

Anarchy in a Diasporic Key

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Imagine diasporic anarchy! While not all diasporas are African, I would like to focus upon the affinities between the African diaspora and anarchy using music as a touchstone.

I use the term “diaspora” in Paul Gilroy’s dynamic sense of the “plural richness of black cultures in different parts of the world in counterpoint to their common sensibilities—both those residually inherited from Africa and those generated from the special bitterness of new world racial slavery” (Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*).

Such an approach lends itself to formulating a diasporic conceptualization of anarchy based upon both cultural diversity and solidarity, as well as resistance to the ongoing colonial project now known as globalization. This approach is not meant to imply that the only alternative to the globalizing schemes of transnational capitalism is a search for anarchist diasporic affinities, or that all diasporic peoples will or must choose to identify with such affinities. It can, however, offer one example of how affinity-based cultural relationships have the potential to subvert the atomization of the global market economy with a cosmopolitanism that remains in harmony with; but not fully explained by, a grass roots sensibility.

Cosmopolitanism, by definition, posits a worldliness that is free from national limitations or attachments. While such an idea is certainly compatible with anarchism, in an African historical context, cosmopolitanism has often been the province of Westernized colonial elites and so has been thought of as Eurocentric and divisive in relation to the struggles to end European domination. Given the horrors of colonialism, the desire for independence is certainly understandable.

As yet unanswered is where does that leave anarchist cosmopolitans who question the nation state itself? One answer might be the creation of a diasporic cosmopolitanism unsparingly stripped of Eurocentrism yet critical of the neocolonialist forms of elitism that so often accompany flag independence. Such a radical cosmopolitanism would be differentiated from mere Westernization, and its generative power would not automatically be ‘focused on the rise of a neocolonial nation state operating within the context of capitalist globalization.

As maverick cultural theorist George Lipsitz sees it in his *Dangerous Crossroads*, “The existence of the African diaspora functions throughout the world as a crucial force for opening up cultural, social and political space for struggles over identity, autonomy and power.” What then is the anarchist potential of those diasporic linkages that are not confined by the nation state, yet, at the same time, do not degenerate into global neoliberalism.

Using African American jazz as a reference point, let’s take a musical journey from the Mississippi to the Zambezi and back again. In 2000, veteran free jazz trumpeter/composer/improviser Wadada Leo Smith, participated in an African diasporic recording project with the “Lion of Zimbabwe,” Thomas Mapfumo. Smith, one of the earliest jazz musicians to write on “world music” theory, united his band, N’Da Kulture with the music of Mapfumo’s band, The Blacks Unlimited, on a small independent aNONym label recording entitled, *Dreams and Secrets*, during the Zimbabwean’s current US residency in Oregon.

When Mapfumo first created “chimurenga” music in the early 1970s by reconfiguring traditional Shona mbira tunes or village dance drumming for an electric guitar band in the context of Zimbabwe’s anti-colonial struggle, he was not arbitrarily grafting on European ideas to indigenous music or vice versa, but selectively drawing upon cre-

ole musics with ties to the African diaspora (reggae, Latin, rhythm and blues, soul, jazz and rock) in a cosmopolitan context, just as many younger African musicians, such as Femi Kuti, do today with hip hop. This 2000 recording brings that original diasporic connection full circle.

As his music attests, to Mapfumo contemporary African culture is not simplistic. It is characterized by hybridity, and its politics are open to critique. Like “people’s poet” Mzwakhe Mbuli in South Africa, who was a committed cultural activist in the African National Congress during the liberation war, Mapfumo has continued to be critical of post-independence corruption and his latest (2003) aNonym recording, *Toi Toi*, is steeped in protest in relation to the present situation in Zimbabwe.

As a result, both musicians have earned the wrath of their respective governments, with Mbuli railroaded into a jail cell and Mapfumo pushed into exile. While neither Mbuli nor Mapfumo might consider themselves or their music to be anarchist, their situations can be instructive when placed in an anarchist context that challenges not only capitalism, but nation state solutions to colonialism.

In the past, both Mbuli and Mapfumo, as cosmopolitan recording artists, have at times operated as marginal figures within the market-driven context of the transnational record industry. Under such problematic circumstances, we might ask how they were able to retain their political integrity and appeal to both their local and cosmopolitan audiences.

In doing so, they had to grapple with the music industry’s “world beat” version of global cosmopolitanism in which African music often has no more connection to a politically-engaged diasporic consciousness than is allowed by the demographics of niche marketing with its emphasis on cultural appropriation, exoticism and related stereotypes of tribalism and spectacular rebellion. Compare such a global plantation system approach to the dream of a decentralized “yard to yard” diasporic network capable of reconfiguring production and distribution or, at its most utopian, creatively bypassing both national and global media conglomerates entirely.

In trying to realize such dreams, we might ask ourselves the following questions: What if diasporic cosmopolitanism was not linked to Eurocentrism, elitism, capitalism, the nation state or globalization hierarchies? How would such a delinking change not only the production and distribution of diasporic musics, but the nature of cosmopolitanism itself?

What affinities with anarchism might emerge given an anti-authoritarian cosmopolitanism rooted in an oppositional diasporic consciousness that envisions stateless forms of autonomy which avoid the trap of capitalist globalization as defined by World Bank/IMF/WTO development schemes or flatly refuse the lure of globalization in toto. In the process of asking such questions, anarchists, whatever their chosen cultural identity or assigned racial classification, might start to fashion a more culturally nuanced anarchist theory, open their minds to new ideas, and open the door to an increasingly diverse worldwide movement.

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