

The Need For A Self-Aware, Intentional Agorist Movement

A Response to Nathan Goodman and Nick Ford

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Nathan Goodman does a great service by offering critiques to the Agorist, Illegalist, and Syndicalist framework. Where he succeeds in uncovering important questions for practitioners of these schools of thought, he may fail for lack of imagination or direct experience. As someone who identifies as an Agorist or Counter-Economist and practices the philosophy on a daily basis, my response to both Goodman and Ford is only interested in the sections of their essay's associated with Agorism.

Briefly, Agorism is the philosophy that calls for the creation of counter-institutions to the state using a strategy of counter-economics to syphon political power and moral support away from the state. Samuel E. Konkin III, founder of Agorism, called for entrepreneurs to make use of the so-called black and grey markets. In the footnotes of Chapter 3 of *The New Libertarian Manifesto*, Konkin writes the following:

“In short, the “black market” is anything non-violent prohibited by the State and carried on anyways. The “grey market” is used here to mean dealing in goods and services not themselves illegal but obtained or distributed in ways legislated against by The State. Much of what is called “white-collar crime” falls under this and is smiled upon by most of society.”

Nathan Goodman offers a critique of the use of the black market. Specifically Goodman compares prison gangs and their black market transactions with Agorism and asks what is an agorist to do about these unsavory situations?

“While these governance institutions lack the state’s monopoly jurisdiction and provide governance in a way that enables black market transactions, they can be just as authoritarian and violent as states.

So prison gangs route around the state in order to facilitate and govern black markets. But they also engage in predatory violence, and they benefit from state policies. How should an agorist think about these institutions? Surely we should not valorize them as purely the agents of the counter-economic social change we want to see in the world.”

*“By working through the market process, agorist entrepreneurs have incentives to create value, access the dispersed knowledge that is coordinated through the price mechanism, and adapt their actions when they become destructive rather than productive. However, **black markets are distorted by the state in ways that often benefit particular participants in those black markets.** These actors may become predatory and embrace unproductive entrepreneurship that undermines liberty rather than advancing it.”*

This is an apparent blind spot in Nathan Goodman’s Agorist research. Namely, Konkin distinguished the peaceful black and grey markets of Agorism from violent market actions which he called “the red market”. As Nick Ford noted,

“In Samuel Edward Konkin III’s work he made the distinction between black markets and red markets and he explains this in his pamphlet Counter-Economics, “The Counter-Economy is the sum of all non-aggressive Human Action which is forbidden by the State. Counter-economics is the study of the Counter-Economy and its practices. The Counter-Economy includes the free market, the Black Market, the “underground economy,” all acts of civil and social disobedience, all acts of forbidden association (sexual, racial, cross-religious), and anything else the State, at any place or time, chooses to prohibit, control, regulate, tax, or tariff. The Counter-Economy excludes all State-approved action (the “White Market”) and the Red Market (violence and theft not approved by the State)”

It seems obvious that educated Agorists would not support the violent actions of prison gangs or any other institution. Goodman goes on to ask what Agorist’s might do about counter-economic entrepreneurs who are incentivized to support state intervention in the interest of reducing competition. Goodman writes:

“In an agorist framework, bootleggers are understood as part of the black market, the counter-economy. Bootleggers provide goods that people have a natural right to purchase. They are entrepreneurs who route around the state to provide goods and services that have been unjustly criminalized. And yet because state intervention reduces the competition they face, these counter-economic entrepreneurs have incentives to support state intervention.”

Nick Ford also handles this point,

“While Goodman is correct that from an agorist framework they would be considered a part of the black market, being a part of the black market and the counter-economy are not always the same thing. From my perspective a black market is simply a type of market whereby illegal goods are bought and sold. The counter-economy on the other hand is, I’d argue, a certain type of black market whereby the people involved are intentionally trying to mitigate the state’s efforts and do it for radical purposes.”

I completely agree that there is a critical difference between the casual patron of the black and gray markets and a “conscious Agorist” or a practicing counter-economist. The average bootlegger or prison gang member may be participating in the black market, but cannot be thought

of as a conscious agorist until an understanding of the philosophy has been achieved. Konkin understood this and made note of the importance of “consciousness-raising activity” and infecting the Statist economy with Agorist thought and action. Konkin writes:

“Now we can see clearly what is needed to create a libertarian society. On the one hand we need the education of the libertarian activists and the consciousness-raising of counter-economists to libertarian understanding and mutual supportiveness... Note well that libertarian activists who are not themselves full practicing counter-economists are unlikely to be convincing. ‘Libertarian’ political candidates undercut everything they say (of value) by what they are doing”

The debate around ideology and intent is indeed one of growing importance as knowledge of the philosophy of Agorism expands thanks to the trend towards decentralized, peer-to-peer, digital tools. Nick Ford points out that Agorists (including Konkin) tout the Soviet Union’s black market as an example of the counter-economy in action, but often “much of the “counter-economy” had nothing at all to do with undermining state authority in any intentional or ideological way.” Eventually, Russians turned away from the black markets and joined the state-capitalist markets.

“What are agorists to make of this?,” Nick Ford asks. “For one thing I think they should temper their historical examples with more historical context but with that in mind it’s still true that black markets are a flexible and powerful tool for revolutionary struggle through peaceful means. But at the same time they are a strategy that can be co-opted like anything else. **If we have folks who are just bootleggers to make money or people who are doing things only to survive then the agorist revolution is unlikely to happen.**”

On this last point, Ford could not be more correct. As outlined by Konkin in the quote above, “consciousness-raising” is needed in order to secure an agorist revolution. In response to Ford’s request that agorists “tempter their historical examples with more historical context”, I would like to ever-so briefly provide an example of the counter-economy, and possible Agorist action, that I have not found referenced anywhere else. I am speaking of the “informal sector” of Peru during the 1980’s and 90’s. The informal sector was made up of individuals who operated outside government laws and regulations. The activities of the informal sector are conducted outside the legal system without regard to government regulations, including an informal economy.

In his 1989 book *The Other Path*, Hernando De Soto provides a detailed study of the emergence of the Peruvian informal economy, and how it operated. De Soto argued that government regulations on housing, transportation, and trade should be removed to allow the dynamics of the informal economy to take over. Unfortunately, De Soto and *The Other Path* seem to equate capitalism and the free market, going as far as promoting “market-oriented reforms” which will allow the informal economy to become the new statist economy. Rather than promoting total liberation through the use of the informal economy and a truly freed market, De Soto and his Institute for Liberty and Democracy believe that the capitalist system will liberate the people. Despite these shortcomings, *The Other Path* is recommended for the student of counter-economic activity.

One last important point on Peru’s informal economy is the fact that these black market entrepreneurs were investing and creating informal businesses as a direct attempt to escape the regulations of the state and the violence of the Maoist-terror group The Shining Path. When *The Other Path* was released it was designed to counteract the Marxist propaganda of The Shining

Path, who had been teaching the peasant class that the market was something to despise rather than a tool for liberation. The book would become a best seller and help the growing informal economists recognize the power of unfettered trade and market action. Unfortunately, in the absence of a truly informed and organized Agorist movement, the informal economy seems to have been absorbed by the Peruvian Statist economy.

In the near future I plan to do a full-scale study on *The Other Path* examining the implications for the Agorist movement. For now, I hope the mention of Peru's informal economy helps illustrate to Nick Ford that there are indeed examples of the power of the counter-economy. While the informal economy was without a doubt part of the black market as outlined by Konkin, it's difficult to determine if the informal economy as a whole could be considered Agorist or counter-economic. De Soto does provide examples of individuals who recognized the value and power in removing their economic activity from the State's thieving hands.

Now, if only we could elevate the consciousness of the larger Anarchist milieu and propel the Agorist revolution forward.

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