



## BOOK REVIEW

BAGBY-WILLIAMS, ATTICUS and NSAMBU ZA SUEKAMA. *Black Anarchism and the Black Radical Tradition. Moving Beyond Racial Capitalism*. Ed. by Shannon Fauwkes and Howard Waitzkin. Daraja Press, Cantley 2022. vi, 54 pp. Ill. \$18.00. (E-book: \$5.00.)

For the co-authors of this text, the George Floyd rebellion marked a critical new chapter in the black radical tradition through the expansion of a new first and second wave of anarchism, including movement beyond racial capitalism. First, the authors examine the contributions of Cedric Robinson to Western anarchism through his text *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition*.<sup>1</sup> In this text, Robinson analyzes racial capitalism, and provides a descriptive analytical framework of the Black radical tradition, clarifying the relationship between Black radicalism and Marxism. Here, he outlines in bold relief two programs for revolutionary change: Marxism and the Black radical tradition. Robinson contends that Marxism remains a Western European ideology despite the emergence of Marxist-inspired movements in the Global South, i.e. China, Cuba, Vietnam, and North Korea. As the authors note: Robinson's stance is that Western cultural and historical experience has shaped the "science" of Marxism. Firstly, Robinson draws attention to the fundamental role of racial ideology in Western civilization and its influence on the development of racial capitalism. In particular, he analyzes European formation partially through the colonization by northern peoples of the continent against the "Barbarians" in the Mediterranean region to the south. This analysis emphasizes how slave labor was critical to the production that would continue into the twentieth century. Next, he describes the appearance of Europe's first bourgeois class, who were primarily traders. Their most precious cargoes, however, were slaves. Robinson describes slavery as the liberator of the bourgeoisie. He contends that European civilization is not the product of capitalism. "On the contrary, the character of capitalism can only be understood in the social and historical context of its appearance".<sup>2</sup> Hence, the roots of capitalism lie in the medieval period. He drew attention to how Europeans exaggerated and interpreted them as racial differences. Consistent with Robinson's position, this racialization involved the Slavs in the early Middle Ages and the Tartars in Italian cities later. Finally, people in what Robinson labels the Third World came to fill the category of "slave". Europe was never a free and equal society, as racialization and racism permeated its material reality.

Consequently, these authors examine the second part of Robinson's text, which emphasizes the Black radical tradition whose origins are separate and distinct from Marxism. He describes how this tradition emerged as a response to racial capitalism because the urban proletariat did not exclusively comprise the revolutionary subject.

<sup>1</sup>Cedric J. Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2000).

<sup>2</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 24.

Robinson contends that Marxist accounts of history fail to recognize that slave cargoes were not mere slaves. These laborers had philosophies, values, beliefs, and principles that translated into cultures of resistance: enslaved cargoes, then, did not consist of intellectual isolates or deculturated Blacks – men, women, and children separated from their previous world. African labor carried with it a past – a past that had shaped it and instilled the first element of consciousness and comprehension.<sup>3</sup> Robinson outlined in bold relief the culture of resistance that was a critical element of the Black radical tradition and which Marxism failed to understand. Some historical examples include maroon societies, as well as the founding of palenques, macambas, and quilombos, in North and South America. These renegade settlements of escaped slaves were autonomous and often rebellious settlements striking back at the plantation system. Robinson recites the resistance in numerous quarters highlighting revolutionary slave action in colonial North America, including the establishment of maroon colonies in Florida and the Carolinas and slave resistance during the US War of Independence. Later, he describes the Haitian Revolution and the contribution of maroon colonies to that struggle. The captive African never totally surrendered their humanity to slavery, according to Robinson. The Black radical tradition draws deeply on the idea of the impulse of the masses to make history on “their own terms” (p. 6).

The authors detail Robinson’s engagement with anarchism before writing *Black Marxism*, in his work on political authority. Although he wrote *Terms of Order*<sup>4</sup> before *Black Marxism*, Robinson was already engaging the Black radical tradition in the sense that kinship as an ordering principle had become a component in the resistance of Black radical movements to racial capitalism. Robinson’s criticism of anarchism comes from the idea that anarchism in the West is a negation of Western political authority. In one fell swoop, the Black radical tradition rejects all the West, or, in the case of African anarchism, it simply exists separately from the West. Robinson asserts that European anarchists could not move beyond the authority of the Western state, despite their desire to move to something outside of the state (p. 6).

Apart from random critiques of anarchism from within the anarchist movement, the character of European-North American as manifested within North America reveals a class reductionism concerning race and class. In this analysis, European anarchists often downplayed the role of Black resistance movements to racial capitalism, as well as the capacities of Black communities to act in revolutionary ways. Indeed, the class reductionist focused very little effort on the United States as a racialized society. These theorists have not focused on capitalism as a racialized political economic system. However, from the classical period to contemporary times, anarchists have failed to develop a substantial theory about racism that situates it as central to the development and preservation of capitalism. They have not implemented an anti-racist revolutionary practice based on such a theory.

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<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 121–122.

<sup>4</sup>Cecil J. Robinson, *The Terms of Order: Political Science and the Myth of Leadership* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1980 and 2016).

Anarchism differs substantially from Marxism concerning race and racial capitalism. The authors outline four distinctive historical periods and modes of thought within anarchism. First, the individualist anarchist strain of thought became influential in the early nineteenth century. Second, the anarcho-communism of the late nineteenth century fell into a workerist and class reductionist line. Third, anarcho-pacifism and subcultural anarchism arose during the 1960s and engaged with Black liberation movements. And four, contemporary anarchism (post-1980) adopted new analytical frameworks while continuing to have trouble with the analysis of racial domination.

For the most part, the Black radical tradition as outlined by Cedric Robinson was not addressed and the cultures of resistance on the African continent, in the Black diaspora, and in the United States were missing in action.<sup>5</sup> The failure of European and North American anarchism to develop a concrete material analysis of slavery and racial domination remains problematic today.<sup>6</sup> Still, anarcho-communists in the late nineteenth century were influenced by the emphasis of European anarchists on class without an analytical framework revolving around race. In general, Roediger outlines in bold relief how American anarchists failed to respond to the Black freedom struggle in the nineteenth century, and the Black struggle for liberation in the United States.<sup>7</sup> The Black diaspora remained largely invisible to American anarchists. Andy Cornell describes the third strand of interaction between anarchists and the civil rights movement.<sup>8</sup> He focuses his analytical lens on the civil rights movement, including the Montgomery Bus Boycott, the integrationist efforts in Little Rock, self-defense movements, and the emergence of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). For each of these turning points, Cornell tries to shed light on the anarchist response. Although anarchist non-violent, direct-action practice entered the civil rights movement, no anarchist intervention addressed the question of race and class. Basically, anarchists did engage with the oppression of Black people and racism more broadly, but the anarchism of the 1960s lacked an analytical framework to deal with race and class. Anarchists usually did not materially aid the Black revolutionary movements that were opposing the same capitalist powers that the anarchists considered their enemies (p. 15).

The authors contend that contemporary anarchism has departed from the class-orientation traditions of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries while in some ways re-engaging with the previous individualist tradition. Anarchist encounters with a larger critique of domination with the civil rights movement, anti-war activism, and feminism.<sup>9</sup> Anarchism in the United States failed to develop either an anti-racist or anti-colonial lens to address issues confronting Black and other populations of color. The authors contend that the Black radical tradition

<sup>5</sup>See *idem*, *Black Movements in America* (London, 1997).

<sup>6</sup>See Lewis Perry, *Radical Abolitionism: Anarchy and the Government of God in Antislavery Thought* (Knoxville, TN, 1996); Steve J. Shone, *Lysander Spooner: American Anarchist* (Lanham, MD, 2010); Steve J. Shone, *American Anarchism* (New York, 2013).

<sup>7</sup>David R. Roediger, *Seizing Freedom: Slave Emancipation and Liberty for All* (New York, 2016).

<sup>8</sup>Andrew Cornell, *Unruly Equality: U.S. Anarchism in the Twentieth Century* (Oakland, CA, 2016).

<sup>9</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 281–282.

cannot be understood without a critical examination of Black anarchism. The history of European-North American anarchism drew attention to the weakness of class reductionism and the failure to analyze racial capitalism. The first wave of anarchism involved former Black Panther Party members and Black Nationalists, while the second wave was more influenced by Black Feminism, abolitionism, and several other frameworks, including the Black queer feminist lens and the LGBTQ community. The second wave is informed by the seminal abolitionist texts *Are Prisons Obsolete?* by Angela Davis,<sup>10</sup> and *Golden Gulag* by Ruth Wilson Gilmore.<sup>11</sup> The second wave also emphasizes the connections to “gendered racial capitalism”, settler social contracts (replacing the “internal colony” associated with Black Nationalism) with Blacks and people of color, and Black Internationalism through Pan Africanism. It marks a clear return to Black anarchism with a focus that includes Africa and the African diasporas.

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<sup>10</sup>Angela Davis, *Are Prisons Obsolete?* (New York, 2003).

<sup>11</sup>Ruth Wilson Gilmore, *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California* (Berkeley, CA, 2007).