

# Experiencing Anarchism

by Sara Ramirez Galindo

It is difficult to write about a topic like anarchism, which is already controversial enough, to people who are familiar with its theory and practice without being intensely judged and questioned about what is written. Not that questioning is wrong. It is necessary, but in my opinion, it is unproductive if it lacks respect for someone's ideas, thorough thinking, reflection, and constructive feedback. That is why I ask that you, the reader, to please just read, think and reflect about what I am expressing here. It might not be a perfectly written composition but it is not meant to be one, it is simply my experience with anarchism.

I first learned of "Anarchism," the kind known to most activists in the United States, through literature given to me by a friend who had traveled to Washington State for the anti-World Trade Organization actions in Seattle of 1999. My curiosity about the subject led me to research more about it. I never read entire books by Proudhon, Bakunin or Emma Goldman for lack of time, so I read articles, zines and excerpts of books instead. Through this literature I learned of an anarchist conference.

This first anarchist conference I attended left me perplexed, for I had read about anarchism as the theory and practice towards the abolition of authority, hierarchies, practicing collectivity and active organizing. The feeling I got from that conference was uninviting, dry, alienating, extremely sub-cultural and life-stylish. I could not understand many of the things

people were talking about in discussion circles. I could not understand why several of them had re-named themselves after plants and animals. I did not understand why they wore no deodorant; and it seemed weird to me that nobody bothered asking others how they were doing, if they needed anything, or even took the time to offer a greeting or a smile. I did not enjoy the conference but still remained interested in anarchism telling myself, "I'm sure this isn't all there's to it."

Once I got in contact with a self-defined anarchist group in my region that was holding weekly meetings, I decided to check them out. The way I was received by the people in the group was not any different from what I'd experienced at my first anarchist conference, except that after the conclusion of the meeting a couple of women in the group approached me to ask my name and how I was doing and invited me to their next meeting. I did not stay in that group long. I never spoke up because I was afraid of saying something wrong, something outside the "anarchist" terms they understood, and I did not want to be the center of attention if anything I asked became controversial, for I felt none of that "solidarity" and less of that "collectivity" that anarchism is supposed to generate. Though some people were very nice, others were very arrogant, unapproachable and plain intimidating, so I moved on.

While visiting "anarchist" groups every now and then, I was simultaneously involved in anti-sweatshop student activism, not because it was the "thing to do," but because my mother, uncles, aunts and myself had worked in clandestine garment sweatshops before. From this student activist work, I met a woman who introduced me to her collective, the Zapatista Committee of Los Angeles.

That day was the beginning of a life-changing experience.

Nobody in any activist or typical anarchist organization had greeted me with honest handshakes and looked at me in the eye with interest of

knowing who I was or what I had to say like the people in this collective did. I was once again confused because this group was not self-defined as anarchist, but they based their practices on non-hierarchical, anti-authoritarian politics, they did practice collectivity, held weekly reading circles, and most importantly they were organizing events, not just shows – these were based on accomplishing truly radical and practical goals. And I for the first time felt these actions were building a true sense of community.

**...our communities need non-traditional anarchist projects that could be constantly assessed to see if they are indeed creating solidarity, mutual-aid, self-determination, self-sufficiency and autonomy.**

As I became to know each and every one of the people in the collective, I was not surprised to know many of them were in fact self-defined anarchists who had simply felt the need to work with a group of people who could produce and provide what mainstream anarchist circles had not. Upon experiencing anarchism through those events, groups and people, I constructed this view about today's many types of anarchists: the self-defined image anarchists, the read-only anarchists, the underground and non-self-defined working anarchists, the anarchists who are a combination of all these, and others.

At this point I had understood that the anarchists I had initially met did not necessarily comprise what the theory and practice of anarchism was, as I understood it. It was like understanding that in the world there are nation-states and then there are the people living in them, two different entities. It was also at this point that I openly acknowledged that I was not wrong for being one of the few women and people of color walking into a predominantly-white anarchist book fair, but that is was in fact this homogenized "movement" of anarchists that had unfortunately allowed things to be structured this way.

This homogenization has unfortunately built boundaries that mark what kind of issues are of priority, what kind of actions are "revolutionary," the kind of workshops to be given at a conference and so on. It was difficult for me to feel connected to these anarchists; our realities and priorities had nothing in common. Anarchist literature circulating in the majority of anarchist groups today speaks mainly of European (and European descendants') anarchists' history and present. I'm sure that is not on purpose, yet the beginning of this trend led to the simplification of ideas, such as that of Europe being the "birthplace" of anarchism and this information was used to simplify another idea, that supposedly anarchism later "reached" Latin America in the mid-1800s. I saw how this was not questioned often or ever by mainstream anarchism. Was it never considered that other people, whose histories just never made it to books, could have been practicing anarchism?

Understanding the importance of rescuing other anarchist histories has led to the emergence of materials about Cuban anarchism, African anarchism, Argentine anarchism, etc. At the same time a growing number of anarchists – including myself, a non-white person – have started identifying as anarchists of color in order to rescue and expose (to everyone, not just to mainstream anarchists) our struggles and those fought by historic individuals like Luisa Capetillo from Puerto Rico, Lucy Parsons from the United States, Julia Arévalo from Chile, Maria Angelina Soares from Brazil and others.

Being part of this is my attempt to break up this standardization of anarchism's current Eurocentric tendencies that, in my opinion, could be causing some of the stagnation of its theory and practice; and to use it as a supplement to the gradual dismantling of racism and similar hierarchies of power that unfortunately exist in mainstream anarchism.

I keep mentioning, "mainstream anarchism" because in the United States, the only anarchism recognized is that which is externally visible, while it is in fact being "actively and seriously" taken into practice in other parts of the world through struggles that are simply not getting the amount of solidarity an all-white-boy black-block "action" gets. I am certain that the anarchist activity taking place right this minute in Magonista communities in the Mazateca Highlands in Oaxaca (Mexico), and in the Bolivian region are not the type of anarchist "scene," we are accustomed to see, for these movements include bloody confrontations, tears, death, mutual trust and hope, and most importantly constant struggle as a priority to survival. The realities for U.S. anarchism are others, and so the responses are going to be different, that is understood. Yet, this mainstream anarchist movement in the U.S. lacks understanding and consideration for the realities lived by non-privileged anarchists in the same region. Mainstream anarchism in this aspect lacks the solidarity, the convivial feeling needed to work with each other, to learn and unlearn from each other, and most importantly to build trust to back each other up.

I was fortunate enough to participate in an amazing event where these elements of respect, solidarity, inspiration and revitalization were experienced.

The Anarchist People of Color Conference in Detroit boosted up my hope for anarchism. This was an event that became controversial (to mainstream anarchists) from the very beginning, as many considered it exclusionary, "racist" and every other negative thing possible. I did not pay much attention to this drama, as I knew we were not gathering to plot a battle against white anarchists, we were simply in need to meet and share ideas

with each other. It felt humiliating to have to explain to some white and non-white anarchists why we wanted to meet. We wanted to meet for the same reason anarchist women gather separate from anarchist men: to empower themselves; we gathered, with similar reasons to those anarchists break away from authoritarian nation-state governments: to change things that were going wrong, to change things in the system. To me this conference meant meeting people who had experienced the discrimination I had lived within mainstream anarchist circles. It also meant meeting individuals who were highly interested in developing and carrying out projects, not just for those in the "scene" or in their cliques, but mainly with those in their communities (community meaning neighbors, co-workers, families, etc.), projects that could truly exemplify the ideals of anarchism rather than simply spending time theorizing about them. This conference did not produce a separate anarchist group, as that was not our purpose. We created a different understanding of its practice and theory.

To us, anarchism meant something diverse, since we all came from different communities and with different psychological, emotional and spiritual experiences. We stressed on the importance of having serious commitment on building relationships with our community rather than encircling ourselves in a subculture that unconsciously excludes others around us. We also planted that this anarchism we were talking was non-vanguardist, non-elitist, non-arrogant, respectful, humble, honest, loving, gentle and accountable to others. As revolutionary anarchist people of color, we understood our communities need non-traditional anarchist projects that could be constantly assessed to see if they are indeed creating solidarity, mutual-aid, self-determination, self-sufficiency and autonomy.

Experiencing anarchism to me has not been what books say it is. It has meant how my actions can in fact produce it effectively.

# Hearts Spark Arson

by Heather Ajani

Over the past few years, my involvement in movements against police brutality, globalization and other political movements led me on a path to understanding how race works and how it affects me as a woman of color. Over the years, I have studied race theory, women's liberation movements, the criminal justice system, classical and contemporary political theory, as well as drawing from my own experiences. It is because of these academic exercises and personal growth processes that I write this article. I learned a lot about myself over the past three decades, figuring out why I am angry, why the way I feel has a bigger context than just my being and that as a brown woman in America I am forced to feel a duality wherever I turn.

There is a lot of debate about the political versus the personal. The debate started hitting mainstream activism during the second wave women's movement. The argument boiled down to whether the personal experiences we had belonged in political debate, more easily analogized as taking a more professional approach in our activism, checking personal problems at the door. To me this argument plays into the colonization of thought we struggle against each and every day. We use it and other terms to stifle each other and ourselves, including when we need to be accountable for our actions.

There have been times in history when the most beautiful revolutions, revolts and uprisings have been sparked because of the personal. Such examples include the abolitionist movement, civil rights movement and even mother's movements such as the Argentinean group, "Las Madres de Plaza de Mayo." Some of the most successful movements are borne of passion in one respect or another and that personal drive, commitment,

self-discipline and self-determination, or whatever is at the base of a revolutionary's heart is balanced with the political context of their environs. These movements are sparked by fires that burn the very foundations of the people involved, threatening their identities, who they are, leaving them with their backs against the wall.

As a person of color, activist, organizer, agitator, anti-authoritarian with strong anarchist leanings, I have often been accused of being too emotional, too critical, or too truthful. I can't say that I've always displayed the best behavior when confronted with these paternalistic statements often bestowed on women in radical circles, but I have tried to hone those accusations into something I can reclaim in a more principled way. The pain I feel when I hear these accusations and when I think of the way that these statements become internally oppressive it makes me wonder if what we give each other leaves us empty handed.

In my journey to developing a political and personal praxis, I have come to an understanding that my oppression comes from a system that depends on the privileges of a few and the oppression of those who are denied those privileges. This oppression eats people of color alive, depends on false dichotomies, hierarchies, systematic genocide through the continual colonization of non-whites, the perpetuation of capitalism and unholy alliances between workers and bosses. I have also wondered if it is possible to have the passion necessary to combat these social and political ills without emotion, self-criticism and truth.

In *All About Love*, bell hooks stresses the need for openness (i.e. honesty,) nurturing, self-discipline, justice and love as a means for social and political change. In a recent project, I had the opportunity to speak with several elders who had taken part in movements such as the Black Panther Party, Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee, and others. Most stressed the need for spiritual and political balance, stating that often times the connections between mind, body and spirit are ignored in lieu of personal gain. In another, more locally based project in Houston, this

reality took another turn as I asked people why commitment to political organizations/movements waned. Often times the answer was simply that there is a lack of passion for what we do. The balance between the personal and political is necessary to successfully create revolutionary potential. How do we seek to build a better world when we can't deal with ourselves or each other? How do we set examples for our dreams, our goals, or our visions without the internal healing that needs to take place?

We need passion to make change. We also need political direction and unity. In order to do this we must find the balance between the personal and the political worlds we live in. Sometimes we need to take our personal experiences to build a political analysis while understanding that political change can't successfully occur until we are left without those personal choices. I often quote one of my favorite people in the anarchist people of color movement, Ashanti Alston in saying, "change doesn't come until you are made to feel uncomfortable."

#### **Building the Political and its Relation to the Personal**

Drawing upon what I know, I will use the struggle of women as an example. Due to racial oppression, struggles of women of color have not focused on women as women, but against various oppressive systems. Often in our struggle, women of color experience issues of tokenism, stereotypical oppression, as well as blatant exposure to sexist behavior. We are not only subject to our identities as women, but also as women of color. Theorists often refer to this identity as "the other." Another term I prefer is the "third world women" (Anzaldúa, 64). This term encompasses the need for decolonization of the oppressed in our communities, the need for self-empowerment and -determination and knowledge of the history of people of color in this country. We are part of a system that seeks to destroy us, we are the "developing" and "war torn" peoples within Amerika, we continue to be colonized through lack of education, healthcare, employment, decent housing, child care and decent food. We have been taken from our lands

and our lands have been taken from us and we continue to experience this displacement through modern day Jim Crow systems such as the police and prisons. No matter what, the culprit is the same. It is our common enemy and the only way that we can fight it is by addressing our issues, finding solutions and developing political unity in order to build and strengthen social movements.

Before we can go on to developing a theory for freedom, we need to recognize and understand power. Power is often defined as the capacity to exercise control over another. Power is also the ability to perform or act effectively. At a women's studies conference in 1981, a group of women who were part of a consciousness-raising group for women of color concluded that they needed to define a common ground for how power worked within the United States. This model has four categories and signifies a hierarchy from which power flows. It begins with the idea that freedom in the U.S. is most easily achieved by the reality of the white, capitalist male. Next in line is the white woman, who achieves her will to power through her whiteness and though she is objectified by white men, she still bears the privilege of whiteness and draws on that privilege objectifying people of color in order to gain a solid sense of self. Men of color or "third world" men do not benefit from racial hierarchy, but do utilize their identities as males to confront their oppressions, which leaves women of color in a place where they are neither white, nor male (Anzaldúa, 64).

Even when trying to understand power as something that is interconnected through race and gender, it is important to think in terms of political change, where the weak spots are. Though power has been displayed in terms of hierarchy above, there is a need for a common goal, not just against whiteness and patriarchy, but against the weak spot in the system that divides these struggles. For critics of capitalism, it is class, but beyond that, what has historically divided struggles against those in power in the United States? Power differentials in the U.S. have been dependent on a system of white privilege. This privilege has separated movements of

women's liberation, labor movements and hinders self-determination of the poor and oppressed. Whiteness as a system determines who goes to the best schools, who lives where, employment, healthcare, and allows for an alliance between the bosses and the white working class. Whiteness keeps people of color from meeting basic needs and the power differentials that white privilege creates keeps the entire working class and sectors of the poor from resisting en masse because of the benefits it creates for those who identify as "white." This benefit for whites is sometimes referred to as the "wages of whiteness" (Roediger).

We need to recognize this system of domination that we live under if we are going to struggle against it. It is also important to understand what we go through on a personal level and how the wages of whiteness often times affect us. In a discussion session held amongst women of color at the 2003 Anarchist People of Color Conference in Detroit, a decision was made to discuss how we were made to feel as women of color and what we saw as solutions to those problems. We made this decision in order to start a dialogue amongst ourselves that started with a healing process, so we could gain strength in fighting our oppressions. When I look back upon the following list, I feel empowered because I no longer feel alone in system of oppression and domination that often sparks self-hatred and identity crisis among many women of color.

We came to many conclusions as to how we are oppressed, internally as well as externally. One was that women of color are often tokenized. Women of color (and our brothers) are often looked to by whites for answers and opinions about their [whites'] race politics, how they are working within a community, etc. When a cultural or racial question comes up, many times whites have a tendency to look towards the people of color in the room to view their reactions. This is not to say that whites should disregard the opinions of people of color, but that we shouldn't be asked for our opinions simply because we are non-white. A twist to this problem is when whites start to pontificate about our struggles as people of color.

Sometimes whites will say, "if you all did this..." or "if you did that..." Why would a white person know my struggle better than me? Why would I listen to a white person when all the white people in my life have said something either intentionally or by slip of tongue denoting that I am less than deserving: things like I am not fit for school, I shouldn't have kids, that they wish that I could stay and take care of their kids and help around the house, reinforcing that I am subordinate in one way or another?

Often women of color experience tokenization by whites in various ways; one is that we are exoticized for our unique qualities and physical attributes. There is more than one tale of a black sister walking into a room where a white woman wants to feel her hair. Other forms of oppression include unconscious sexist behavior amongst women, competitiveness, communication problems (not getting heard, getting talked over), being put into caregiver roles (we are called upon to be the secretaries, the organizers, the errand runners, the nannies and the mummies) and there are times when we fear for our personal safety because women of color are often perpetuated as whores by the corporate media. After each of us at the discussion brought up an issue, we finished our sentence with what we wanted in order to address the issue, so we were problem solving as we went along. Some of the solutions we came up with were: healing ourselves, finding balance, defining our boundaries, taking responsibility for ourselves and our actions, developing respect for ourselves and for others, and building communication skills. These solutions clearly spelled out the need to deal with the personal as well as the political in building strength among the women in that room.

### What We Need

We need to build solidarity amongst each other through sharing our experiences, recognizing our differences and building support for each other. True solidarity creates awareness amongst oppressed peoples, and helps them to recognize the need to forge political unity. Because our

identities as third world peoples are multiple, this means defining who we are and at the same time, redefining what it means to struggle for liberation by building on our commonalities. The struggle for liberation should seek to end the subordination and domination of oppressed peoples and create a shift in power differentials that concentrate on a weak spot within our current power structure.

This means that we need to deal with who we are personally (both politically and spiritually) in order to be able to look beyond ourselves and truly see how we as oppressed peoples are affected as a whole. This does not mean that we stop at struggling against our own angst, or for equality and individualism—this means that we use our consciousness of self to begin to collectively envision a society without domination by white, capitalist males; that we need to challenge what whiteness means in terms of actual privileges and to bankrupt that system so that it does not provide wages to those who draw on their identities to oppress others. We also need to create spaces that help to develop and empower ourselves and others. We need to understand that without our own fires we cannot spark the creativity, desire, and strength needed to struggle effectively against our oppressors.

#### **Sources**

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**NOTE:** the title of this article is not of my imagination, it is taken from a friend's former band, Bully Rag, a.k.a. Fucking Thunder's CD, which ironically they put out before he was unfairly replaced. Anyways, to make a long story short, they consequently suffered as a result of their bad decision. Solidarity with friends, oh yes...

# The End of Idealism

## Honest Conversations about Race, Class, Self-Determination and Anarchist People of Color

by Ernesto Aguilar

I first began writing for *Our Culture, Our Resistance* on anarchist people of color and the conversations I believe we need to get started. During that process, very kind individuals offered up much help in ideas and structure, but at some point, the work became academic. So, stepping back, I realized that, to be compelling and motivate change, starting any conversation has to be fluid and open, but also geared at accomplishing something. I took a step back and returned to the roots of my piece, of the conversations we need to get started if we are going to grow and politically advance ourselves as revolutionaries of color. And here we are.

When people visualized the emergence of a tendency of anti-authoritarian people of color, no one believed it would grow at the pace and direction it has. It is sprouting up and fostering awareness in ways few people envisioned, which has been fantastic. At the same time, we are at a critical point; where many see our organizing must evolve. We need to create a space for our unity, culture and identity, but also our politics.

We need to be clear that advocacy of rights and roles for people of color, while certainly needed, permits the state and white-led movement to institutionalize and mediate our struggles. Fighting racism and white supremacy, when included at all, are problems typically regarded as line-items for social change. Even among anarchists of color, the attraction is

strong to build own our anarchist movement, made up of people of color, or to demand greater respect from the white-led movement. In the process, we're failing to ask critical questions about the viability of the white-led movement or our own loyalties.

For people of color who identify as anti-authoritarians, bringing us into the clearest solidarity with oppressed people around the world should be our primary focus. We need to give respect to those who've come before us by building on their successes and learning from their mistakes, while bringing the anarchist people of color tendency to the next level.

### Understanding oppression

Ask someone what they think of when they consider racism, oppression and white supremacy. You'll likely get many answers. What does oppression mean to you as a person of color? I believe that, in order to find answers, it's important to know what we're dealing with when we talk about such broad concepts.

Francis Cress-Welsing argues that racism is white supremacy. That distinction alone is significant. Some whites and a few people of color are confused by the word racism; they'll sometimes fall into traps of terms popularized by the far right, or take the word literally, thinking it to be a prejudice of any race by any race. Historically, however, racism has always meant white supremacy and collusion with institutional power. Race was, in many instances, a line of distinction separating Europeans from non-whites. Cress-Welsing states racism consists of "patterns of perception, logic, symbol formation, thought, speech, action and emotional response, as conducted simultaneously in all areas of people activity (economics, education, entertainment, labor, law, politics, religion, sex and war)." Cress-Welsing's definition grasps the totality of racism/white supremacy, and how it shapes our own views, as well as that of white people, virtually from birth. Cress-Welsing's clarity makes us think about how we got into the global mess we face. In truth, Europeans have waged



military and cultural war against people of color for nearly a thousand years. Such exercises were never a means of dividing rich and poor, but to unite the white masses to fight for the moral, political, social and/or economic superiority of their way of life over other races.

Addressing the social and political realities of white supremacy requires a strategy. In my view, that approach must make self-determination for oppressed people a basis of unity for looking at the world, among those professed anti-authoritarian people of color and all others. Our first stand must be with people of color worldwide fighting for room to breathe. Our first prerogative must be freedom for all oppressed people, by any means. At its core, self-determination is an opportunity to finally be free, to determine one's own political, social and economic destinies. For North American radicals of color, this kind of idea can be a leap; we live in a society of relative privilege, where corporate corruption, globalization and other movements compete for our hearts and minds. Occupation and oppression aren't harsh and in our faces as, for instance, in Palestine. As such, we're conditioned to think about our struggles related to what we're against, rather than that for which we are fighting.

### Tactics and unity

Clearly, it's on us to start thinking about how we make efforts if we are to be self-determined. One of the beautiful things about anarchism, many people tell me, is that it is fluid and open; flexible enough to respond to social and political conditions, but strong enough in its anti-authoritarianism to stand up against dictatorship of any kind. However, all of us get frustrated in the roadblocks that come before any movement. I submit that we need think about our tactics and our unity.

It is crucial that we start looking at our politics with a nod to what we, as revolutionaries, hope to create of this world. We know what we're against, but how are we getting to the world we want to create? And, as impor-

tantly, what actions do we need to make to get there? What is a fundamental call from which our movements emanate?

Although I have spoken out frequently on the need to locally organize, I respect that not everyone is an organizer. It can be intimidating for even experienced people. In reality, I am an advocate of the growth of our movements on many levels. Whether you are an organizer, somebody just looking for answers, someone fed up with how the system works, or an intellectual, what you are about and what we as a movement stand for needs to be out front, fearless, imperfect and courageous.

Some ideas that touch on tactics and unity, no matter who you are:

- **Objectives:** What do you want? What are the long-term, mid-range and short-term goals? What are the process goals (i.e. building cultural consciousness among members) in reaching the objective?
- **Resources:** What/where are the alliances, money and relationships?
- **Audience:** Who are the people you want to connect to? Who are you trying motivate to action?
- **Message:** What do people need to hear? What parts of the message apply to people's sense of justice, and which to their self-interest?
- **Spokespeople:** If you are organizing something for your idea, who should deliver the message? Who is credible to the audience, and how do we equip spokespeople with information and comfort levels?
- **Jump-Off:** How do we kick off and move forward?
- **Venue:** How do we get the audience the message?
- **Opportunities:** What do we need to cultivate?
- **Evaluation:** How do we judge our progress?

As one example, I wrote a missive on tactical politics, focusing on lifestyle politics. Also called conscientious consumerism, lifestyle politics (and other forms of reactive activism), have come to the fore as leading trends in social action. Boycotts; buying green, fair trade, et al.; and voluntary

simplicity are everywhere. The failure of these kinds of strategies is in vision. Writer Angus Maguire argues that, at its worst, lifestyle politics "overemphasize the importance of white and middle-class buying habits while marginalizing the work of communities of color around the world to gain power in struggles against the same injustices our buying habits are supposedly addressing." And I concur. But the ensuing responses from whites as well as a few people of color failed to offer a vision about how such consumerism connects with our program for advancement. Many people are not ready for a discussion about a "program for advancement" or much of a program for anything, but we need to be. Time and conditions require we stop spinning our wheels. We need to see a strategic vision for our work as part of an explicit and comprehensive program for reaching political, social and economic self-determination. Lifestyle politics is perhaps an easy target, but this instance demonstrates our need to analyze tactics.

Unity is perhaps one of the most curious roads to navigate in this respect, because once you find out what you're for, your allies become a little clearer. It's vibrant, for sure, and presents opportunities for us.

I don't want to open the conversation with the typical us-versus-other-ideologies rhetoric, but nudge you to consider priorities. Herb Boyd writes in a revised edition of *Detroit: I Do Mind Dying* that ideologues on various sides of the political spectrum had, "political positions so bitterly opposed in the 1970s that it disrupted the remnants of the Black liberation movement, thereby ending any possibility of operational unity." Anarchists of color get caught up in that too; some of us see our internal contradictions as people of color as more important than the external contradictions of white supremacist-engineered society out to do us all in. We've been sold the line that joining the white-led movement serves "humanity," when humanity can't speak for itself in struggle in which it doesn't lead. Some of us eschew other people of color as being anti-white, et al., but fail to see who is served by our divisions. By no means am I saying to ignore our

differences. I don't believe paper unity serves anyone. I encourage all my people to consider who you unite with, why and the interests it serves.

### Allies and language

Whether we unite with white anarchists is a tough question. While I believe broad-based work presents unique opportunities, I am very passionate in feeling it's not our job to hold white folks' hands, make them feel empowered, good about their politics, not downplayed, etc. The white-led movement should provide that to them, since it's theirs and whites should be demanding more of other white progressives. But the subject of allies is altogether different.

When the Anarchist People of Color listserv began, some of us came to the table with the idea that we'd have this open space for ourselves to create a more visible presence of people of color in the 'anarchist movement,' essentially the white-led movement. Undoubtedly, our at-first unpopular little crew has now gotten more support from whites who see this effort as important. However, while most anarchists of color still participate in white-led organizing, our collective analysis is slowly evolving to a place where we are standing on our own, and what such unity means for us in the long term.

There's an equal amount of work around the question of anarchism, and how we can grow it to meet the needs of communities of color. Not a few people of color observe that the contemporary anarchist scene, if indeed it's embodied by testosterone-pumped white boys and *Anarchy* magazine, relates to a minuscule fraction of the populace. How do we make the ideas of anarchy relate to those who are not pissed off Caucasians and grad students? Such a question doesn't even get into the troubling failure in anarchism to adequately address white supremacy, e.g. Bakunin's anti-Semitism, Emma Goldman's advocacy of eugenics and modern anarchism's denial of the centrality of race in the dialogue. Anarchism, looked at objectively, should be applied as a model of social organization. North American trends in anarchist thinking have advocated anarchism as

an ideology, philosophy or lifestyle choice. Yet the fault of such application is that many assumptions made by anarchists deliver firmly Eurocentric values in their introduction.

Just to be clear, when I say Eurocentric values, I mean values that have become a little more complex than merely 'white values,' but concepts, through the system of white supremacy, capital and subjugation, that have become part of mass consciousness. The rise of modern Eurocentric values can be traced to the rise of capitalism, and embody ideas which, despite pretensions to the contrary by their most radical carriers, are intended to serve white supremacy and capital.

Calling individualism, liberalism, the rule of (natural, structural or other) law, democracy and free markets (e.g. free trade, fair trade, et al.) Eurocentric values denies the rightful link people of color have to them. In fact, Eurocentric values mean a sense of power, and of moral, political, social and/or economic superiority to other cultures, with the mission of assimilating them. For hundreds of years, European scholars have bemoaned the failures of "other" people as a means of talking up the superiority of their own belief systems, and assimilating them into Eurocentrism. All of us fall into the trap sometime; as people of color, we've been indoctrinated to tacitly accept the superiority of whites over us, while whites have been taught to assume their values are right. The "unite and fight" abstraction, at its core, is aimed at winning people to its philosophy and assimilating all struggles into "one." In another example, you regularly hear proponents of anarchism rejecting community cohesion and religious faith, but failing to grasp that, to many people, such things are important and can, in some historical examples, be an organizing spot. Even notions of consensus – an organizing model developed by white, middle-class anti-nuclear activists where a tiny group of people, often with many of the same values, get together and mutually agree to something – are an illusion aimed at reinforcing the values of a small group to the contrasting values of outsiders. Proponents of North American anarchism too often look to bring

allegedly superior lifestyles and belief systems to the fore, and oppressed people, directly or indirectly, can be the victims.

I do think a revolutionary movement will take root, and that it will be broad-based. However, the mindset of many is a rush to idealism – that social justice is "all one struggle" and that we all need to be united to defeat fascism. I put forward the conversation that the rush to idealism will be our demise as a movement. The white-led movement should answer for its internal racism, and people of color should understand what we want, how we plan to work, and be conscious and organized as a struggle enough to fight this battle alone, if necessary. That kind of conviction is important in this undertaking. We should not make concessions to our demand for self-determination to win anyone's support.

#### Related: Class

Another issue on the unity tip is the anarchist romance with class. As we forge a new path of oppressed peoples' politics, as well as anarchist theory and practice, we must take a critical look at class. Are we surrendering our self-determination in the name of unity?

Within white-led anarchism, there is a subtle, and occasionally overt, competitiveness between race and class. For example, in "Race and Class: Burning Questions, Unpopular Answers," a member of the Northeastern Federation of Anarcho-Communists brings arguments such as "racism is an excuse" and that racism is prevalent among people of color. These ideas are presented to show class is the primary issue we should unite under. "There's an overwhelming amount of class-privileged 'people of color' spearheading this movement, creating a culture that is class reactionary to all working class people of all races in the United States," the piece notes. "These people are also quick to react to what they see as 'class trumping race,' and find the common class struggle between people of different races to be not as important as what they share in common

with the community in question.”

Similar points are made in a far cruder fashion. Most white radicals, and some radicals of color, have adopted old Marxist notions of class, class struggle and, most importantly, class solidarity. There are dozens of names people of color get called – from “nationalist” to “reverse racist” to “privilege pimp” – for pointing out the obvious importance of self-determination, racism and the historical fallacies of class unity. Although I do agree with familiarity with how capitalism functions is appropriate, my concern is many class-unity concepts are based on two fundamentally false ideas: 1.) that “the working class” (meaning the white working class and workers of color, in the United States and internationally) can unite to fight; and that workers of color and the white working class have common interests, from the workplace on down.

Even most anarchist intellectualism stakes positions to which the two misconceptions as their foundation. While there are indubitably surface commonalities (i.e. workplace, housing, etc.), history demonstrates that working-class solidarity between white workers and workers of color does not exist. History further demonstrates that white workers, in almost all cases, side with the oppressor and against workers of color. I’m sure there are isolated examples of unity. Does that mean I believe people of color should take such cavernous leaps of faith? Not without their eyes open and minds sharp.

J. Sakai, author of *Settlers: Mythology of the White Proletariat*, has been one of the hardest critics of the white working class. In an interview I conducted with him, Sakai explained he researched history and put his findings bluntly “I figured out that actually there wasn’t any time when the white working class wasn’t white supremacist and racist and essentially pro-empire.” Those who ad hominem dismiss Sakai ought to follow up on what he says. From colonization to ongoing wars and the dismantling of Affirmative Action, how many mass movements of white workers (or whites

altogether) were there, compared to instances where white masses either stood with the elite, actively or passively? 100-to-1? 500-to-1? Herein lies the dirty secret of class politics. If we have a few hundred years of history to look upon, in which the white working class has consistently and in most instances actively sided with oppressors and sold out people of color, what is the basis for solidarity? If working-class solidarity were more than a slogan, wouldn’t the racial discrimination and even profound racism within the ranks of white workers have been obliterated years ago? If white workers have rejected significant demands supporting people of color, what makes them different now? They’re not. As Sakai points out, and deftly illustrates, the white working class and people of color have divergent interests. White workers just side with their own interests and the empire’s.

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Another conspicuous issue is the history of cross-class alliances among people of color in fighting colonialism. Read the histories of Algeria, Mexico and other countries and you’ll discover the internal contradictions of class become far less important when faced by the external contradiction of an occupying army. It’s the kind of history that swims against North American radicalism’s beliefs that classes don’t or can’t unite. Moving forward as anarchist people of color means understanding our allies, as well as our enemies, and what that means for our freedom.

### Privilege and Assimilation

One of the beauties of self-determination is the fact that it draws lines of opposition, contradictions and prompts us to consider privilege. Not simply the (still important) roads typically hewn by activist-types -- gender, sexual orientation and class -- but looking at one another and acknowledging the privileges of people within this movement, and navigating that in hopes of being honest as possible. Being self-determined requires such.

For people of color who were raised in or politicized by white-dominant spaces, concept of self and one's relationship with non-white-dominant spaces represent one point of privilege worth exploring. In no other instance is the difference between anarchists of color bigger than between white-aculturated persons of color, and those socialized by their respective cultures. Relational views, concepts of autonomy/people of color spaces, racial experience, overall objectives for empowerment and more, are thus profoundly varied. In many cases, being raised in white-dominant spaces is not a choice, although voluntary involvement is. In both cases, participants must recognize that, historically, such spaces impart values that, while dressed in democratic language, are intended to further white supremacy, create confusion and division, and, as a means of self-perpetuation, can make white-aculturated people of color unwitting agents of white supremacist ideology. How internalized marginalization and oppression function are critical considerations.

Very honestly, there are internal struggles being waged by conscious people of color all around us. The sense of estrangement from communities is real, as is the indignation some people of color feel when whites assume that people of color have no other interests but race. We need to be actively supporting one another through these explorations, exhibiting care and knowledge. Internalized oppression for people of color, manifested as guilt or defensiveness, helps no one, and we need to see these issues of privilege as collective issues for all of us in the movement.

Similarly, it's important white-skinned people of various cultures and ethnicities to understand the dynamics of race. This is a challenging segment of privilege to steer, but it's necessary. Light skin versus dark skin is a demonstration of our internal struggles, as well as the debates within our own colonies. As one person put it well: "How has your light skin operate like white privilege among people of color? How have used your light skin to pass as white in the dominant culture? How has your light skin been used as a way to separate yourself from people of color? Do you use it to separate yourself from other people of color but not from people of your ethnic group? How does the collusion of your light skin give people of color the impression that you are not in their camp, but only come to their camp when excommunicated from the dominant culture not wanting to have these privileges is not the point here. The point is this: the fact that you do have light skin privilege in this racialized society, it is important to be racially responsible with it."

Talking about collective freedom through self-determination also requires we have a discussion about individualism. Individual freedom is one of the reasons we fight, and it is one of the highest ideals, although the ultra-competitive society fostered by capitalism has turned the idea of individual conscience on its head. Our objective as anarchists is not to emulate what the media tries to make of us, as self-involved monsters bent on greed and serving ourselves. Autonomy doesn't mean that our politics are defined by our moods or interests at the moment, but by study, struggle and discovery. Individualist politics are an exercise in privilege. Many Americans exercise that privilege every day by passively supporting the empire. Some anarchists of color get swept up in the moment, and start defining our politics by what's exciting at the moment, rather than realizing we don't have that many moments to lose.

Lastly, it is critical to recognize that the need for respecting each other and organizing ourselves collectively. I'm regularly surprised by the lackadaisical approach some people of color bring to anarchist people of color

spaces. From small things like showing up late to gatherings to major things like exclusionary organizing, the message is one of power dynamics and privilege. Sometimes it's unconscious. Sometimes people came up in a lazy political culture or one that didn't have to consider what starting a meeting 45 minutes late, for instance, might do for a poor person's bus ride or parent's time with their kids. Yet these examples are matters of privilege that mirror what is already going on in white anarchist milieus. This needs to be examined clearly.

### What do relevant politics look like?

Think about Adidas. Its purpose is to sell expensive shoes. But nobody in their right mind will buy \$200 sneakers. So Adidas has to evolve from selling shoes to selling a lifestyle. The baller of the moment rocks a pair of signature shoes as a hot track bumps in the background. Adidas is flexible; it grows its campaigns as the tastes of potential buyers evolve. Now think about a movement. Making signs and sweating in the hot sun doesn't sell well. Who in their right minds wants that, *verdad?* So we need to evolve as people's media-savviness and minds evolve; the problem is not that people don't believe what we believe, but that anarchists can seem completely uninspiring doing what we do. Why would anyone care for a lifestyle of protests, long meetings, drum circles and getting arrested? Maybe those pissed-off Caucasians or grad students I mentioned earlier, but that's all.

We all want movements that are flexible and can respond to social conditions. We also need to work tirelessly to keep political goals like self-determination and tactics for getting there relevant to everyday folks. No, we don't need a movement led by Adidas, but we need to look at, without bias, the world our people live in, and how our messages can speak to them. I've heard 'we can't go to such-and-such because it's corporate' as proclamations of people's individualist politics twice as much as I've heard 'where do people hang, and can we go talk with them about such-and-such

campaign?' If Adidas can have legions of cats wearing their \$200 gear, they've tapped into what we need to get a dose of, and quick. A few points that came out of the "Building an APOC Movement" workshop at the 2003 APOC conference, in terms of organizing:

- How people go about doing things; for the benefit and greater good take where people are and build from that. We have more to learn from people than they do from us;
- Using skills and resources already in existence; empowering to teach each other-working from our strengths; and
- More vision; not just talk about, make it more participatory, more organizing.

And in terms of networking and resources:

- Find common ground and be in the community;
- Bring together by using each others' resources together;
- Focusing on commonalities;
- Be honest when balancing your values and other groups as a basis for building trust; and
- Be simplistic; talk about how you can support.

We also resolved on a few ideas related to points of unity:

- Ask people first; value system respecting existing knowledge;
- Clarity of goals makes things clear;
- Be aware anarchism is not better than what exists; be open; and
- Ultimately support community decisions; mistakes are part of the process.

Four key points of anarchist organizing:

- Helping people experiment with decentralized, collective and cooperative forms of organization;

- Increasing the control that people have over actions that affect them;
- Building counterculture that uses all forms of communication to resist illegitimate authority, racism, sexism, and capitalism. Creating alternatives to the dominant culture; and
- Strengthening the 'social fabric' of neighborhood units that network of informal association, support services, and contacts that enable people to survive in spite of the negative influences of government and its bureaucracies.

Five criteria covered at the conference for measuring success:

- People learn skills needed to analyze issues and confront those who exert control over their lives;
- People learn to interact, make decisions and get things done collectively; rotating tasks, sharing skills, confronting racism, sexism and hierarchy;
- Community residents realize some direct benefit or some resolution of problems they personally face through the organizing work;
- Existing institutions change their priorities or way of doing things so that the authority of government, corporations, and large institutions is replaced by extensions of decentralized, grassroots authority; and
- Community residents feel stronger and better about themselves in the collective effort.

These aren't gospel, but they're a start in moving towards the conversations we need to have -- whether you're an organizer or not -- about self-determination, tactics, allies, privilege and more. As with anything, we need to treat each other with compassion and empathy; don't let hostility, resentment or a quest for 'accountability' color your efforts. Tearing each other down as people of color for perceived transgressions is never acceptable under any circumstance. We're not the military, and nor should we strive for that. We have serious discussions to have, and hopefully more learning, caring, fighting and loving in the future.