

Vertical and Horizontal Agorism

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“As more people reject the State’s mystifications — nationalism, pseudo-Economics, false threats, and betrayed political promises — the Counter- Economy grows both vertically and horizontally. Horizontally, it involves more and more people who turn more and more of their activities toward the counter-economic; vertically, it means new structures (businesses and services) grow specifically to serve the Counter- Economy (safe communication links, arbitrators, insurance for specifically “illegal” activities, early forms of protection technology, and even guards and protectors). Eventually, the “underground” breaks into the overground where most people are agorists, few are statist, and the nearest State enforcement cannot effectively crush them.”

- SEK III, Applied Agorism, An Agorist Primer

We are going to take a look at two different types of counter-economic action which are applicable to a variety of individuals in a range of living situations. We refer to these strategies as vertical and horizontal agorism. We are working with two complementary definitions of horizontal and vertical which further explain the “how” of agorist philosophy. These definitions are taken from the above quote from Samuel Konkin III and from Swedish Austrian economist Per Bylund and his 2006 essay “A Strategy for Forcing the State Back”. Let’s compare the definitions and see how they can provide a path for the eager agorist.

Konkin starts by describing the counter-economy as growing horizontally in the sense of an increasing amount of the mainstream population turning their activities towards the non-statist economy. Vertical growth, in the Konkian sense, involves the actual creation of counter-institutions to the statist counterparts. This means building alternatives not only to the economic power centers via alternative currencies, but alternatives to the deadstream corporate media, the corporatized food production systems, the compliant academic centers, and the growing non-profit industrial complex. (Side note: the industry formerly known as the mainstream media is correctly referred to as the deadstream media because everything produced by this industry leads to misinformation, faulty decision making, and eventually, death. The corporate media is a constant stream of lies and decay.)

Per Bylund describes his vision of vertical agorism as the “introvert” strategy based on the work and ideas of radical libertarian Karl Hess. Hess was an extremely eloquent speaker and

speechwriter who grew from conservative to libertarian anarchist to a more left-leaning community organizer and activist. During the 1960's, he was heavily involved in organizing on campus during the rise of the new left and antiwar student movements. Hess worked with Murray Rothbard, Konkin, Carl Ogelsby of the Students for a Democratic Society, and several others, attempting alliances between the emerging new left and libertarian movements. He was also one of the few people to have 100% of his wages stolen by the IRS for challenging the income tax.

In the 1970's, Hess shifted the focus of his activism to experiment in community building within the low income neighborhood of AdamsMorgan in Washington D.C. In his books, *Community Technology and Neighborhood Power*, Hess outlines how he worked with the local neighborhood to build an empowered community focused on sustainability, or what they termed "appropriate technology." Hess describes a neighborhood with aquaponic gardening in basements, rooftop gardens, and community services meant to replace the state option. He was adamant that tools and technology directly contribute to freedom. By being able to share tools with your community members, you are able to share access to the means of production and encourage entrepreneurship. It is this focus on community empowerment that Per Bylund refers to as the vertical or introvert strategy. These actions can be considered agorist in the sense that they are aimed at building self and community reliance rather than dependence on external forces, but they are not explicitly counter-economic because they do not involve black and grey markets. Still, these vertical actions are extremely valuable and necessary.

Vertical agorism would include participating in and creating community exchange networks, urban farming, backyard gardening, farmers market, supporting alternatives to the police, and supporting peer to peer decentralized technologies. While these vertical steps could potentially involve the use of the state's currency (and therefore not completely counter-economic) they are still significant for challenging the dependency on the state and corporate classes. Other vertical steps may not directly involve exchanging currency but still work against dependency. This could include moral support and promotion of technologies that disrupt the status quo and foster stronger relationships among community members.

One very pronounced example of vertical agorism is seen in the growing alternative media, which has been made possible by the internet. Less than one generation ago, the mainstream media, owned by megacorporations and tightly regulated by government, controlled all of the information that filtered down to society. The distribution of information in society came from the top down, making it very easy to brainwash and propagandize the population. However, with the rise of the internet, activists and freedom seeking individuals discovered that they could use this new medium to create their own media, become journalists themselves, and fight back against the propaganda of the state. In just a few short years, the alternative media quickly upset the monopoly of the mainstream media, taking up large portions of their once exclusive market share. The surge of independent media provides an excellent example in our study of how alternative systems and institutions can be created to compete with existing state monopolies.

Our goal is to question and challenge the mechanisms of power that seek to influence and rule over our lives. This includes the state, as well as other institutions that attempt to exert control and influence. For example, by choosing to grow your own food or support local farmers you are taking a vertical step away from the biotechnology corporations that promote the heavy use of pesticides and a potentially hazardous technology. You are also not supporting the transportation of food products from thousands of miles away. Instead, you walk to your backyard or the local market for your produce. This greatly increases your independence while relinquishing support

for an unsustainable industry. These vertical steps are also the easiest ways to begin living in line with your principles. Once again, we can see the value of consistency of words and actions. Per Bylund describes the horizontal, or extrovert strategy, as more directly related to the ideas of Konkin. The extrovert label is related to the bold choice to pursue action that the State considers to be illegal or immoral. By venturing into this territory you are joining the ranks of the bootlegger, the moonshiner, the cannabis dealer, the guerilla gardener, the unlicensed lawn mower, food vendor or barber, the weapons dealer, and the crypto-anarchists. When one combines the vertical and horizontal agorist strategy, an image comes into view that illustrates the steps that can be taken by a wide range of people in a variety of living situations and environments.

In the bottom left corner we have statism and in the top right corner we have agorism. We can plot vertical actions which help lift the individual up from dependency. Perhaps your situation is better suited to vertical actions such as growing your own food, using encrypted messaging, hosting community skill shares at your house, practicing peaceful parenting tactics, providing alternatives to state welfare by crowdfunding money for community projects and feeding the homeless, or simply cleaning up the neighborhood. Each of these steps move the individual (and in the long-term, the community) vertically towards consistency and independence. For those who are ready to become counter-economists and take on the risk of grey and black market activity, we plot their actions both vertically and horizontally. An agorist practicing horizontally and vertically would move up and away from statism and dependency to the top right position of agorism. This means for every garden built, alternative currency used, tax avoided, skill shared, business practiced without a license, and illegal substance sold, the individual can plot their progress moving from dependency to self-reliance and from statism to agorism.

When Konkin first espoused the concept of agorism, the consciously practicing counter-economy may have only involved a few radical libertarians, but since that time, the opportunities for black and grey market exchanges have grown immensely. As the state's weaknesses become apparent it will become safer for the masses to begin exiting the former economy and joining the counter-economy. This is the truly freed market, or agora, of which Konkin spoke. Now that we have outlined the vertical and horizontal agorist strategy derived from the work of Karl Hess and Samuel Konkin, we must elaborate further on a concept that we hope will become widely adopted and adapted to many different communities. This is the aforementioned concept of Freedom Cells.

Freedom Cells are peer to peer groups made up of 7 to 9 people (with 8 being ideal) organizing themselves in a decentralized manner with the collective goal of asserting the sovereignty of group members through peaceful resistance and the creation of alternative institutions. Freedom Cells could be seen as a very specific type of mutual aid group, where agorism and counter-economics play a key role. The name comes as a response to State propaganda around "Terror Cells". We are consciously choosing to reclaim the language and build cells that spread freedom. Also, FC's act like cells in a body that are performing important tasks individually while also serving the goal of the larger organism. In our vision, every FC is playing a vital role of spreading counter-economic activity and agorist philosophy while also forming a part of the larger network that will foster exchange of ideas and products between cells.

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