

On Liberated Zones Theory

Or How BIPOC Groups Are Already Doing the Work

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I have previously pointed out, in my essay “Historical Materialism: A Brief Overview and Left-Libertarian Reinterpretation,” that on-the-ground efforts in Rojava and by Cooperation Jackson in Mississippi can be seen as...

attempting, as Wesley Morgan describes, “to create ‘dual power’ through the creation of cooperatives.” Morgan disapprovingly terms this “market syndicalism” and critiques it for simply creating “units in a market economy” and still relying “upon access to the market.” However, this opinion does not take into account the unification of this praxis within broader pushes for anti-statist autonomy such as large-scale community self-defense that, like in Rojava, are creating space for non-capitalist markets. Such a method would not be dissimilar to the call by Samuel Edward Konkin III for “agorist protection and arbitration agencies” and “protection company syndicates” to defend markets growing counter to the state-capitalist economy and contain “the State by defending those who have signed up for protection-insurance.”

Konkin’s vision is a somewhat cynical speculation in comparison to the lived struggle of the Kurdish fighters, but the comparison lends validity to the case that building a decentralized, cooperative economy is inseparable from direct action like self-defense and networks of counter-economic exchange. In my own journey, these observations represent a more revolutionary and non-utopian development in the tradition of early North American anarchist Josiah Warren’s communitarian-mutualist experiments like Utopia, Modern Times, and the Cincinnati Time Store, but these ideas also arguably fall under the umbrella of “liberated zones theory” as theorized (and struggled for) by comrades at Community Movement Builders. I therefore want to ‘advertise’ for their theory and praxis because I really do think *it’s just that compelling*. And though I will add plenty of my own thoughts, the real purpose of this piece is to point out that (because of historical conditions) almost anything white, settler anarchists like myself may propose is already being done in Black, Indigenous, and POC communities.

Community Movement Builders is an incredible organization who describe themselves as “a Black member-based collective of community residents and activists serving Black working-class and poor Black communities” that “organizes to bring power to Black communities by challenging existing institutions and creating new ones that our people control.” They have chapters

in Atlanta, Dallas, and Detroit, with each one adapting to their own local conditions. Some of the projects that these chapters are undertaking include land trust development, cooperative development, cop-watch programs, community gardens, mutual aid programs, and international alliances with socialist groups like Pati Kan Pèp in Haiti. All of this sits within the framework of “liberated zones theory,” the outline of which—provided by CMB—feels important enough to reproduce in whole here:

Liberated Zones are territories where the masses (the community of people who live in and around a specific area) are in near-complete control over their political and socio-economic destinies because they control the institutions in a specific region, city, town or state. Because liberated zones/territory will exist within larger capitalist economies and hostile state institutions, complete control can’t happen until another later stage of transformation. The control gained exists within a larger strategy of challenging state institutions and capitalism.

Economically, the community will run the market system through various worker-controlled enterprises and cooperatives. This is to ensure that the surplus-value of local communities’ labor is controlled within the liberated zones and not exploited by the outside capitalists. For this reason, that surplus can be distributed to developing the community and addressing human needs instead of capitalist wealth. Thus, the communities will be in charge of generating and sustaining economic wealth from within.

At a further stage in liberated activity, the state governing apparatus will also be under the control of the people (current institutions or new ones). That can be done through either revolutionary political parties that truly represent the people’s interest, or through the consistent political struggle of the masses. In any case, the state can be used to support cooperative economic activities and the creation of new economies to deter reactionary forces from reentering the liberated zone.

The people within the zones will control their local resources such as land, housing, and labor and will be the decision-makers on how these social elements will be maneuvered. Ideologically from our perspective as a Black self-determining organization, the masses will see themselves as a part of a larger pan-African struggle and therefore, embrace the unity and resistance struggles of African people at home and abroad.

When I read this overview, it blew my mind. Here are folks doing incredible praxis in the framework of an excellent theory to establish autonomous networks of cooperative and commons-based market economies that resist capitalist extraction and legibility. And the necessary elements of anti-racism and anti-colonialism make it an even more powerful and contextual model for social change.

Admittedly, one feature of liberated zones theory that might (understandably) rub anarchists—particularly of the individualist tradition—the wrong way is the goal of putting “the state governing apparatus . . . under the control of the people (current institutions or new ones).” However, while our essential tension with any government apparatus must stay central to anarchists, I think this is much less of an issue than it might first appear. Even as CMB names “revolutionary

political parties that truly represent the people's interest," they equally emphasize "consistent political struggle of the masses" and center the "challenging [of] state institutions." And because of the decentralized approach of liberated zones theory, it becomes less a question of arguing over a single unified tactic and political model and more about what is most appropriate to local conditions. For example, while my work often focuses on building and maintaining non-state institutions like land trusts, cooperatives, and mutual aid programs, I am also on very good terms with local branches of the Communist Party of the United States—fragmented and decentralized as they are today by destructive interference from both the U.S. and Soviet governments—and Democratic Socialists of America—especially their Libertarian Socialist Caucus—and have supported plenty of local socialist candidates. While one should *always* be wary of *any* political organization, it is also perfectly reasonable to see leftist groups such as these (or others depending on local conditions) winning control over the existing governments of, say, larger urban areas in order to "support cooperative economic activities and the creation of new economies to deter reactionary forces from reentering the liberated zone" as a net positive. This could open the door to policies like participatory budgeting, food sovereignty ordinances, stronger squatting rights, tax breaks for cooperatives, public banks, and more directly democratic governance structures in general.¹

Control of local government in this manner also fits very well with Kevin Carson's model of libertarian municipalism. He argues that participatory governance structures like Michel Bauwen's and Cosma Orsi's "Partner State" do not need to be...

so much a 'government' as a system of governance. It need not be a state at all, in the sense of an institution which claims the sole right to initiate force in a given territory. It is, essentially, a nonstate social association—or support platform—for managing the commons, extended to an entire geographical region. . . . In fact, it is arguably quite possible to sever the Partner State altogether from even residual forms of sovereign police power over all the individuals in a contiguous geographical area. It is possible to have an entire polycentric ecosystem of commons-based institutions with self-selected memberships or users of a particular common resource, with substantially overlapping memberships, and large minorities or even majorities of those in the same area being members of most of them. In that case adjudication or negotiation of the relationships between them will cause a body of "common law" to emerge for the system as a whole, with a substantial degree of de facto coordination over a common geographical area.

Carson sees this project as a "municipal level" version of "[t]he Saint-Simonian idea of replacing legislation over human beings with the 'administration of things,'" an interpretation that is directly (*and potentially strategically*) related to Friedrich Engels' "withering away" of "political rule over men" into "an administration of things and a direction of processes of production," on the foundation of, he continues elsewhere, "free and equal association of the producers." This is not dissimilar to the strategies engaged in by the Paris Commune in establishing worker cooperatives and participatory governance. Marx himself writes of the Commune in *The Civil War*

¹ See my articles "An Anti-Statist Beginner's Guide to (Taxation, Public Budgets, and) Participatory Budgeting" and "Anti-Statists for LA's Public Bank: Charter Amendment." Additionally, Sarah Horowitz outlines extensively—though at times too optimistically in my opinion—the role that the government can play in empowering the "mutualist sector" through actions like tax and regulation reform in Chapter 8 of *Mutualism*.

in France, praising its efforts toward cooperativizing production and its rejection of “centralized state power” in favor of a system of “municipal councillors, chosen by universal suffrage in the various wards of the town, responsible and revocable at short terms.”²

Not only does this come very close to the proposals of council communism, but such a system integrates well with liberated zones theory’s background in Black Panther Huey P. Newton’s “intercommunalism;” an effort to adapt Marx’s dialectical materialism to a modern colonial context.³ Newton writes:

[T]he world today is a dispersed collection of communities. A community is different from a nation. A community is a small unit with a comprehensive collection of institutions that serve to exist a small group of people. And we say further that the struggle in the world today is between the small circle that administers and profits from the empire of the United States, and the peoples of the world who want to determine their own destinies.

Currently we live in an era of “reactionary intercommunalism, in which a ruling circle, a small group of people, control all other people by using their technology.” But...

[a]t the same time, we say that this technology can solve most of the material contradictions people face, that the material conditions exist that would allow the people of the world to develop a culture that is essentially human and would nurture those things that would allow people to resolve contradictions in a way that would not cause the mutual slaughter of all of us. The development of such a culture would be revolutionary intercommunalism.

This logic of community control over the means of production is at the heart of liberated zones theory, and Newton, writing in the 70s, even refers to “the people in the liberated zones of South Vietnam” [emphasis added] in his analysis. In the 21st century, CMB’s Kamau Franklin was recently part of a panel “on the theory and practice of Intercommunalism,” and, in an interview with *Millennials are Killing Capitalism*, he explicitly outlines how their work is in the lineage of the Black Panther Party as well as identifying a solidarity between struggles of different peoples suffering under colonialism. The throughline between these ideas is an international, cross-cultural, multi-class collaboration that expressly includes, as Newton emphasized, the “lumpenproletariat” in community contexts.

To come at the project again from an anarchist—particularly market anarchist (nod to the audience)—perspective, the 19th century mutualist Voltairine de Cleyre writes, not dissimilarly to Marx, that though the aforementioned Paris Commune “went down in utter defeat,” if it had made different choices, namely oversetting “the economic institutions which beget the centralized State” and “proclaimed a general communalization of the city’s resources,” the Commune

² For more on Marxism and cooperatives, see my article “Marx, Conflict, and Cooperatives” and David L. Prychitko’s book *Marxism and Workers’ Self-Management: The Essential Tension*.

³ Encyclopedia Britannica is correct to end their entry on “dialectical materialism” with the caveat: “There exists no systematic exposition of dialectical materialism by Marx and Engels, who stated their philosophical views mainly in the course of polemics.” I do however highly recommend a combined reading of Bertell Ollman’s *Dance of the Dialectic: Steps in Marx’s Method* and the popular Marx-Engels Reader.

could have served as “a practical example of the extension of a modified Socialism and local autonomy” for cities across Europe. And if we were to ‘try try again’ through the lens of liberated zones theory, we could add elements from other market-oriented thinkers. Such zones could be a context for something like early anarchist Pierre-Joseph Proudhon’s “Bank of the People” to lend out interest-free loans to cooperatives on the basis of mutual credit (and/or time, local resources, or any other effective monetary scheme). Large corporations in the zones could undergo what radical libertarian Murray Rothbard describes as “homesteading confiscation,” whereby ownership is “transferred . . . to the specific workers who work in the particular plants, thus making them producers’ coops.” He saw this as a process that could be helped along by nationalization and redistribution, but we need not even go as far as nationalization as this could be accomplished through forms of municipalization within liberated zones. Examples go on and on about what might be accomplished at a local level through mass action and pluralistic overlap of many different (participatory) governmental and (cooperative) non-governmental efforts gathered under the umbrella of liberated zones theory.

Yes, there is still government in this scheme, and though a stark differentiation between localized democracy and a centralized nation-state is helpful and accurate, anarchists and radical libertarians should seek to abolish both in favor of purely free association. William Gillis, in “The Abolition Of Rulership Or The Rule Of All Over All?,” is surely correct that we need to avoid idealizing even decentralized and direct democracy, and yet at the same time “[t]here are many situations where participatory democracy represents a major step forward, even something anarchists should fight for with our lives.” And from a dialectical libertarian view, a term coined by Chris Matthew Sciabarra, what we should seek is a contextual, real-world net reduction in the power of the state and its resulting conditions of economic exploitation. A strategy like liberated zones theory could provide an excellent pathway for that kind of net reduction and allow for common goals and, consequently, immediate cooperation between anarchists, democratic socialists, communists, and even radical libertarians to use both direct action and local governance to facilitate community-owned and (particularly producer) cooperative networks. Such is essentially, as Sarah Horowitz outlines in her book *Mutualism: Building the Next Economy from the Ground Up*, what happened in post-fascist Italy when “communists, partisans, and faith-based groups that wanted to rebuild their communitarian way of life after the war” sewed the seeds for a “decentralized local cooperative economy” in Emilia-Romagna. “Today the region has no umbrella organization, no president, no official coordination. It thrives because of the reciprocal obligations among co-ops and among citizens,” two-thirds of whom are members of at least one cooperative (pgs. 109, 112).

Interesting to me as well—on the note of “faith-based groups”—is how Rukiya Colvin and Richard Feldman, in their outline of various institutions in Detroit pushing for liberated zones, identify certain religious institutions as centers of community development. For example, they write that the Episcopal Church of the Messiah is...

more than a place of worship as they host annual anti-violence rallies, cultivate creativity through makerspaces, promote wellbeing through community gardens, support the need for digital equity through the Equitable Internet Initiative, and hold monthly coalition meetings, while also working to rebuild the neighborhood through the low income housing options they provide. Their space also serves as a small business incubator.

This stood out to me as notable as I have, over the last two years or so, been exploring the histories of antinomian Christian communities, particularly those of English Civil War (like Diggers, Levellers, Quakers, etc.) and the Radical Reformation (like Thomas Müntzer and his 16th century peasant revolutionaries).⁴ These influences have brought the place of religious community in relation to economic liberation to the forefront of my mind. But again, this sort of project has been extensively undertaken in the last hundred years by Black and Latin American liberation theologians from Martin Luther King Jr. (see his sermon “Can A Christian Be a Communist?”) to James H. Cone (see his article “The Black Church and Marxism”) to José Míguez Bonino (read chapter 8 of his book *Christians and Marxists*) and beyond; and churches in marginalized communities have served as both places of refuge and sites of resistance for centuries.

So we once again return to the main point: BIPOC communities are already doing the work and thinking outlined in this article. We as leftists need to stop bickering and particularly stop telling BIPOC communities what they should or shouldn't be doing. Instead, we join in similar efforts to establish liberated zones in combination with cross-community strategies like mass labor actions and industrial unionism. I would add too that market anarchists have a lot to offer to this struggle, whether it's perspectives rooted in Hayekian knowledge problems and collective action problems, agorist tactics (as mentioned above), a state-monopolist model of capitalism (à la Benjamin Tucker), or just our bodies and hands. So cooperate! Get to know your neighbor! Befriend a communist! Learn to defend yourself or strategize to be defended! Bypass state-capitalist legibility! Oh, and if you're interested in supporting Community Movement Builders, check out their donation page!

⁴ For short overviews of these subjects, Éric Vuillard's book *The War of the Poor* and chapter 2 of Margaret Hope Bacon's *The Quiet Rebels*.

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