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Black Lives Matter or, How to Think Like an Anarchist

Abstract

Since February of 2012 a social movement clamoring for racial justice took the country by storm. Black Lives Matter (BLM) evolved into a movement and a diffuse network of social justice activists who have worked tirelessly to both reform the inherently discriminatory and abusive police practices endemic to the American justice system and sought to build alternative forms of community that would immediately improve the lives of black people in America. Members of the conservative establishment have called out Black Lives matter as being "anarchist" in nature. Indeed, these conservative critics are right in more ways than one. BLM approaches social justice from the parallel concerns of building community and influencing policy. This twin approach seeks to capture, at least parts of, the state in order to combat corporate power and abuses of the state security apparatus all the while building parallel and alternative forms of community independent from these same structures. In doing so, BLM endeavors to both maintain intellectual and political independence and transcend the state centric horizon of legibility and legitimacy inherent in our politics as well as echoes the rich tradition of anarchism.

Keywords

Anarchism, Black Lives Matter, Social Justice

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Donald Trump has recently made headlines by denouncing what he sees as the electoral exploitation of black people by the Democratic Party. According to Trump, Democrats feel no pressure to govern in ways that will benefit marginalized communities of color because these communities are already stable constituencies of the Democratic Party. Trump argues the Democratic Party is out of touch with African Americans and their hegemony over minority majority districts alienates the very constituencies they claim to represent. His argument is neither facile nor wrong.

Perhaps the most damning condemnation of both major political parties and the U.S. political system is the treatment of African Americans. From the denial of personhood at the founding, to the legacy of Jim Crow, to the recent police killings of unarmed African Americans, black people in America have been under siege since day one. The simmering tensions between African American communities and law enforcement are always bubbling right near the surface.

In the wake of the assassination of unarmed black teenager Trayvon Martin in February of 2012 a social movement clamoring for racial justice took the country by storm. Black Lives Matter (BLM) became both the message and the messenger. The hashtag evolved into a movement and a diffuse network of social justice activists who have worked tirelessly to both reform the inherently discriminatory and abusive police practices endemic to the American justice system and sought to build alternative forms of community that would immediately improve the lives of black people in America.ⁱ

Recently, Bill O'Reilly echoed a common conservative critique of BLM when he accused the group of being anarchists. While condemning BLM's "Gestapo tactics" it is their radicalism, O'Reilly claims, that is a cause for concern for white people across America.ⁱⁱ O'Reilly is more right than he knows.

Anarchists believe in self-organization and free association and trust people to run their own lives in a decent manner without being compelled to do so by the state or other hierarchical institutions like private capitalist firms. Anarchists generally consider laws, governing everything from business transactions to interpersonal relations, as exercises of arbitrary authority that usually serve power and privilege instead of justice and freedom. While self-government is part and parcel of the anarchist tradition, the government of some over others (representational or otherwise) is anathema to anarchists and anarchists are keen to serve neither lord nor master. They embrace a healthy skepticism against all concentrations of power, privilege, and authority. Likewise, anarchists are quick to point to the pervasive political and economic alienation suffered under all shades of, what's disdainfully called, "parliamentary capitalism."

To some degree, we all share this sense of alienation. In fact, many of us are already anarchists and don't even know it. How many times do we reflexively cringe as politicians claim to be doing the "people's work"? How many times do we feel our neighbors and we would be able to tackle community issues much more effectively than city and county government (much less the federal "authorities")? How many of us instinctively resent the authority certain investors or upper management exercise over a company's policies with little or no knowledge of what goes on in the office, on the shop floor, or in the break room?

In short, anarchists trust the immediacy of free association, community relations, and direct participation. They believe relationships in every sphere of life should be consensual and not based on coercion. They embrace a healthy skepticism towards all authority and encourage us to endeavor to take matters into our own hands (“direct action” in anarchist lingo) instead of exclusively relying on the state or other hierarchical institutions to provide for or protect us. That said, the anarchist reputation for nihilism, chaos, and violence in the popular imagination is not surprising. It is a product of ceaseless propaganda on the part of both private concentrations of power and the state as well as the incriminating tendencies of some strains of anarchist activism. So-called “propaganda by the deed,” (the idea that we should take the overthrow of the state to justify our attempts to assassinate government officials or destroy public property) did immense damage to anarchism’s reputation and helped to misrepresent anarchist goals and ideals to the public.

When speaking with anarchists, chaotic would be the last adjective they would use to describe their preferred mode of societal organization. Anarchism is far from unorganized. In fact, an anarchist society requires a great measure of organization, along informal and formal lines, to be able to operate outside the scope of the state. While an authoritarian institution like the state can coerce people into complying with just about anything, the lack of coercive means requires anarchists to rely on deliberation and consensus to get things done. This necessitates an enthusiastic organizational spirit as well as exceptional administrative effort.

BLM is indeed a radical movement inspired by tenants of the anarchist tradition often demonized by state and corporate power. This has been shown most clearly in BLM’s recently published “A Vision for Black Lives: Policy Demands for Black Power, Freedom & Justice.”ⁱⁱⁱ In it, they detail both concrete policy proposals and organizational goals that reveal the movement’s profound radicalism. They center their struggle for empowerment, freedom, and justice on liberating the most marginalized (“women, queer, trans, femmes, gender non-conforming, Muslim, formerly and currently incarcerated, cash poor and working class, differently-abled, undocumented, and immigrant”) members of an already oppressed class and then turn their attention to the historical injustices suffered by people of color and concrete policy and participatory solutions to persistent inequities and injustices.

BLM aims to curb state violence against people of color, invest state resources into education, health, and safety and divest from prisons and the military. They advocate for a democratically controlled economy and social and political inclusion for black people. The group is also militantly internationalist. They stand in solidarity with the victims of militarism and imperialism, warn against the danger of human-made climate change, and condemn what they see as the ravages of global capitalism.

They approach social justice from the parallel concerns of building community and influencing policy. This twin approach seeks to capture, at least parts of, the state in order to combat corporate power and abuses of the state security apparatus all the while building parallel and alternative forms of community independent from these same structures. In doing so, BLM endeavors to both maintain intellectual and political independence and transcend the state centric horizon of legibility and legitimacy inherent in our politics.^{iv}

In desiring to end the prison system they echo Russian anarchist Peter Kropotkin's famed critique of prisons where he condemns their dehumanizing conditions and advocates for their abolishment, education programs for ex-prisoners, and reintegration of the prison population with the general society.^v BLM's anti-militarism and solidarity with oppressed people around the world reflects the long history of anarchist internationalism.^{vi} By advocating the strengthening of the welfare state to combat corporate exploitation BLM not only works for their vision of economic security for exploited populations but also confronts existing injustices with the political tools at their disposal. In line with the history of anarchist movements in state capitalist societies, while empowering local communities to confront issues of marginalization and exploitation they do not shy away from using state welfare measures to serve as bastions against corporate power. Their engagement and coalitions with a loose network of national and local groups across the United States as well as their desire to capture local governments organizationally reflects the anarchist confederate ideal.^{vii}

BLM details an extensive policy platform ranging from cultural and economic reparations and universal healthcare to guaranteed income and a democratically controlled economy. Perhaps most importantly, they echo anarchist ideals when they call for thoroughly democratizing most spheres of life. They not only hope to redirect social spending for the benefit of historically marginalized groups, they also seek to change social, political, and economic structures themselves. By advocating for economic models based on community control, free association, collective ownership, participatory budgeting, support for cooperatives, and other policies based on "human needs and community participation rather than market principles," BLM prioritizes worker self-determination over corporate and state control of human lives.^{viii}

By subverting the hierarchical state centric, corporate, and surveillance models of political governance, economics, and policing and replacing them with horizontal participatory visions, BLM aspires to radicalize existing institutions and create spaces for new organizing possibilities that would deepen and expand democratic, indeed anarchistic, practice. Moreover, while setting these ambitious policy and participatory goals, BLM endeavors to expose the plight of particularly marginalized groups within historically exploited and oppressed peoples by protecting and fully harnessing their creative and participatory energies. In addition to these overarching aims, BLM's guiding philosophy is laced with a thorough concern for individuality reflective of Emma Goldman's proclamation that she did not want a revolution she could not dance to.^{ix}

Bill O'Reilly claims the "radical left" and "fringe nuts" only support BLM. I would argue most of us would fall under these categories once we understand how to think like anarchists. Once we recognize the egregious concentrations of power endemic to corporate capitalism as well as reject the profound political and economic alienation bred of its political and institutional manifestations, we are able to easily embrace BLM's message.

This approach to politics and community building is based on principles familiar to any fellow traveler and "fanatic lover of liberty."^x By rejecting the hegemony of the Two Party system and attempting to simultaneously capture and circumvent existing political institutions, Black Lives Matter has echoed Donald Trump's stinging critique of the Democratic Party and has prioritized the "right of self-determination" by fostering "organic agreement of all on the basis of like interests and common convictions" through

“free combination from below upward.”^{xi} Between chants of “No Justice, No Peace” there exists a shared sense of spontaneous belonging that transcends Party loyalty. It obviates the electoral engineering so pervasive to our algorithmic data driven partisan echo chambers. It transcends the persistent identity politics of an ostensibly “post-racial” American political landscape. Most importantly, Black Lives Matter gives us an opportunity to think like anarchists.

ⁱ For a compelling account of the persistent discrimination and inequity inherent to the American justice system see Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New York: The New Press, 2012).

ⁱⁱ Sophia Duffy. “O’Reilly Scolds Black Lives Matter for ‘Gestapo Tactics,’ ‘Condemning White Society.’” Filmed [August 2015]. YouTube video, 5:45. Posted [August 2015].

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=13jI7LCKqDI>. See also Ben King. “Bill O’Reilly Confronts NAACP Official on Black Lives Matter – ‘White American Despise this Crew.’” Filmed [July 2016]. YouTube video, 4:45. Posted [July 2016]. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FJtouRmlSmw>.

ⁱⁱⁱ “A Vision for Black Lives: Policy Demands for Black Power, Freedom, and Justice,” Black Lives Matter, accessed October 15, 2016, <https://policy.m4bl.org>.

^{iv} See James C. Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998).

^v Peter Kropotkin, “Prisons and Their Moral Influence on Prisoners” in *Anarchism: A Collection of Revolutionary Writings* (Mineola, New York: Dover, 2002), 219-235.

^{vi} See George Woodcock, *Anarchism: A History of Libertarian Ideas and Movements* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009).

^{vii} See “The Meaning of Confederalism,” Murray Bookchin, accessed October 14, 2016, <https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/murray-bookchin-the-meaning-of-confederalism>.

^{viii} Robin D.G. Kelly, “What Does Black Lives Matter Want,” Counterpunch, September 2, 2016, <http://www.counterpunch.org/2016/09/02/what-does-black-lives-matter-want>.

^{ix} Though this saying is often attributed to Goldman, there is no textual evidence she actually uttered these words. It is remembered she said something to this effect while in a discussion over the propriety of dancing at a party with some fellow activists. In their “Vision for Black Lives,” Black Lives Matter makes clear their concern over the homogenization of black struggle and the need to make their struggle multifaceted and attuned to the struggle for human identities across a wide spectrum.

^x Mikhail Bakunin is quoted in Noam Chomsky, *Chomsky on Anarchism*, ed. Barry Pateman (Edinburgh: AK Press, 2005), 121.

^{xi} Rudolph Rocker, *Anarcho-Syndicalism: Theory and Practice* (Edinburgh: AK Press, 2004), 60.