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Entrepreneurs and the Lumpenproletariat

Comparing Agorism and Illegalism

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Karl Marx considered the lumpenproletariat to be the segment of the working class with the least revolutionary potential and in fact went as far as to deem them as potentially counter-revolutionary. However, this class of “beggars, prostitutes, gangsters, racketeers, swindlers, petty criminals, tramps, chronic unemployed or unemployables, persons who have been cast out by industry, and all sorts of declassed, degraded or degenerated elements” was considered by Bakunin to be the class with the most likely revolutionary potential, believing that wage workers were far too integrated within capitalism to be able to truly challenge it.

Illegalism sprung up as an anarchist philosophy of the lumpenproletariat. Championed by individualists such as Ravachol, Émile Henry, Auguste Vaillant, and Caserio and others influenced by Max Stirner’s brand of egoism, illegalism promoted the criminal lifestyle as the archetype for the revolutionary, believing that through individual criminal actions done in pursuit of individual desires and survival under capitalist oppression, they could even-

tually inspire mass insurrection leading to a revolution. Theft and burglary were seen as a means of individual and mass reappropriation of capitalist property, counterfeiting and smuggling were used as a means of survival, and most controversially, political bombings and assassinations were labeled as “propaganda of the deed.” Criminals were cheered on for their general disregard of statist authority and their use of crime as a survival tactic.

Agorists similarly champion so-called criminals who make their livings in the black and grey markets. Smuggling, drug dealing, gun running, civil disobedience, prostitution, and unlicensed business practices are promoted as a means of countering state power. As more and more economic activity is moved from the white market to the underground economy, the state loses more and more control over such economic dealings. Along with this, agorists advocate tax evasion which helps to drain the state’s monetary supply thus making it difficult for it to function. While both deal with daily survival under a state-capitalist system, illegalism merely places hope in one day inspiring revolution while agorism lays out a clear path. Agorism puts an entrepreneurial spin on lumpenproletariat activity.

Now at first glance these tactics have much in common. Harboring undocumented immigrants, dealing in illegal drugs and weaponry, smuggling, squatting, prostitution, tax evasion, and even counterfeiting are illegalist actions that are also counter-economic and have been advocated by anarchists in both camps. However major differences in opinion come about when so-called red market activity comes into question. While not strictly entrepreneurial activity, political assassinations, bombings, and even theft are considered antithetical to agorism as they violate the rights of other persons and their property. Sometimes such things as political assassinations have been justified by individuals on the grounds of self-defense but many agorists believe self-defense can only be claimed if one is under immediate threat of violence which would therefore exclude political assassination outright.

While some agorists would likely argue that individual reappropriation is a violation of property rights like any form of robbery or theft, illegalists would argue that the capitalist has no legitimate property rights to begin with as they made their fortunes by stealing the fruits of others’ labor. This sentiment is actually echoed by many on the libertarian left who point out that most capitalist property was gained through means of state seizure and corporate welfare, thus making their claims to such property illegitimate. In the Rothbardian tradition, if the original owner of such stolen property cannot be determined or found, then it should be reclaimed by others who can offer a more just claim to the property. Is this not a call for reappropriation of sorts?

So it seems that agorism is compatible with illegalism but illegalism is an uncomfortable fit at best within agorism. Despite this uneasy relationship at times, the two philosophies can indeed learn a lot from each other. Both of these philosophies defiantly spit in Marx’s face and show the true revolutionary potential of the lumpenproletariat as both criminals and entrepreneurs. It’s time for the underclasses to rise up and take what is rightfully theirs.