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The Network: A Parody of the Discourse

William Gillis

April 2nd, 2020

It's fun to reimagine the same damn fights among anarchists over "markets" with "network" substituted in its place. After all, "market" just stands for "trade network." And while opposition to the act of trade is a distinct and important component of most rejections of markets — see my prior parable about the benefits of trade — those hostile to markets rarely stop there.

One might well imagine the same abstract *structure* of arguments being brought to bear against networks as a whole rather than just trade networks...

"We've all seen how miserable we are under The Network, forced into social interaction with one another at all times, all to benefit a system that besieges us and suppresses our individual thoughts in favor of *interaction*. What we each need to do is unplug, to become individually self-reliant, stop associating with other people, and stop forming connections with them. All revolutionary movements have failed until now

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<https://c4ss.org/content/52751>

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because they've all continued to replicate The Network to varying degrees. Only full dissolution of all networking, a world of completely isolated individuals will be free."

"Okay, that's wrong. Freedom is a matter of what choices you have in the world around you and without people connecting with one another they will each have less options. Networks are necessary to do a ton of things, just because there are bad things about the configuration of our present network doesn't mean those downsides are inherent."

"You silly network anarchists think you can reform The Network, that's ridiculous. Name even a single Network that hasn't had bad stuff."

"If you're asking us to find a society — a network of connected individuals — entirely free of sin, we could sit here listing historical societies we think are *better* than our present one, but you can of course find things to critique in every single one. There are nevertheless positive aspects to networking, to forming relations with one another. Networks can exist in quite different configurations, we're just saying that when we build connections between individuals it enables everyone to have more choices—"

"And once a network comes into existence what say do I have over it? It becomes a god more powerful than me."

"Are you upset that you wouldn't have personal control over a connection someone else might make on the network? Like if two people became friends that's something you wouldn't be able to

veto? Okay, sure, yes, we don't think you should have that power, for a variety of reasons. “

“Christ, you're entirely enraptured with your Networks. The Network really is your god.”

“It's a clean concept referring to a wide set of possibilities. And it's one that provides a lot of insights. Network analysis gives us the capacity to talk with a great deal more detail and substance about a variety of things, why just some basic topological traits—“

“Networking is a pseudoscience. People aren't dots on a diagram. Here, read this poet complaining about how unlike dots people are.”

“It's often possible to gain great insight into what is possible by mapping things to a more simple model, that nevertheless captures some of the more pertinent constraints or dynamics. Sure there are different types of connections, vast complexity to individuals, etc, but at the end of the day if two individuals aren't connected to one another by some edge on a network there's no way for them to convey information to one another. That's a real constraint. Network analysis is useful at engaging with these constraints and limitations, even discovering overall trends or tendencies of a network —“

“Look at how beholden you are to math! Name even a single society that contributed to math but didn't have a state! It's not just network theory, math is the enemy, math inherently orders the world into a hierarchy. Numbers are the first hierarchy, the origin of putting some things above other things.”

“Okay, that’s just a terrible misunderstanding of what we oppose in ‘hierarchy’. Surely there are some things that are worse than other things, ordering or prioritizing is inherent to any sort of thought. Many non-state societies use math and we have evidence of advanced math being used by peoples that the archeological record shows no signs of states in. There will always be better records kept of things in historical state societies because they could finance centralized libraries and also had a tendency to burn away the historical record of societies they conquered. But okay, sure, if you oppose math then it probably follows that you oppose network analysis. But we could ask you to point to historical examples free of networks. No matter how solitary a hunter gatherer society, no matter how much they despised or ignored familial relations, they still interacted, they still had social connections.”

“That’s absurd. Now you’re calling *everything* a network. You’re stretching the definition so far as to be meaningless.”

“Well, yes, there are networks in nearly everything, albeit we grant not in a world of completely isolated individuals living alone in their bunkers. But “network” isn’t trying to cleave out a distinct set of societies, it’s talking about common underlying dynamics, underlying dynamics that we can speak substantively about through well developed analytical tools. These dynamics can be positive or negative, but they have immense potential for good.”

“Nonsense, Networks refers to a very particular modern set of western societies. Christ, it’s like

you haven’t even read the literature on Network Societies.”

“Okay, so there are some authors who try to use ‘network’ to define a very particular set of cultural characteristics and only a very small number of societies, but this completely bypasses the standard definition, and ignores the benefits of network analysis.”

“See how craven you are before your god of The Network!”

...This is a malicious parody, to be sure, obviously few people take isolationist individualism this far, and most opponents of the market oppose them for what they believe are pro-social reasons. They want networks, just without *trade*. Yet we’ve already covered why trade is useful and not necessarily negative.

The point here is to substitute a clearly wrong opinion from the start, and then let it wield the same structure of arguments used by those opposed to trade networks — e.g. markets — to illuminate just how *bad* those following arguments are.

The fact of the matter is that network analysis is a useful way of thinking about the world. There are networks in everything. There are also markets to be found throughout human history and this doesn’t invalidate the utility of “markets” as a concept.