

The Promise of Agora-Feminism

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Marginalized people are often excluded from the formal economy. This exclusion can be driven through state interventions, such as occupational licensing laws, that erect barriers to entry. This can be coupled with discrimination by employers, barriers to accessing education, and other social factors that impede success in the formal labor market. This leads to transgender women, for example, often pursuing “survival crimes” such as sex work and drug related entrepreneurship. Given that transgender people, people of color, women, the poor, and other marginalized and oppressed people often work in the counter-economy, it may be fruitful to synthesize intersectional feminist theory and praxis with agorist theory and praxis. Indeed, many oppressed people are practicing agorist direct action already, even if they do not adopt the theoretical framework of agorism.

Intersectional feminists emphasize that oppression is interrelated, and that we cannot isolate sexism from racism, transphobia, homophobia, or economic subordination. People often experience multiple forms of oppression simultaneously. These oppressions are not simply additive, with racism adding oppression on top of sexism for women of color, for instance. Instead, these oppressions influence and structure one another. For example, racism structures the gendered expectations and stereotypes projected upon women of color, such that they face a different form of misogyny than that faced by white women. This means that white women, who are often the leaders and face of politically influential feminist movements, may be ineffective advocates for women of color. Strategies for social change should be attentive to differences and should empower people from a wide range of backgrounds to act in their own interest and towards their own liberation. As a strategy for social change, agorism is compatible with intersectional feminist insights, because the agorist emphasis on entrepreneurship allows people to apply their local knowledge in order to resist the state interventions that directly oppress them.

Perhaps the most obvious site for intersectional agora-feminist emphasis is sex work. Sex workers and their clients are criminalized. Recently their criminalization has been fueled through laws that emphasize “human trafficking,” but tend to criminalize immigrants, voluntary sex workers, and those who provide services to voluntary sex workers. These laws engage in a bait and switch by appealing to legitimate concerns about sexual coercion in order to further criminalize some of the most marginalized people in our society. In many American cities, including New York, transgender women of color have been profiled as sex workers by police, and have had their possession of condoms treated as evidence of guilt. Sex workers and their allies can act in

various ways to make sex work safer and protect sex workers from violence and abuse, whether by police or individual criminals. This work is fundamentally agorist in nature.

Restrictions on abortion and access to reproductive healthcare can also be circumvented through agorist direct action. In some countries, abortion is outright criminalized, while in the U.S. it is often regulated in ways that impede access to abortion. While the most onerous of these restrictions were recently struck down by the Supreme Court, restrictions still exist and limit access to reproductive healthcare. This provides entrepreneurial opportunities to provide healthcare to poor women whose access is restricted by state intervention.

When abortion was entirely criminalized in the U.S., this type of agorist entrepreneurship was pursued by the JANE Abortion Network. JANE connected women who wanted abortions with doctors who could provide them safely. Eventually, members of JANE learned to perform abortions themselves after one of their primary doctors lost their trust. According to the Feminist Women's Health Center, "the underground collective performed over 12,000 safe, affordable abortions. Word of the illegal alternative was spread through word-of-mouth, cryptic advertisements, and even by members of Chicago's police, clergy, and medical establishment." This was black market entrepreneurship that concretely helped thousands of women safely access healthcare that had been criminalized by the state.

Agorist tactics can also help advance feminist goals on issues of gender violence. When it comes to rape, sexual assault, and domestic violence, we live in an era characterized by government failure. According to the Rape, Abuse, and Incest National Network (RAINN), 994 out of every 1,000 rapists will never be incarcerated. This is largely because most rapes are not reported to the police. Many people do not trust the police, and recognize that upon reporting they may be shamed, re-victimized, scrutinized, and have to repeatedly revisit or relive the trauma of sexual violence. Some of that discomfort may be a necessary feature of evidence gathering and testifying in a trial. But much of it relates to misconduct and poor behavior by police officers and other actors within the criminal justice system. Even when rapes are reported, police officers and other actors in the criminal justice system are often grossly negligent in investigating rapes. For example, there are massive backlogs of untested rape kits in many American cities. Many sexual assault survivors have found the state to be a woefully inadequate provider of justice.

Yet in government failure there are entrepreneurial opportunities. Whenever the state has failed to serve people's needs, entrepreneurs have the opportunity to fill that gap. For example, programmers have developed apps such as Circle of Six, which enable people to quickly contact trusted friends or family members in order to coordinate a response during a crisis. Rape crisis centers, women's self-defense collectives, and other grassroots responses to sexual violence can also be developed. In India, the feminist vigilantism of the Gulabi Gang can be thought of as entrepreneurial provision of law and governance by non-state actors.

Today, agorism is conventionally associated with libertarianism and high-tech hacktivism. These realms are currently dominated by white men. But when we examine the counter-economy more broadly, we find diverse forms of entrepreneurial direct action by women, people of color, and members of the LGBTQ community. These oppressed people are not begging the state for reforms, but are instead engaged in entrepreneurial direct action for their own survival and liberation. Agorists should do all we can to aid and abet their agora-feminist revolution.

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