulated experiential knowledge'. In this way, Ervin's approach to anarchism ultimately stresses the power, humanism and revolutionary agency of the masses over political elites. For these and other reasons, *Anarchism and the Black Revolution* speaks to our political moment.

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