

Agorist Class Theory

Presentation Notes
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I'm going to discuss agorist class theory. I'm drawing primarily from Wally Conger's predictably titled work, *Agorist Class Theory*. Conger uses Samuel Konkin's notes and essays to bring forth a class theory based on Austrian economics and libertarian ethics. We have copies of this work to give out, or you can find it online at agorism.info.

(Marxism)

Now I'm sure that when I say class theory and class struggle, a lot of Marxist alarms go off. This is understandable, as Marxism has largely usurped class theory. Class struggle had been originally, and more accurately, described by classical liberals Charles Comte and Charles Dunoyer. Comte and Dunoyer, and later Murray Rothbard and Sam Konkin, were able to look deeper at how wealth was acquired and created a more accurate theory of economic class conflict than Karl Marx did.

It is of immediate importance to examine the idea of class war. These days the biggest banks are overtly robbing taxpayers and a managerialist government increasingly takes on the role of economic decider. As you've probably noticed from the earlier speakers, agorism is quite the radical philosophy. For agorists to displace the played-out program of Marxism as the dominant radical philosophy, we need to address Marx, and reframe class struggle based on the libertarian principle of zero-aggression.

The book *Agorist Class Theory* includes a critique of Marxism from a specifically agorist standpoint which I won't go into. But it's worth reading.

(Agorist Class Theory and Origins)

So where to begin with agorist class theory?

Comte and Dunoyer created the foundation for *Agorist Class Theory* in the early nineteenth century - again, before Marx.

They defined the oppressing class not as those who used money to employ people and got wealthy from the labor of employees, but as those who used money to influence the state and/or got paid by the state. This oppressing class can be called the political class, because their wealth comes from the political means of coercion and rank, not the productive means of peaceful creation and exchange.

Keep in mind there is nothing that prevents those who would be labeled oppressors by Marxists from also being labeled oppressors by agorists. A large number of wealthy people and established corporations use the state to enforce their economic position.

Comte and Dunoyer were not anarchists. But they recognized that some people acquired wealth using the state rather than the market, and that therefore their current income was due to the state, not due to the market.

Wally Conger essentially summed up agorist class theory as follows:

1. The State is the main means by which people live by plunder; the Market, in contradistinction, is the sum of human action of the productive.
2. The State, by its existence, divides society into a plundered class and a plundering class.
3. The State has historically been directed by those who gain most by its existence...
4. The directors of the state will fight to keep their privileged status, and have done so, against libertarians seeking their overthrow and the restitution of their plunder to those from whom it was taken.
5. Politicians operate as “gladiators” in the aptly named Political Arena to settle disputes among the state’s directors (which are not monolithic).

(Power and Market)

There is a lot of history between Comte and Konkin. Perhaps the greatest influence on Konkin was the libertarian theorist Murray Rothbard.

Rothbard is generally credited as the founder of anarcho-capitalism. Like many Austrian economists, he used the term capitalism to mean free enterprise and a free economy based on private ownership. He strongly criticized state handouts to connected capitalists.

The class model presented by Murray Rothbard describes the state and those connected to it as parasitic class that continually presents justifications for its plunder. They profit from coercion, not from production.

Rothbard’s fundamental division of society was “into an exploiting class of those who make a net gain by the existence of the State, and an exploited class of those who incur a net loss by the existence of the State.”

Wealth can be acquired voluntarily using the market or acquired coercively using political power or privilege.

Rothbard took insights from a variety of sources whenever he believed it would advance liberty.

His roots in the Old Right had introduced him to populist “bankers conspiracy” theories and similar ideas. Government existed for the benefit of some, at the expense of others.

He brought other views from leftist statist and earlier anarchists and classical liberals.

Left Revisionist Historian Gabriel Kolko influenced Rothbard’s views on how the state colluded with certain business interests, allowing the creation of cartels and monopolies that would be unlikely to exist in a free market.

Carl Oglesby, a former president of Students for a Democratic Society, contributed insights into the divisions among the ruling class. These divisions are settled with electioneering, corruption, assassination, and warfare. Conflicts among political class factions are conflicts in which productive individuals were to be used as pawns for interests not their own.

G. William Domhoff, a research professor of psychology, coined the term “Higher Circles” to describe the subtle aristocracy who exhibit similar mating and association habits to those of previous holders of state power and privilege.

Campaign funding, war profiteering, central banking, bailouts, and business regulations are all involved in the political means of making wealth.

(Praxeology)

Agorist Class Theory classifies individuals according to their economic interests. It is not simply for pigeonholing unique individuals into determinist categories. This contrasts with Marxist class theory, by which someone born into the bourgeoisie must of necessity act for the bourgeoisie, unless, conveniently enough, they adopt the Marxist gospel.

One could raise objections to the conspiratorial tone of Rothbard’s analysis. But to conspire doesn’t require secret handshakes or an international club pulling the strings. It requires only that multiple parties recognize their interests involve dishonest deals.

Agorist Class Theory is based in praxeology, the study of human action. Konkin, like his oft-cited Rothbard, drew heavily upon Austrian economics.

To exist, a person must act. Every action is undertaken to attain a state that is more satisfactory according to one’s subjective values.

It is the way in which a person acts, the way in which they acquire wealth, that determines their class. The political interests involved in their economic activity are what members of a class hold in common.

One can change classes in agorism: Konkin advocates maximizing non-coercive sources of wealth and minimizing coercive sources of wealth.

(The Criminal Class)

Agorist class theory is rooted in counter-economics.

Agorists consider behavior to be criminal only if it is coercive, regardless of what the state calls it. Agorist class theory dissolves popular confusion and obfuscation into a simple and correct dichotomy of power versus market.

Those who coerce but do not use the state to do so are called “objectively statist” by Konkin. Their crimes of murder, theft, fraud, and assault are of the same substance as state actions but on a smaller scale. They are part of the ‘red market’ and are best looked upon as degenerate factions of the ruling class, in contention with the State.

So called “crimes” that do not involve coercion, in other words do not involve the initiation of violence or the threat of it, are counter-economic. Because they run counter to the real or perceived interests of the state, the state forbids them. They are, therefore, objectively agorist and revolutionary. People who engage in forbidden, but noncoercive behavior are acting counter-economically.

Konkin said:

“Agorist class theory has the best of both positions: a sharp class line and a graduated spectrum. Individuals are complex and confused. An individual may commit some Counter-Economic acts and some statist ones; nonetheless, each act is either Counter-Economic or statist.”

End quote.

(Subclasses)

Konkin doesn't go into a lot of detail on how the political class and the productive class could be divided into subclasses. But if we look at potential subclasses in agorist class theory, some interesting ideas come up.

The political class can be divided into those who direct plunder, those who enforce plunder, and those who merely accept plunder. The directors include statist policy-makers and the connected capitalists they work with. Those who enforce plunder include the military, police forces, statist mobs, and security guards who protect property that was acquired through plunder. Those who merely receive plunder include all employees of institutions that get resources through the state but do not personally direct or enforce plunder.

Agorists could potentially drive a wedge between these subclasses.

Konkin talks about Nalevo industries, black market production that was done with property claimed by the Soviet government. Counter-economics provided a way for Soviet people to make life better by resisting the state. Unfortunately, many Americans would describe such activity as a waste of tax dollars. What it really does is put state-claimed resources to productive use, that is, it takes them out of political use and puts them into the freest market available.

So a state worker who doesn't personally coerce people could more easily be turned into a counter-economic entrepreneur than could his boss who seeks status in the political power structure.

Another example. It is true that many college students and faculty think it's good that the state provides them money. The guns and chains upon which all state action rests are frequently ignored by them. However, research and education will likely be valued in a free market. Growing an agorist consciousness among students and faculty could help liberate universities from the administrators who determine how state money is to be doled out.

If an action does not help state programs function as planned and does help the counter-economy, it is productive. Every economic action presents the choice of siding with market or power.

Are there subclasses within the productive class? We can classify members of the entrepreneurial more specifically. This will simplify, but hopefully not oversimplify the task of examining individuals in the productive class.

There is a gradation between people who do nearly everything on the white market and those who do nearly everything in the underground market. Perhaps a dividing line can be drawn between those who are net contributors to the counter-economy and those who are net contributors to the state. This division could also be framed as people who avoid most coercion versus those who do not. Another, perhaps more strategically useful, division could be drawn

between the productive who ideologically avoid or resist state controls, and those who do not, as these subclasses are divided in terms of economic interest.

Fulltime counter-economists are the vanguard of the productive class.
Konkin said of them:

“They reject government offerings and disregard State regulations. If they report an income, it is a tiny proportion of what they actually earn; if they file a report, it’s highly misleading but plausible. Their occupations are fulfilling demand that the State strives to suppress or exterminate. They not only act freely, but often heroically.”

Remember that the agora is the economy that the state cannot regulate. But those who work in the regulated white market may certainly be members of the productive class. They are just not the vanguard of the class.

What about rich and poor within the agora?

Is the Agora a society without economic classes? In a footnote to New Libertarian Manifesto, Konkin says “Whether or not “wage workers” would exist instead of “independent contractors” is arguable” but the worker-boss relationship is a holdover from feudalism.

So Konkin’s ideal seems to be universal self-employment.

In the meantime, he notes the class unity of diverse counter-economists who keep each other out of the reach of the state.

In a criticism of Marxism, Konkin says:

“Even in extreme cases, the commonality of the Counter-Economist has generated an economic determinism as strong as any Marx considered to weld ‘class unity.’ ...

“This class unity is not that of a workers’ class (though workers are heavily involved) nor of a capitalist class (though capitalists are involved) ... this class is based on the commonality of risk, arising from a common source (the State). And risk is not proletarian (or particularly capitalist); it is purely entrepreneurial .

End quote.

But it's well known that the unaccountable nature of today's underground economy leaves many open for exploitation. The agorist answer comes in two parts:

1) Coercion in the underground economy is red market activity, not black market -a function of the degenerate political class.

2) Inequalities in the black market can be reduced by entrepreneurship. As business regulations are avoided, agorist consciousness will encourage the creation of new economic opportunities. These include businesses that will provide better working conditions (perhaps through self-employment), and organizations that will introduce accountability and protection from red market crackdowns.

To use the colors red and black in an entirely different context for a moment, Charles "Radgeek" Johnson suggests building "red and black markets". By that he means that revolutionary entrepreneurship will include activities traditionally associated with the radical left. "Red" counter-establishment institutions include small scale gift economies, homesteading, radical unionism, and mutual aid networks. More of this type of entrepreneurialism as opposed to business modeled on today's firms would likely lead to diminished economic inequality. But of course it's up to each agorist which business model he adopts.

(welfare and the poor)

What about today's poor?

Welfare recipients receive stolen money through the functioning of a state program the way in which it was intended to function. Does this make them members of the political class?

This would have to be decided on an individual, case-by-case basis but the answer is generally no. The question to ask is "Do they benefit from state involvement in the economy?"

It is hard to see how occasional checks from a bureaucracy that has little incentive to care about them could be considered a privilege. The disastrous consequences of political class action - everything from business licensing to redevelopment to the schooling cartel to the drug war - has destroyed entrepreneurial hopes for many. If dependence on state handouts is the only way they see to support themselves after the state destroyed their business environment, they are not truly benefiting from the state.

Remember that individuals in prison are fed, clothed, and housed using money taken from innocent taxpayers. Yet it would be ludicrous to say that someone jailed for a victimless

infraction is part of the political class. Likewise, a check from a state agency does not damn an individual. He may actually be looking for a way to make it on his own, which the counter-economy would enable him to do. In short - among today's poor are both potential recruits and red-market enemies, and agorists should seek out the former.

(should it be called "libertarian" class theory or "agorist" class theory)

Could what I described be called simply "libertarian class theory" instead of "agorist class theory"?

Of course not - otherwise I would have called it that all along.

Agorism is revolutionary market anarchism and can be distinguished from the broader libertarian ideology by its revolutionary mindset and focus on counter-economics. Likewise, Agorist Class Theory can be distinguished from other libertarian theories of class by its specific applicability to counter-economics and market anarchist revolution.

(conclusion)

Unfortunately a full exposition of agorist class theory was not laid out until Wally Conger assembled it from Konkin's notes and essays. That short work provides needed clarity for building freedom. The New Libertarian Manifesto or An Agorist Primer by Konkin provide essential context. And they're short. A good essay to read, which I haven't specifically referenced here, is Roderick Long's *Toward a Libertarian Theory of Class*, which is available online.

It's difficult to see how a radical could disagree with the observation that some people benefit and some people are harmed by the workings of the status quo. This observation alone implies the need to determine who benefits, who is harmed, and how to help the right class win. Agorist class theory is very helpful in understanding the struggle for liberty. It reframes the essential political struggle not as Democrat versus Republican, rich versus poor, or current administration versus all opponents, but as entrepreneuriat versus political class.

Thanks for listening.