



# **Organizing for Survival: From the Civil Rights Movement to Black Anarchism through the Life of Lorenzo Kom'boa Ervin**

**Nik Heynen<sup>1</sup>**

Department of Geography,  
University of Georgia,  
nheynen@uga.edu

**Jason Rhodes<sup>1</sup>**

Department of Geography,  
University of Georgia

---

## **Abstract**

This paper considers the influence of civil rights era community organizing on the formation of Black Anarchism, and the combination of the two for helping imagine a more open trajectory for anti-authoritarian politics. We will argue that while Black Anarchism is still perhaps more of a notion, than a movement, it is still an important lens through which to consider radical politics in the US, given its racist and patriarchal history. We will explore this through the thought, radical organizing, and life of Lorenzo Kom'boa Ervin. Ervin's seminal written contributions to the development of Black Anarchism, coupled with his influential organizing experiences with the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, the Black Panther Party, Anarchist People of Color and Black Autonomy Network of Community Organizers situates him as an organic black intellectual with powerful



insights to share. One of Ervin's greatest contributions has been demonstrating the potential of anarchist praxis to both transform and link revolutionary conceptions of social transformation with people's everyday struggles for survival.

### **Introduction**

The post-WWII struggles for civil rights, loosely periodized from the 1950s to the 1970s, represent a revolutionary ethos within U.S. history as significant as any other. The intense thinking that took place regarding the project of creating a more democratic society, combined with the tactics and strategies to bring people together to build that more democratic society, continue to offer lessons of the greatest significance to the project of developing resistance to all forms of authoritarian oppression. Unfortunately, the significance and potential of these lessons is often overlooked by contemporary revolutionary thinking and organizing, much to the detriment of current projects for social change. In line with Payne (1995: 364), we think much of this has to do with the degree to which the praxis embodied by many civil rights organizers/intellectuals has been overshadowed by the particular moments that they helped organize, such as the Freedom Rides, the sit-in movement, or Freedom Summer. That is, the theories, philosophies, and knowledge of organizing responsible for these monumental episodes have been eclipsed and forgotten within the radical imaginary of the larger movement, as the details of the events themselves have commanded the bulk of radical attention.

However, as history marches forward, other, often marginalized forms of political praxis offer insights into struggles for civil rights and black liberation. We think considering the ways traditional Civil Rights era community organizing and what David Graeber has called "the New Anarchism" can come together to offer an important opportunity for reflection. Graeber (2004: 2) suggests that "Anarchist or anarchist-inspired movements are growing everywhere..." What can contemporary activists, organizers and intellectuals who are engaging threads of anarchist philosophy and organizing logic learn from these historical lessons for the purpose of developing a broader movement? This is a question that we think offers much in the way of pushing new forms of radical politics forward within the contemporary maelstrom of poverty, inequality and oppression.

At the level of praxis, the Civil Rights and anarchist traditions are very close in several important ways. For instance, summing up those key features central to the organizing successes of the Civil Rights Movement, Payne (1995: 364) suggests that "In the late sixties and early seventies, the themes of the community organizing tradition—the development perspective, an emphasis on building relationships, respect for collective leadership, for bottom-up change, the expansive sense of how democracy ought to operate in everyday life, the emphasis on building for the long haul, the anti-bureaucratic ethos, the preference for addressing local issues— were reflected in varying combinations..." From Payne, we can move to Graeber (2004: 2), who in articulating the main tenets underpinning the

rise of anarchist-oriented politics, suggests that “traditional anarchist principles—autonomy, voluntary association, self-organization, mutual aid, direct democracy—have gone from the basis for organizing within the globalization movement, to playing the same role in radical movements of all kinds everywhere.” There is undoubtedly some variation as to how these different tenets have been applied across different historical-geographical contexts, but their similarities outweigh their differences, and merit the attention of contemporary radicals engaged in projects for transformative social change.

Given the range of theoretical tensions, impediments and contradictions related to imagining an anti-authoritarian politics that is fundamentally and simultaneously anti-capitalist, anti-racist, anti-patriarchal, and emancipatory beyond these forms of oppression, we turn to the experience of an organic intellectual/organizer whose life experience embodies not only the tension between dogmatic ideology and non-hierarchical grassroots organizing, but also an historical link between the collective leadership of the civil rights struggles and the growing number of anarchist-inspired movements. Lorenzo Kom’boa Ervin is a former Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) field organizer and Black Panther Party (BPP) member, and later in life was central, in a variety of ways, to the formation of Anarchist People of Color (APOC) and the Black Autonomy Network of Community Organizers (BANCO). His young life was a whirlwind of turmoil and revolutionary struggle. By the age of 23, Ervin had had his house burned by racists, seen a youth-led movement of working class and poor African-Americans use violence to force integration on the power structure of Chattanooga, Tennessee, spent nearly a year in a military prison for deserting the United States Army, and worked with SNCC at the time of its brief merger with the BPP. He had hijacked a plane to Cuba, been captured by U.S. agents in Europe, and received a sentence of life in prison, the harshest penalty ever handed down for hijacking in the United States up until that time. While in prison Ervin encountered the broad set of ideas associated with anarchism and libertarian socialism through interacting with noted prison organizer Martin Sostre. During fifteen years of “hard time” in prison, Ervin reflected on the whirlwind experiences of his life to date, as well as the gains and failures of the black revolutionary movement through the lens of an anarchist critique, learning lessons he believes are crucial for the establishment of an anti-authoritarian revolutionary movement in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. His biography offers particularly unique insights into the emancipatory potential of anarchist praxis in an urban, U.S. context, organizing designed to confront structural racism, police repression, and crushing poverty. We believe that Ervin’s multi-positionalities as both experienced organizer and organic intellectual on the forefront of efforts to develop a revolutionary Black Anarchism contribute in robust ways to re-building a theoretically informed, action-oriented approach to reconsidering and responding to oppressive power relations.

## **The Importance of Social Knowledge and Organizing for the Geographies of Survival**

After several months of networking to get the necessary contact information and a series of “getting to know you” phone conversations with Ervin, in an effort to establish trust and a sense of purpose, we went to Nashville in mid-spring of 2009 to spend time with him and his partner, JoNina Abron Ervin. Importantly, JoNina Abron Ervin is also an important organizer/intellectual in the annals of human rights struggles, playing a crucial role in the development of the BPP’s survival programs (see Abron, 1998). Situated just a short walk from the historically black college, Fisk University, with neighbors who didn’t recognize the significance of their political efforts, Lorenzo and JoNina were continuing with the same type of neighborhood organizing efforts in which they had been engaged for most of their lives, that is, they continued to fight to “organize the hood.” We have remained in contact with him since these initial interviews, continuing to work to understand Ervin’s model of Black Anarchist organizing.

In his seminal book, *Anarchism and the Black Revolution* (1994: 4), Ervin juxtaposes traditional models of what he calls “European Anarchism” to better define what he means by Black Anarchism. He says “we are oppressed both as a distinct people and as workers. European Anarchism places its greatest contradiction with the State in the State’s ability to hold back a free lifestyle, and this is exactly what we cannot limit our critique to. This is a white world-view based on their privileged place in society. It is no accident, and it’s true that racism has not been commissioned by individual white workers, but they have been beneficiaries of our oppression, and Whites are part of the social control mechanism of the State.” Like other discussions of Anarchism, Ervin’s Black Anarchism engages the contradictions of the state, but a unique contribution of Black Anarchism, which Ervin traces to the influences of SNCC and the BPP, is the focus on the survival of racially oppressed people.

Later in his book, and echoing the BPP’s *10 Point Survival Program*, Ervin makes this unique dimension of Black Anarchism clear when defining what it will take to build a black survival program: “Building consciousness and revolutionary culture means taking on realistic day-to-day issues, like hunger, the need for clothing and housing, joblessness, transportation and other issues. It means the commune must fill in the vacuum where people are not being properly fed, clothed, provided with adequate medical treatment, or are otherwise being deprived of basic needs.” (Ervin 1994: 36)

Ervin’s life offers a useful glimpse into radical politics because while he has experienced ideological shifts and tactical recalculations, there has always been a steadfast anchoring in what we will refer to as the geography of survival. No doubt one of the reasons Ervin has gone on to contribute so much to notions of Black Anarchism has to do with the fact that anarchist theory and political philosophy is fundamentally concerned with how the act of thinking/doing politics should

always, if only in microcosmic ways, form the structure of the new society within the shell of the old<sup>2</sup>. The geography of survival necessitates this kind of attention to the “here and now” given how crucially the reproduction of social and material life depends on it. In the most visceral kinds of ways, the politics over human survival is embedded within destructive social processes of inequality and deprivation that encumber human lives by impeding people’s access to the necessary material substances essential for their continued existence as living, breathing beings. As discussed elsewhere (Heynen, 2010: 1231-1232) “At the core of the concern with human survival are questions related to the socio-spatial processes that impede human lives by preventing people from accessing the basic stuff necessary for their continued survival: adequate food, shelter, bodily safety, etc.” (also see Heynen, 2006, 2009a,b; Mitchell and Heynen, 2009; Pickerill and Chatterton, 2006). While less apparent than other threads of thought, the concept of the geography of survival dates to beginning of radical geography (see Bunge, 1973, 2011). Related to the connections between the geographies of survival and the need to better integrate what Black Anarchist organizing offers is a need to ground politics in opposition to uneven development and urban inequality. As such there is a very interesting, although not unsurprising, connection between how Bunge’s coining of the phrase “Geographies of Survival” while living in the Detroit neighborhood of Fitzgerald relates directly to the struggles Ervin faced growing up in Chattanooga, Tennessee. This important connection shows how both knowledge production and organizing can co-evolve over time and space.

For Ervin, these politics around issues of survival have arisen out of a set of contingent crises ranging from capitalist exploitation and market failure, oppression resulting from racial/gender/sexual orientation or on the basis of ability, to homelessness, starvation, and everywhere in between. The kinds of everyday political obstacles to the material and social reproduction of life itself necessitates organic intellectual consideration for the sake of exposing these contradictions that can often times best be articulated through the kind of “social knowledge” that many academics simply do not possess as a result of their often privileged positionality (see Chambers, 2003).

Related to this is the notion of social knowledge as crucial for organizing within the geographies of survival. Edward T. Chambers, who became the head of the Industrial Area’s Foundation (IAF) after the death of Saul Alinsky in 1972, uses this idea to articulate a different thread of discussion around praxis. In his book, *Roots for Radicals: Organizing for Power, Action and Justice*, Chambers (2003:16) starts with the Greek notion of *phronesis* or “practical wisdom,” in deliberate contrast to the notion of *theoria*, or theory, to define social knowledge as “the kind of know-how based on the hard lessons of life experience that guide a good parent, boss, or leader.” Chambers goes on to say, “People gain social

---

<sup>2</sup> Other important figures related to, but not discussed in this paper include, Ashanti Alston, Hubert Harrison, Ben Fletcher, and Kuwasi Balagoon

knowledge by dealing with others around life's everyday demands. It's learned in the street, in private relationships, and in public places. You earn it only by digesting your own life experiences and those of others. All social knowledge is experiential."

In Ervin's thought and organizing we see the makings of a much more robust imaginary playing out historically and providing a foundation for thinking through, in non-dogmatic ways, potentials for emancipatory forms of praxis largely, we argue, because it contains radical theoretical insights wrapped in thick social knowledge about the geographies of survival. Take these threads of discussion in the broader context of contributions within Black/Brown radical thought (see Robinson, 1983, Kelley, 1994, 2002; Hill, 2004; Ransby, 2003; Tyson, 1999—outside of geography, and McKittrick, 2006; McKittrick and Woods, 2007; Pulido, 2006 inside geography), and it becomes clear that social knowledge cannot be realized in placeless understandings of how to get things done, but must also be understood, if geography is worth anything at all, as being developed within particular historical-geographical contexts, through particular struggles. To this end, Kelley (2002: 9) suggests that "social movements generate new knowledge, new theories, new questions. The most radical ideas often grow out of a concrete intellectual engagement with the problems of aggrieved populations confronting systems of oppression." He goes on to argue that "progressive social movements do not simply produce statistics and narratives of oppression; rather the best ones do what great poetry always does: transport us to another place, compel us to relive the horrors and, more importantly, enable us to imagine a new society." With that sentiment, we would like now to move on to discussing the bio-geographical ways Lorenzo Kom'boa Ervin's life and thought can help us think through new forms of radical organizing via the history that leads to his version of Black Anarchism.

### **The US South as Incubator for a Black Organic Intellectual/Organizer**

If ever a place served as proof of the need for indigenous, post-colonial radical theory and praxis, honed in struggle against place-specific structures of power, it was Lorenzo Ervin's Chattanooga, Tennessee. For African-Americans, the Chattanooga that Ervin was born into in 1947 was, like most other places in the South, a place of apartheid and crushing poverty for the vast majority. Ervin argues, however, that there were crucial differences between Chattanooga and other Southern towns, differences that help explain both the character of racial rebellion there as well as the fact that Chattanooga, in many respects, can be described as a city which the Civil Rights Movement, at least the one recounted in history books, largely passed by. "In most places where there were civil rights demonstrations, even in Greensboro, where they started, the whites did not violently resist like they did in Chattanooga," says Ervin (n.d.: 8) in his autobiography. What made Chattanooga different from many of the Southern cities that challenged apartheid by way of non-violent protest was that the city had an explicitly pro-Klan city government that acted violently against challenges to white rule, and did so regularly. Thus, according to Ervin, while elites in a city like Atlanta viewed racial

violence and unrest as bad for business, declaring their city as one “too busy to hate” (see Grady-Willis, 2006), Chattanooga elites, steeped in a tradition of rule by racial terror, had no intention of peacefully brokering an end to segregation.

The reality of the city government as juggernaut of racial violence powerfully shaped the trajectory of black resistance to white rule in Chattanooga in the 1960s. There was no space for the local African-American middle class, chiefly comprised of ministers, teachers, and small business owners, to develop organizations capable of challenging segregation. Thus resistance, when it came, was spontaneous and prepared for violence, with working class youth, as opposed to college students, in the lead, and older siblings and parents not far behind. The African-American middle class was largely on the sidelines of the black rebellion that erupted in Chattanooga in the early 1960s, and in many instances, individual members of this class were pressed into service by the city’s white elite to act as both informants and “peacemakers,” publicly cajoling their increasingly recalcitrant community to take their complaints up with God if they must, but to do so quietly and respectfully, and in any place other than on the streets of Chattanooga.

Ervin recalls the sit-in movement which took place in the city in 1960. Organized by high school youth inspired by recent sit-ins in Greensboro, Nashville, and other southern cities, the students targeted first Kresses Department Store, and then Woolworth’s and whites-only movie theaters, picketing the establishments and crossing color lines *en masse*. The first demonstration was intended to be peaceful, but white violence was responded to in kind, and, as Ervin recalls, police only intervened when African-Americans began to get the upper hand. African-American youth, armed with knives, stabbed police dogs that were released on them, and from this point on, Chattanooga’s African-American youth saw that there was no prospect for peaceful struggle, and self-defense was made an integral part of their strategies for organizing against segregation. Ervin recalls the battles of 1960 this way (n.d. 7):

We poured into...the main black thoroughfare in support of the black students. There was literally widespread fighting in the streets, the cops used the fire department’s high-pressure water hoses to push people back into the black community, threw tear gas bombs, and even fired shotguns over our heads. They failed, and hundreds of people poured into the downtown area. These protests actually went on for weeks, until finally the racist city government and the northern-based Woolworth and Kresses Corporation capitulated and then called for “negotiations” with the students, which led to an agreement to serve black people at all lunch counters run by the store chains, and even to hire black people without discrimination in the stores as sales clerks, cashiers, and other jobs.

Ervin discussed how the NAACP was hostile to the radical politics of the time and this helped create his sense of politics. Indeed, the president of the

Chattanooga chapter of the NAACP, who was also the principal of Howard, the all-black high school, punished students who participated in the demonstrations with expulsion. All of this had a transformative effect on young Ervin, who was only thirteen at the time. “It changed my whole way of looking at things, and gave me a whole new purpose in life” (n.d., pg. 7). In fact, he credits this experience with making a lifelong activist of him, saying that it made him realize “what was possible when black people united to fight oppression.” He also took away the lesson that not only is peaceful resistance often not possible, but that those challenging authority must be prepared to defend themselves against violent attack. The youthful experience also gave him a lifelong mistrust of self-styled African-American middle-class leaders who either assist powerful whites in deflecting attention from the plight of the African-American majority, or do their best to channel protest in safe directions when, in times of social unrest, African-American poverty can no longer be ignored. Apparently even the prospect of peaceful change was too much for many of the most comfortable members of Chattanooga’s African-American population. When Martin Luther King Jr. visited Chattanooga a few years after the eruption of 1960, apparently hoping to lead demonstrations in the city, he was rebuffed by the city’s African-American ministers, who Ervin recalls having a pronounced antipathy for protest of any kind, violent and non-violent alike.

### ***The Civil Rights Movement, SNCC & the “Ricks Method”***

In May of 1967, in Chattanooga, Ervin came across organizer Willie Ricks, a leader of the 1960 anti-segregation uprisings and now a field organizer for SNCC. Ricks was emblematic of what distinguished Chattanooga’s struggle from that of the mainstream Civil Rights Movement. Ricks came to organizing from the streets and the pool halls, not from a college campus, and spoke to the people he organized in a shared, common language. A long-time field organizer for SNCC, Ricks had developed his own organizing methods, borne of the realities of a city government for which there existed a deliberate overlap between police force and Klan. Rather than publicize meetings in advance, and calling the community to some specified public location, such as a church, Ricks would hold what he called “house meetings,” spontaneously arriving at the home of a sympathetic, potential organizer in the community, and having them get the word out on the spot for an impromptu meeting. This method stymied police and informants, and also exemplified SNCC’s non-hierarchical approach to community organizing. Ricks’ job was not to stay and lead anything, but rather to facilitate a discussion that was already informally underway, and provide political education that assisted the group in formulating a strategy for organizing the community that would be implemented after Ricks left, on his way to another “house meeting,” in another neighborhood, and eventually on to another state.

Ervin recalls Ricks (n.d.: 22), and the impact he had on him, this way:

He captured the imagination of a lot of the young people—the way he talked, he was a working-class brother, but he was also an intellectual. He was a native intellectual, though, not a bourgeois intellectual. He wasn't a college student, and all that kind of thing. And he'd go in [to people's houses], and he'd talk to them about the Civil Rights Movement, about the grievances, and so forth, but he'd explain it in terms that they understood. And it'd be a two-way conversation. And his call was, I'm not here to lead you myself, I'm here to give you the tools for you to be the leader. This is your community. I'm not gonna be here livin' with you. James Forman called Ricks the greatest organizer in the Civil Rights Movement, though he never got the acclaim.

Ervin apprenticed under Ricks, and became a field organizer for SNCC, going back and forth between Chattanooga and Atlanta, and using the “Ricks method.” It was at this time that the Oakland-based BPP began to receive national attention, with chapters founded in cities across the country and the party paper circulating in African-American neighborhoods across the nation. Ervin would pick up boxes of the paper in Atlanta for distribution in Tennessee. At the same time, a dialogue was taking place between the leadership of SNCC and the BPP, resulting in a brief alliance of the two organizations. Some SNCC leaders, such as Kathleen Cleaver and Fred Hampton, went on to become key figures in the BPP, and Ervin argues that the significance of the brief alliance, as well as the missed opportunities, is something that has been largely overlooked. The alliance had the potential of connecting grassroots African-American community organizers in the South, in Northern cities, and on the West Coast, and it is certainly possible that SNCC's decentralized organizational style might have sparked a much earlier discussion about the hierarchical structure and approach of the BPP. The alliance, Ervin told us, was destroyed primarily as a result of government repression:

The deepest part of the problem was government surveillance and government repression. They were scared to death of the prospect of SNCC, which is a more seasoned organization, connecting with youth on the west coast, north, or wherever. They were frightened of that prospect, and they started working to break it up. They played personalities against each other, they framed people, claiming they were informers and this, that and the other. There were differences, for sure, between the Black Panther Party, and SNCC. But that wasn't what destroyed the alliance

In his book about SNCC, and importantly in a chapter titled “The Revolution Beyond Race,” Howard Zinn (1963: 216-217) suggests that members of SNCC “nurture a vision beyond race, against other forms of injustice, challenging the entire-value system of the nation and of smug middle-class society everywhere....SNCC's radicalism has the advantage of being free from dogma and

tradition, uncluttered by clichés, seeing the world afresh with the eyes of a new generation.”

Beyond the cross-racial and integrative organizing politics embodied within SNCC’s nonhierarchical organizing, they were also the central civil rights group to engage the problematic forms of patriarchy that were so rampant within the movement. As has been discussed widely within SNCC’s history, the group was not simply sensitive to the importance of gender politics, a fact which distinguished them from many other civil rights groups. Much more profoundly, SNCC’s structure actually transformed gender politics within the Civil Rights Movement. As Robnett (1997: 137-138) suggests and Estes (2006) confirms, “Because of its non-hierarchical structure, women in SNCC enjoyed leadership mobility more than in any other civil rights organization... The decentralized nature of SNCC provided more free spaces, allowing greater individual autonomy and, therefore, increased leadership mobility for women.” These developments were so important that as hooks (1984), Collins (1989) and Taylor (1998) discuss in different ways, it was largely women working within SNCC that led to the formation of the second wave of feminism through their grassroots struggles against social and economic inequalities, thus pushing past the first waves’ focus on a legal approach to fighting gender discrimination.

As Ervin suggests, the kinds of organizing within SNCC, and specifically the kinds of praxis he learned from Ricks, necessitated an attention to bringing a wider group of people together to forge a struggle which went beyond dismantling the formal structures of racial oppression that so often get primary attention in accounts of the Civil Rights Movement. Ervin says, “According to Ricks, SNCC still agitated against racial discrimination in jobs and housing, for voting rights, and an end to police brutality, and around other traditional civil rights demands, but as a whole its program was much more militant.” The organization had no expectation that the federal government and its civil rights laws would have a transformational impact on the oppressed condition of African-American people, and had no faith in American institutions generally. It recognized the crucial need to develop a culture of collective leadership as part of a non-dogmatic, non-hierarchical struggle for radical social change, and had no intention of claiming victory at the achievement of legal equality.

### **Police Harassment in Chattanooga**

Local elites did not leave the repression of civil rights organizations entirely in the hands of federal agencies, and in early 1968, the Hamilton County (Chattanooga) Prosecutor convened a special session of the Hamilton County grand jury to investigate the “extent and influence of the ‘Black Power movement’ in Chattanooga, after the state attorney general had indicted Stokeley Carmichael and several other SNCC activists in Nashville on ‘treason’ and ‘criminal anarchy’ charges, after a rebellion at Tennessee State University, blamed on SNCC” (Ervin, n.d.: 24). The chief target of the Chattanooga authorities was Ricks, who was

legendary for coming and going from the city without leaving a trail, and so naturally they began to focus on the "Ricks men."

Ervin describes a pattern of increasing harassment in 1968 (n.d.: 23): "Many times when I would sell the BPP paper, cops would come up and try to make me stop. Once they handcuffed me, threw me into a police car and ripped the paper into shreds, threw them on the ground, and then let me go when that was done." This petty harassment escalated considerably, however, when one night he was handcuffed, taken to the police station, and told he was being charged with kidnapping and car theft, among other charges. The questioning session revealed that what they wanted from him was incriminating testimony against Ricks. In exchange, they would agree to drop the bogus charges. He refused, and was finally let go, as there was no stolen car or victim of kidnapping to which he could be credibly tied.

It was in this atmosphere of increasingly threatening harassment that Ervin received a summons to appear before a grand jury which had been convened in the wake of the violent African-American uprising in Memphis following the death of Martin Luther King. Ricks, who had not been in Memphis at the time, was being charged with "inciting a riot across state lines," which was forbidden by a recently enacted federal law specifically designed to facilitate a legal crackdown on civil rights organizing, and popularly known as the "H. Rap Brown Act" (Ervin, n.d.: 24; also see D'Arcus, 2003). Ervin sensed that this time, he might not walk free from a refusal to cooperate, and decided to hide out in Atlanta until things blew over. In Atlanta, he sought out a Chattanooga newspaper, and was amazed to find his picture on the inside of the front page, with the news that he was wanted by the FBI for the crime of inciting to riot after King's death. Recalls Ervin (Ervin, n.d.: 25-26):

They claimed that I was a "Black Power militant," was anti-white, and had agitated a "street riot" around the death of Dr. Martin Luther King. According to them, I had smuggled in explosives and guns to the black youth who had rebelled over the assassination of Dr. King....Since the FBI was going all over the country looking for me, I had only two choices available: go underground in the U.S. or get out of the country...Because there were so many plane hijackings going on at this time, I hit on the idea of commandeering an aircraft to fly me to Cuba for political asylum. I got myself an old .44 magnum caliber pistol and a hand grenade I had brought home from the army, and prepared myself to take over the plane. I wanted it to be known by the passengers that this hijacking was a political act, so I planned to pass out a statement explaining my actions. I had anti-war leaflets printed by an underground printing company, which I planned to take aboard the plane. I also drafted an application letter to formally request the Cuban government to grant me asylum on the grounds of political persecution in the United States and racial oppression...I will never forget the day

of the hijacking, February 25, 1969. I went into the restroom shortly after takeoff, checked my gun to be sure it was loaded, and then went into the aisle where I stated to both passengers and crew in my most dramatic voice that the airplane was being hijacked: ‘This aircraft is being commandeered by cadre of the Black Liberation Movement. I will not hurt any of you, do not panic. This is an armed protest action against the U.S. war in Vietnam and the domestic war against black America. We are going to Cuba, please do not interfere...’”

What he found in Cuba was a government with little patience for hijackers from the U.S., of which there were not just a few. While the Cuban government was sympathetic to hijackers clearly fleeing for political reasons, it was not always easy to distinguish revolutionaries from lunatics and common criminals. At the same time, the government was rattled by the anti-Castro attack coming from Eldridge Cleaver, who was in Havana at the time, telling the world that in siding with the Soviet Union against Mao’s China, Fidel was on the wrong side of history. They were not going to arrest such a prominent revolutionary figure, but Cleaver’s blustering made things difficult for not-so-famous African-American militants who were seeking refuge in Cuba.

After a few months in Cuba, during which he notes with irony that he divided his time between Havana’s *Hotel Liberacion* and jail, Ervin was placed on a flight to Prague, where he was told he would receive a visa to enter the Republic of Guinea, which would grant him asylum. The visa never came. After a few weeks in the Czech capital, Ervin received a notice from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs that he was to give up his Cuban travel document, as he was not a Cuban citizen, and report to the U.S. Consulate to receive an American passport. While he was assured that “the whole thing had been taken care of” with the Americans, he had no intention of reporting to the U.S. embassy. A few days later, Czech police seized him at the hotel, and forcibly brought him to the U.S. Consulate. He was informed that he would be put upon a plane for the United States the next day. Amazingly, Ervin managed to escape when they attempted to move him from the building to a waiting car, but he was apprehended soon after, and after being drugged and beaten while made to confess that he was part of an “international communist conspiracy,” he was finally returned to the U.S. Soon after he was tried as a “radical terrorist” before an all-white jury in Newnan, Georgia, a small town about forty miles south of Atlanta. The trial was quick, and Ervin was given two life sentences, by far the harshest sentence ever handed down for airplane hijacking until that time (see New York Times 1969, 1970).

### **The Birth of an Anarchist**

Ervin entered the US prison system in 1969, as the Black Power movement and prisoner-led revolutionary and prisoners’ rights movements were reaching their peak (see Joy, 2003). Prison walls were no barrier to the revolutionary tenor of the times, and Ervin’s activities as a revolutionary and an organizer never stopped. He

speaks of a lesson he had learned in his previous incarcerations, both in Germany, as a war-resisting soldier, and in the US leading up to his trial and conviction: “If you were quiet, ‘did your own time,’ you helped the authorities maintain order. Once I understood this, I was never ‘quiet’ again.”

Drawing on past organizing experience, and in cooperation with other revolutionary prisoners, Ervin used outside contacts with media and attorneys to draw attention to and force improvements in what were scandalous conditions of confinement. At the same time, prisoners organized defense units amongst themselves, creating an environment in which perpetrators of prison-sanctioned brutality against prisoners, both prisoners and guards, realized that there was now a prison-wide organization of prisoners committed to physically resisting such violence. The revolutionary prison movements of the sixties and seventies thus not only secured for prisoners state-mandated improvements in prison conditions, but also resulted in a palpable change in power relations within the prisons themselves, as well as a substantial, if temporary, reduction in the routine brutalization of prisoners, which, until challenged by prisoners, had been a crucial element of the maintenance of discipline and control within the prisons (also see Cummins, 1994).

Within the continued whirlwind of activity, however, there was also plenty of time for reflection, periods of extended contemplation which were in fact imposed by stints in solitary confinement amounting to several of his total of fifteen years spent in prison. He had entered prison with a Maoist conception of Third World armed struggle against the white, racist empire of Europe and the United States, a conception in which the armed resistance of colonized African-Americans in urban ghettos was to play a key role in the global struggle, launched from within the “belly of the beast.” This was the logic with which he had hijacked the plane, an act which he saw as part of a larger struggle, conceived mainly in military terms, in which the oppressed would ultimately defeat their oppressors in combat. Implicit in such a conception was a hierarchical approach to political organization, as the pyramid structure which characterizes the vast majority of military organizations, regardless of ideology, went unchallenged. Such an ideology lay behind the organizational structure of the BPP, with its ministers, “Supreme Servant,” and top-down approach to making and implementing decisions, such that decisions were made far from those they impacted, and orders were to be obeyed without question.

How did such a conception square with the “Ricks method,” which had had such a profound impact on Ervin, and which had at its essence a diametrically opposed approach to political organization, in which units of action were organized by facilitating discussion on the neighborhood level, and then leaving local program development and implementation to be determined by the (hopefully) ever-expanding number of participants in that neighborhood-based dialogue? Ervin readily admits that as a 23 year-old entering prison in 1969, he had perhaps not yet even formulated such a question, much less subjected it to scrutiny or brought it to any effective resolution. And significantly, he maintains that such a critical evaluation of the means and ends of the Black Power and radical

movements of the sixties and seventies has in large part been evaded to this day, with tragic consequences for both the current state of the Left and the living conditions of the poor. He recalls his undeveloped state of political development upon entering prison:

“Before I went to prison, I was an untrained youth. I was, you know—I had the zeal, but I didn’t have the consciousness, and the political understanding, and the skills, the training skills, to be an organizer” (Ervin, n.d., 56). If Willie Ricks was his first mentor, taking him under his wing in SNCC, Martin Sostre was the crucial figure who introduced Ervin to anarchism, a systematically anti-authoritarian view of the world, which would provide him with both a nuanced critique of the BPP as well as an intellectual framework from which to evaluate the reasons for the effectiveness of SNCC’s decentralized approach to organizing, as well as the exhilaration he had felt in being part of it.

Ervin met Sostre while he was held for several months at a federal detention center in New York City, immediately upon return from his arrest in East Germany. Sostre, a Puerto Rican anarchist who’d opened a radical Afro-Asian bookstore in Buffalo, N.Y., was arrested on narcotics charges in 1967; it was later proven that he was framed as part of the FBI’s Counter Intelligence Program (COINTELPRO; for more see Copeland 1970; McCubbin 1969; Sostre 1968).

As a jailhouse lawyer, Sostre had won crucial victories on behalf of prisoners, including the right to uncensored reading material (*Sostre v. Rockefeller*; *Sostre v. Otis*). He struck up a friendship with Ervin, nearly 25 years his junior, and began plying him with anarchist literature.. Ervin recalls the encounter as one which simply “blew my mind” (ibid., 46). The books which Sostre gave him included *The Unknown Revolution*, by Voline, an anarchist account of the Russian Revolution, which caused him to consider for the first time the distinction between the entities “revolutionary government” and “people,” and the possible implications of that distinction; *Sabate: Guerilla Extraordinary*, by Antonio Tellez, about Francisco “El Quico” Sabate, the Spanish anarchist who robbed banks to fund resistance to Franco, repeatedly sprung comrades from prison, and brought many a fascist cop and functionary to an early grave long after Franco had “won” the Spanish Civil War, before finally being captured and killed by Spanish police in 1960 while conducting a raid into Spain from France; and, most significantly, a steady stream of works from the anarchist geographer-prince, Peter Kropotkin: “As far as being an ideological theorist, Kropotkin’s influenced me more than anyone. His theories are simple, but the idea that you can create an alternative economic structure even in the belly of capitalism, and it can start organizing to take, essentially take the breath of capitalism – that really excited me” (ibid., 38).

Reading Kropotkin changed Ervin’s views about both the source of capitalist wealth and power as well as the role of the state in capitalist society. Capitalist wealth, argues Kropotkin, has but one source, the poverty of the poor: “If all the men and women in the countryside had their daily bread assured, and their daily

needs already satisfied, who would work for our capitalist at a wage of half a crown a day, while the commodities one produces in a day sell in the market for a crown or more?" (Kropotkin, 1995:44). This state of dependence is hardly a natural one. It is rooted in the separation of the great mass of people from land and tools. Such a separation can also not be defended by any appeal to "nature," whether one chooses to proceed historically or logically. Historically, Kropotkin points out that common land ownership, by tribe or village, is the norm, surviving in his own day in the form of the Russian peasant commune (Kropotkin, 1970: 219). Logically, it makes no sense to keep people from making use of the stunning advances of agriculture and industry, first to end their poverty, but ultimately to establish a society of comfort, community, and leisure.

Indeed, should the productive capacity of people ever actually be unleashed, by overcoming the unnatural separation of people from land and machines, the potential for the mitigation of suffering, and for inauguration of a truly free society, in which no one's material desperation could be pressed into the service of wealth-creation for another, was truly stupendous. According to Kropotkin (1995:12):

On the wide prairies of America each hundred men [*sic*], with the aid of powerful machinery, can produce in a few months enough wheat to maintain ten thousand people for a whole year. And where man wishes to double his produce, to treble it, to multiply it a hundredfold, he *makes* the soil, gives to each plant the requisite care, and thus obtains enormous returns...With the co-operation of those intelligent beings, modern machines – themselves the fruit of three or four generations of inventors, mostly unknown – a hundred men manufacture now the stuff to provide ten thousand persons with clothing for two years...Truly, we are rich – far richer than we think; rich in what we already possess, richer still in the possibilities of production of our actual mechanical outfit; richest of all in what we might win from our soil, from our manufactures, from our science, from our technical knowledge, were they but applied to bringing about the well-being of all.

In addition to providing this sort of macro-level contrast between the stunning potential of current productive forces and the class monopoly on those forces which prevents them from being used for the common good, Kropotkin also provides detailed information on the potential for small-scale local projects, such as urban gardens (1996) or "communist kitchens" (1970), potential which might even be realized in, to use Ervin's words, "the belly of the beast." The role of the state is to keep the people from finding their own way to "the conquest of bread," outside of the wage relation, and indeed it requires "a vast array of courts, judges, executioners, policemen, and gaolers" for it to do so (Kropotkin, 1995: 18).

For Ervin, all this represented a paradigm shift. Kropotkin caused him to redefine both the means and ends of political organizing. Rather than seeing social struggle in essentially military terms, a violent conflict over control of the

machinery of the state, he now saw the aim of revolutionary organizers as working to create “alternative economic structures” within capitalism, designed to overcome the capitalist separation between the vast majority of people and their means of directly providing for their needs. Such organizing poses a direct challenge to the state, whose job it is to maintain mass dependence on wage labor. It can also cause people to see, in micro, the potential of labor in free association for the common good, absent the class monopoly on land and machines which is backed up by the power of the state. Ervin has no doubt that the state would use both law and violence to crush the development of “alternative economic structures” which posed a challenge to wage labor’s role as gate-keeper to the means of survival. However, he argues that while the state can maintain its appearance of legitimacy when using violence to confront a directly military challenge, its legitimacy can be seriously undermined by any use of force to thwart community efforts to develop and organize “survival programs” which develop a community’s ability to provide its own food, clothes, and shelter (ibid., 92). This new, Black Anarchist perspective, for which he credits both Sostre and Kropotkin, caused him to look upon the survival programs of the BPP as a profoundly significant development, tragically undermined by the hierarchical structure of the organization. He speaks of missed opportunities to take the Panthers in a decentralized direction.

Both Sostre and Kropotkin helped Ervin recognize that the essence of the problem for African-Americans was poverty, not a particular class of white people, or the American imperialist machine, which, while essential components of the problem, have as both their result and their precondition the poverty of the vast majority. Capitalist wealth is the flip side of the poverty of the masses, and the role of the state is to maintain the poor in their state of dependence. Thus the state must be challenged by actively working to eliminate this dependence. Echoing Kropotkin’s passionate insistence that “truly, we are...far richer than we think,” Ervin implores us to consider the fantastic liberatory potential which might be unlocked by way of a rediscovery of the social knowledge forged on the front lines of the Civil Rights/Black Power struggles, and the application of this knowledge to a project conceived as a frontal assault on the precarious nature of our access to the means of survival, a state of precariousness which, in essence, is what gives meaning to the words “rich” and “poor.”

## **Conclusion**

Today, Lorenzo Kom’boa Ervin wants to engage the left in a dialogue about the viability of what he calls an “organize the hood” campaign, an effort that would draw on the best of SNCC, the BPP, and various strains of anarchist traditions to provide urban poor communities with the tools necessary to create “*new life starting again in thousands of centers on the principle of the lively initiative of individual groups of free agreement*” (Kropotkin, 1970: 264).

Ervin makes a powerful case that Kropotkin was onto something when he says that people can do fairly amazing things with access to land and tools. The

Civil Rights Movement was all about demands for access to space, whether lunch counters, schools, voting booths, or bus seats, and the techniques used to break down barriers to making use of that space. Ervin asks us to imagine going block by block and engaging people in dialogue about how they might transform their urban spaces in ways that met their needs and increased their collective ability to survive. In so doing he gestures to the always evolving idea of Black Anarchism, perhaps because while more a notion than an actual movement, it offers him the synthetic language and agility of mind to bring together his experience and social knowledge to inform discussion of survival, and the spatial variability inherent to the geographies of survival.

Ervin's life has no doubt been a tumultuous one, but it is much more than that. A lifetime of struggle and reflection has resulted in an approach to organizing that places the development of time and place-specific social knowledge at the center of the struggle for transformative social change. Ervin goes further here, however, than simply arguing that the Left, still overly reliant on a traditionally Eurocentric radical canon, should make sure to take its multicultural pieties seriously. Stating that "the American left has no idea how much there is yet to be learned from SNCC today," he argues that there is a gold mine to be discovered if our focus on the Civil Rights/Black Power Movements shifts from what they *did* to what they *learned*, and that rediscovering and building upon this social knowledge is crucial to the development of a contemporary movement for transformative social change, which he calls Black Anarchism.

As an anti-capitalist/antiracist/anti-patriarchy revolutionary, Ervin insists that radicals on the left attack capital and the state at their roots, and by way of his engagement with Kropotkin, he locates these roots in our own separation from the means of survival. Such a project would not only prefigure the anarchist ideal for which it strives, but would offer the potential to "take the breath of capitalism" as it steadily reduced the state of mass dependence without which capitalism could not exist. As such, Black Anarchism is a variety of anarchism still in the making, with only a few people involved explicitly in it by name, and a lot of people doing it but not calling it what it essentially is. Lorenzo Kom'boa Ervin offers a compelling portrait of an organic intellectual who doesn't care what we call it, as long as we recognize the importance of people's experience for organizing the hood and the potential for anti-authoritarian struggles for survival to undermine the foundations of poverty and dependence through projects which aim at the transformation of the spaces in which we live.

## References

- Abron, Jonina M. 1998. 'Serving the people': The survival programs of the Black Panther Party. In, Charles E Jones (ed.), *The Black Panther Party Reconsidered*. Baltimore: Black Classic Press. Pp. 176-192.
- Bunge, William. 1973. The geography of human survival. *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 63, 275-295.

- Bunge, William. 2011. *Fitzgerald: Geography of a Revolution*. Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press.
- Chambers, Edward. 2003. *Roots for Radicals: Organizing for Power, Action and Justice*. New York and London: Continuum.
- Collins, Patricia. 1990. *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*. Boston: Unwin Hyman.
- Copeland, Vincent. 1970. *The Crime of Martin Sostre*. New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company.
- Cummins, Eric. 1994. *The Rise and Fall of California's Radical Prison Movement*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- D'Arcus, Bruce. 2003. Protest, scale, and publicity: The FBI and the H Rap Brown Act. *Antipode: A Radical Journal of Geography* 35, 718-741.
- Ervin, Lorenzo Kom'boa. 1994. *Anarchism and the Black Revolution*. Philadelphia: Monkey Wrench Press and The Worker Self-Education Foundation of the Industrial Workers of the World.
- Ervin, Lorenzo Kom'boa. n.d. Unpublished Autobiography. Obtained from author.
- Estes, Steve. 2006. Engendering movement memories: Remembering race and gender in the Mississippi movement. In, Renee C. Romano and Leigh Raiford (eds.) *In the Civil Rights Movement in American Memory*. Athens, GA: The University of Georgia Press, pp. 290-312.
- Grady-Willis, Winston A. 2006. *Challenging U.S. Apartheid: Atlanta and Black Struggles for Human Rights, 1960-1977*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Graeber, David. 2002. The new anarchists. *New Left Review*. 13, 61-74.
- Graeber, David. 2004. *Fragments of an Anarchist Anthropology* Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press.
- Heynen, Nik. 2006. 'But it's alright, Ma, it's life, and life only': Radicalism as survival. *Antipode: A Radical Journal of Geography* 38, 916-929.
- Heynen, Nik. 2009. Bending the bars of empire from every ghetto to feed the kids: The Black Panther Party's radical antihunger politics of social reproduction and scale. *The Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 99, 406-422.
- Heynen, Nik. 2009. Back to revolutionary theory through racialized poverty: The McGee Family's utopian struggle for Milwaukee. *The Professional Geographer* 61, 187-199.
- Heynen, Nik. 2010. Cooking up non-violent civil disobedient direct action for the hungry: Food Not Bombs and the resurgence of radical democracy. *Urban Studies* 47, 1225-1240.

- Hill, Lance. 2004. *The Deacons for Defense: Armed Resistance and the Civil Rights Movement*. Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina.
- hooks, bell. 1984. *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*. Cambridge, MA: South End Books.
- Joy, James. 2003. *Imprisoned Intellectuals: America's Political Prisoners Write on Life, Liberation, and Rebellion*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.
- Kelley, Robin D.G. 1994. *Race Rebels: Culture, Politics, and the Black Working Class*. New York: The Free Press.
- Kelley, Robin D.G. 2002. *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Kropotkin, Peter. 1970. *Selected Writings on Anarchism and Revolution*. Cambridge, MA.: MIT Press.
- Kropotkin, Peter. 1995. *The Conquest of Bread and Other Writings*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Kropotkin, Peter. 1996. *Fields Factories and Workshops*. Montreal: Black Rose Books.
- Kuhn, Thomas S. 1962. *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press.
- Lefebvre, Henri. 1968. *Sociology of Marx*. New York: Pantheon.
- McCubbin, Bob. 1969. *Martin Sostre in Court*. Buffalo, NY: Martin Sostre Defense Committee.
- McKittrick, Katherine. 2006. *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- McKittrick, Katherine and Clyde Woods. 2007. *Black Geographies and the Politics of Place*. Toronto: Between the Lines Press; Cambridge, MA: South End Press.
- Mitchell, Don and Nik Heynen. 2009. The geography of survival and the right to the city: Speculations on surveillance, legal innovation, and the criminalization of intervention. *Urban Geography* 30, 611-632.
- New York Times. 1969. Jet with 68 hijacked to Cuba; 'Big bore', one passenger says. *New York Times* 26, February 1969, pp. 94.
- New York Times. 1970. Hijacker of plane to Cuba gets first life sentence for offence. *New York Times*. 7, July 1970, pp. 58.
- Payne, Charles. 1995 *I've Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition in the Mississippi Civil Rights Movement*. Berkeley: University of California Press

- Pickerill, Jenny and Paul Chatterton. 2006. Notes towards autonomous geographies: Creation, resistance and self management as survival tactics. *Progress in Human Geography* 30, 1-17.
- Pulido, Laura. 2006. *Black, Brown, Yellow and Left: Radical Activism in Los Angeles*. Berkeley, CA: University of California.
- Ransby, Barbara. 2003. *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement: A Radical Democratic Vision*. Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press.
- Robinson, Cedric J. 1983. *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition*. Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press.
- Robnett, Belinda. 1997. *How Long? How Long?: African-American Women in the Struggle for Civil Rights*. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Sostre, Martin. 1968. *Letters from Prison*. Buffalo, NY: Philosophical Society State University of New York, Buffalo.
- Taylor, Ula. 1998. The historical evolution of black feminist thought and praxis. *Journal of Black Studies* 29, 234-253.
- Tyson, Timothy B. 1999. *Radio Free Dixie: Robert F. Williams and the Roots of Black Power*. Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press.
- Zinn, H. 1964. *SNCC: The New Abolitionists*. Boston: Beacon Press.