

A Playbook of Strategies for Anarchists Addressing Race

Carlos Fernandez

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Intro

To start from what I know, I'd like to use football (futbol) strategy to frame some of the necessities of race facing anarchists*. In the game you have to take shots on the goal. That's the only way to score-the more you shoot, the more shots go in. However, this maxim won't work if the shots are either always random or always an unvarying, pre-planned bunch. Tackling race requires us to study and practice, scout and train, plan and improvise.

I'm not saying anything new, of course. In fact, I think a generalized awareness of the need for multiple, flexible approaches has often lead to despair, cynicism, or other resignations. On the field, that's quitting. It's both the player's and team's fault. The same feedback loops that lead a team's losses into a player's quitting (and vice versa) also work positively: Players find ways to keep each other moving, finding chances, fulfilling their roles. Good teamwork remembers the planned parts and improvises when opportunities suddenly open or close. I consider you my teammate, my comrade. I will try to give you concrete suggestions, "pass" the ideas accurately. My proposals on how to mix approaches to race are part of just one attempt to move anarchism along, just one play in a long season.

Safe Set Plays

What's been tried already? Just because they didn't work before, don't assume they're useless. These are efforts familiar to us all for their appeals and dangers. The real work is to rework them, to learn their effective and principled execution, and to keep doing them.

Anarchists have to talk about race. Simple, frank discussions of race (on what it is, who does it) anywhere (collective meeting, study group, public event) reveal and shape relationships, vocabularies, and circumstances of a group. The discussions don't have to feel good, new, or like they're going somewhere. As long as we do not become satisfied with easy answers, these conversations make race something to be faced collectively.

Anarchists have to work with people of other colors. We need to keep our lives open, experiencing difference, learning our limits and common grounds. This can be a pitfall for liberals. For us, experiencing difference needs to be a test of commitment to living in a multi-racial and multicultural world. Our groups must find their flaws and strengths in dealing with new people. Our ideas need to be tempered by opinions we haven't already heard. The hidden, minor devices which close us off need to be exposed.

Anarchists have to put more people of color in positions of "leadership". It can be a leftist pitfall, known as "false internationalism", or a liberal pitfall, known as "diversity". However, the people of color attracted to or already part of anarchism must have the resources to maintain themselves in foreign terrain, to reach out to each other, and to contribute to anarchism. The idealistic intention of this effort, ceding influence over politics and culture, needs to be defended. Groups cannot make their racial nature and composition into side issues, an ongoing "process", or working groups. They've got to be right next to the groups' foremost goals.

Anarchists have to stick together. Some anarchists see the introduction of ideological discourse into multi-racial activism as problematic if not authoritarian. Such reluctance leaves anarchists hidden within non-anarchist activism, trying to sneak in their principles. To non-anarchists, our ideas, without collective, organized anarchist activity, become just more snowflakes in blizzards

of theory and lifestyle choices. If we want to be anarchists by more than just association, we should commit to developing anarchists ideas and their realizations. The answers to anarchism's shortcomings do not lie somewhere apart from its activity: the meetings, actions, spaces, and organizations need to be continued and continually renewed by raising difficult issues such as race.

Risky Improvised Plays

Liberation means high stakes. At key times, collective and individual investments (our work, hearts, and minds) must be put on the line. Facing the chances of failure, we need to put our anarchism to the tests of becoming more than social scenes or comfortable answers.

Separate. Race is complicated in itself and at its intersections with class, gender, and sexuality, but it is very real. However we experience race, we need to talk about it. And we know before saying a word there are two overarching categories of the experience, white and non-white. In both personal and organizing dynamics, the context of a discussion or discourse might require the exchange between people to be internal to their racial experience. Sometimes we need to talk to ourselves first. Short and long term needs for separate activity will occur among individuals and within groups, for addressing a recent problem or developing the strength of minority voices. These are times of growing stronger, not breaking down.

Criticize. We overlook too easily the thinking and tactics of power brokers within non-white communities, usually out of fear of alienating those communities. Again, as with leftists or liberals, these are often fears of losing influence or legitimacy. Yes, people are touchy, but no one respects spinelessness. Thorough critiques of power by anarchists should develop the integrity, in ideas and actions, that makes us worth joining. Anarchism apprehends the complexity of power structures and the role of middle-men better than many other kinds of liberatory ideology. Join that sensitivity and knowledge with people's discontent. Defend each other against authoritarianism.

Recruit. People of color may or may not see us as strangers or sell-outs. But we must not mislead them into anarchism, or condescendingly show them how they're already "anarchistic". On the levels of friend, activist, or organization, we must invite people to join us. Invitations must be risks we take with our relationships: Ask people before they're already your friend and only lack the formalities of "membership". Ask for commitments to work with us, to contribute, learn, and help. Ask them to open their self-interests and priorities to your own, and do the same for them.

Commit. Don't be satisfied "working" on your racism. Don't be satisfied that your group tried to reach out. We have to set clear goals for anarchism and prepare to weather failures. These goals must explicitly address race. If freedom means anything to us we must refuse its compromise. We can't give up after saying we tried to change people's prejudice, or we tried to get people of color involved, and it didn't work. Make it work. Commitment means we fight to the end, not until we're tired or need to move on.

Outro

The plays I suggest should be implemented in whole and in part, at different times and at the same time, throughout the different levels at which we encounter race. We all live through different scales of interaction. Facing race at any of those scales requires evaluating and acting to change the circumstances of interaction. The mix of methods for changing the circumstances must fit the mix of circumstances. In soccer, going from a single defender to a whole line requires quick shifts in plays. My suggested plays are additions to a playbook of options for anti-racist anarchists. The spine of that playbook is the belief that anarchism is about true freedom for everyone.

No one's really figured out how to end racism's many forms of power. However, I think people who live in racist situations, from relationship to society scales, understand racism best and can find ways to end it. We may lack the answers only because the pervasiveness of oppression determines the questions we ask. Anarchists' work is to take their belief in freedom and turn it into something that begins today, in the great and small parts of our lives, and that unravels the solutions from the knots which domination has made of our lives. That means anarchism will not solve racism without the people affected by it, anarchism must free people from racism as much as anything else, and anarchism must start to realize that freedom today.

Post

I can almost imagine a completely different anarchist movement. If, in the 20th century, non-Europeans remade 19th century European revolutionary ideologies, then we can give today's liberation struggles their lost souls back. Such a wish can sustain us on the long path ahead. It's a path I think I'm beginning to see, even if it can be only by imagination right now.

Anarchism, as thoughts and people, would be: reinterpreted; emerging in all kinds of new places; in sync; arrays of distinct, overlapping efforts; bursting with exchange; full of new dialects and histories; nurturing; a force to carry local struggles toward liberation; answering the questions raised but left unanswered by the Left; liberating.

*With hope and love for freedom,
Carlos Fernandez*

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