

A Look at Nothing

The Politics of Possession

(I)An-ok Ta Chai

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As anarchists, we all hate capitalism and we all want to do away with traditional property relations. We all want to change in some pretty fundamental ways how we relate with the material world and among one another. I figured that it would probably help to make some clear distinctions between the different alternatives to traditional property relations that are out there. If we want to live and experience a way of living and organizing that is very radically different, I think that being quite clear, articulate and up-front about what exactly we would like to see can go a long way. So, here are some of the different alternatives that I see out there that we could explore. This is not a definitive exposition, just an initial volley to get us started in explicitly thinking about how we would like to relate outside of traditional property relations. All of these are not only approaches that society can use after a massive anti-capitalist revolution, they are also practices that we can to some extent apply to our own lives right now.

Gift Economy This is the notion that when the need arises, people will spontaneously contribute “gifts” towards the end of getting something accomplished (acquiring sustenance, giving one’s labor, paying rent, etc.). Behind this concept is still an entrenched and unexamined notion of property. Logically speaking, in order to give a gift one needs to own something to give first. Gift economy then boils down to a different more informal form of charity work and humanitarian aid to others. It is the unconditioned transferring of ownership of something over to another person.

Sharing Sharing is basically on one’s own initiative expanding the sphere of those who access and use a certain resource without expecting any compensation in return. For example, if you owned and were eating a sandwich, a hungry person with no food came along, and you let them eat the sandwich along with you, then that would be an example of sharing. It is expanding the field of use, but not the field of control, within a relationship of ownership.

Collective Ownership This is the concept that a certain group of people has equal or cumulative ultimate say over how certain resources are used. It is shared control, but not necessarily shared access. It is a concept of property where certain people have ultimate say over it together.

Partnership This is a concept of both shared control and shared use taking place within a context of property relations. In the business world this takes place in the form of “business partners”, in romantic relations the term “partner” usually connotes such a relation taking place in regards to material objects, and the less-than-revolutionary nature of most of the talk about the “partnership paradigm”(by authors like Raine Eisler, Daniel Quinn, Marshall Rosenberg, etc.) seems to hold such a notion as well, that is, still maintaining property relations but in this new form.

Stealing This is a transferring over of ownership of something against the will of one of those involved. The concept of property relations is maintained, it is just that this is an instance of disruption of the code of conduct surrounding how property relations are to take place in a civil and respectful manner.

Natural Giving This concept/phrase is one that I first came across in the work of Marshall Rosenberg, the originator of Nonviolent Communication. The concept is that when people have all their fundamental needs met, they engage in “natural giving”, that is, joyfully contributing towards the well-being of others without keeping tallies or expecting anything in return. The theory goes that this is the natural state of people, and that through the rise of Domination systems and life-alienating thought processes humanity became educated out of engaging in this way of acting.

In many ways ”natural giving” dove-tails with the famous anarchist theorist Peter Kropotkin’s notion of Mutual Aid, that is, humanity being programmed in it’s very intrinsic nature to naturally help one another out and support each other in order to continue to get people’s needs met and survive as a species. Natural giving is a needs-based form of compassionate action that does not necessarily have to exist within a paradigm of “ownership”.

Non-Possession More than anything, this is a personal attitude and approach to life that an individual can take towards the world. This concept dove-tails with the Buddhist concept of “non-attachment” in that one is not attached to considering other objects, or people, “theirs”.

Likewise, this concept also crosses over with polyamory as well, seeing “possession” and “possessiveness” as essentially being the same fundamental experience and internal process.

Thirdly, I see this view as also having ties with what the author Frederick Mann calls EF-Prime. EF-Prime is an approach/belief that we distract ourselves from factual reality with different stories of authority, conformity and obedience to collective abstractions – that essentially what we call the “government” is in actuality a mass psychosis that millions of people are experiencing together, and playing off each other with, all at once. Non-possession does not recognize any invisible lines or chains between people and objects or other people – each is taken in, appreciated and respected in it’s full uniqueness and individuality while not being statically tied to anything else.

I personally hold the most affinity with this last concept, what I call “Non-possession”. I see this as being the approach that is the most deeply, genuinely and fully liberatory and authentic.

I also see it as in many ways opening the door for an anarchic spiritual journey as well, if one were inclined to take such paths.

I see the concepts of “natural giving” and “mutual aid” as being approaches that could potentially be seamlessly integrated with that of “non-possession”. “Non-possession” could be seen as one’s internal, personal approach to life whereas the other two are what happens in interpersonal relations.

All the other alternatives to traditional property relations, to me, just do not have the kind of expansive freedom, choice, flexibility, and variety of possibilities that I see the natural giving and non-possession approaches as offering. All the other forms I see as either as being dependant upon the happenstance “generosity” of others, is chained into the obligation of asking for permission before-hand, or is based on a profound alienation between people. With both natural giving and non-possession, one in some sense “has to” understand one another in a profound way simply in order to live. When the illusions come off, what it really means to “live” becomes very clear.

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