

# What is Agorism?

## A History of Agorist Theory and Practice

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In the late 1970's, anarchist, activist, and writer Samuel E. Konkin III (SEKIII) released *The New Libertarian Manifesto*, presenting his case for a new strain of libertarianism that he called "New Libertarianism". The philosophy behind the New Libertarian Movement was agorism, named after the "agora", the Greek word for marketplace. "An agorist is one who acts consistently for freedom and in freedom," SEKIII wrote.

Essentially, agorism is a radical libertarian philosophy that seeks to create a society free of coercion and force by using black and gray markets in the underground or "illegal" economy to siphon power away from the state. Konkin termed this strategy "counter-economics", which he considered to be all peaceful economic activity that takes place outside the purview and control of the state. This includes competing currencies, community gardening schemes, tax resistance and operating a business without licenses. Agorism also extends to the creation of alternative education programs, free schools or skill shares, and independent media ventures that counter the establishment narratives. Also essential to the growth of agorism is the public's support of entrepreneurs who actively do business outside of the state's license and regulations.

In the NLM, SEKIII outlines his vision of a more free and just world by first describing society's present condition: statism. Konkin briefly outlines the path of human thinking from slavery to the discovery of libertarian thought and also emphasizes the importance of consistency between means and ends. Indeed, Konkin believes exposing statist inconsistencies is "the most crucial activity of the libertarian theorist." From here Konkin describes the goal of agorism and the counter economic means necessary to achieve this goal.

In order to paint a clear picture of the agorist struggle for a more free world, Konkin explains the four stages from statism to agorism, as well as various actions that a consciously practicing agorist might seize upon in order to advance agorist propaganda and counter-economic activity. By understanding Konkin's vision of progress, it is possible to create a diagram to outline how far society as a whole has come and where we, as individuals, fit within these steps. After the steps have been mapped, it will then be possible to pinpoint strategies that can help the new libertarian move from one stage to the next.

Konkin starts in "Phase Zero: Zero-Density Agorist Society". phase zero is the time when no agorists existed and libertarian thought was scattered and unorganized, which Konkin says has been "most of human history". Once libertarians became aware of the philosophy of agorism,

counter-economic activity began and we moved into “Phase 1: LowDensity Agorist Society”. In this phase the first counter-economic libertarians appear. Konkin believed that this was a dangerous time for activists who would be tempted by “Get-Liberty-quick” schemes. Konkin also reminds agorists not to be tempted by political campaigns. “All will fail if for no other reason than Liberty grows individual by individual. Mass conversion is impossible,” he wrote.

Phase 1 is presented as a time when the few existing practicing counter-economists’ main goal is recruitment and creation of “‘radical caucuses,’ ginger groups, or as a ‘Libertarian Left’ faction in general” (More on the “Libertarian Left” in chapter 5). Konkin also notes that the majority of society is acting “with little understanding of any theory but who are induced by material gain to evade, avoid, or defy the State. Surely they are a hopeful potential?”.

In order to achieve the free society, Konkin again emphasizes the need for education and “consciousness-raising of counter-economists to libertarian understanding and mutual supportiveness”. SEKIII also called for the creation of a movement of the libertarian left which may grow strong enough in influence and numbers in the latter stages of phase 1 to be able to “block marginal actions by the state”. The ability to block actions by the state has absolutely increased in recent years with the explosion of decentralized, peer to peer networks via the internet that allow for rapid sharing of information and calls to organize. There are a growing amount of internet videos showing communities banding together to oppose unjust arrests by agents of the State.

For example, the websites and apps FreedomCells.org, NextDoor.com, and GetCell411.com offer tools that can be used to strengthen our communities, grow the counter-economy, and push back against the state. Using the Freedom Cell Network one can locate other freedom minded individuals within their city, state, or country with the specific goal of organizing in the real world and bypassing the need for government. In 2016 we launched the site as an online platform for building mutual aid groups known as Freedom Cells, which we will explore in detail in the next chapter. NextDoor also allows the user to connect with the local community, both digitally and in the real world. The app has the added benefit of being focused on your specific neighborhood. This allows individuals to post important safety information, lost and found items, or counter-economic business opportunities, directly to those that live near them. Finally, Cell411 describes itself as a “real time, free emergency management platform”. This means it allows you to create “cells” or groups to which you can send out direct alerts in the case of a flat tire, car accident, violence from a state agent, or some other emergency. The app also allows for truly agorist ridesharing where a third party does not dictate the price of the trip or the currency that must be used.

Each of these tools are a part of the technology of the countereconomy that have the potential to render government intervention and regulation completely useless. If we seize the moment we can grow the black and grey markets using these emerging peer to peer platforms. This is exactly what Konkin believed would help society progress from phase 1 to phase 2. As we move to “Phase 2: Mid-Density, Small Condensation Agorist Society,” the statist take notice of agorism. Is it in this phase that Konkin believes the counter-economy will grow and agorists will begin to represent “an ever-larger agorist sub-society embedded in the statist society”. Although the majority of agorists are still living within the state’s claimed territories, we begin to see a “spectrum of the degree of agorism in most individuals”. This includes benefactors of the State who are “highly statist” and “a few fully conscious of the agorist alternative”, however, the majority of society is still engaged in the Statist economy.

From here, Konkin suggests that agorists may want to start condensing into districts, ghettos, islands, or space colonies. We are, in fact, beginning to see the creation of Agorist minded communities, seastealers, eco-villages, co-ops, and underground spaces which emphasize counter-economic activity and the creation of counter-institutions to the state. Konkin believed these agorist communities might be able to count on the sympathy of mainstream society to prevent an attack from the state. This is the moment where the question of community protection and defense comes into play. We have seen the creation of community protection alternatives to the police state monopoly (see Threat Management Center in Detroit and the Autodefensas in Mexico) but thus far nothing completely agorist has come into existence. It is the creation of these syndicates of community protection which will ultimately allow the agora to flourish. However, in order for this to happen “the entire society has been contaminated by agorism to a degree”, leading to the possible creation of an above or underground movement which Konkin called the New Libertarian Alliance. The NLA simply acts as the spokesperson for the agora and uses “every chance to publicize the superiority of agorist living to statist inhabiting and perhaps argue for tolerance of those with ‘different ways’”.

This brings us to “Phase 3: High-Density, Large Condensation, Agorist Society”, which is described as the point when the state has moved into a terminal crisis period due, in part, to “the sapping of the State’s resources and corrosion of its authority by the growth of the CounterEconomy”. As the agora grows in influence, the state’s stranglehold is also dissipating as a result of unsustainable economic practices. Konkin again warns that the statist will attempt to win over new libertarians with “anti-principles” and calls for maintaining “vigilance and purity of thought”. Highly motivated new libertarians move into R&D to help create the first agorist protection and arbitration agencies that will compete with the state. At this point, government exists in pockets with the state mostly concentrated in one geographic territory. Those living under statism are very aware of the freedom being experienced by their agorist counterparts. The state has become weak enough that “large syndicates of market protection agencies” are able to contain the state and defend new libertarians who sign up for protection-insurance. This, Konkin believed, was “the final step before the achievement of a libertarian society.” Society is divided between the larger agorist areas and the isolated statist centers.

The transition from phase 3 to phase 4 brings about “the last unleashing of violence by the ruling class of the state”. Konkin said that once the state’s intellectuals recognize that their authority is no longer respected they will choose to attack. Defense against the state will be managed once the counter-economy has generated the syndicates of protection agencies large enough to defend against the remaining statist. The NLA should work to prevent the state from recognizing their weakness until the agorist movement has completely infected the statist society. Once the agorist communities have successfully resisted the state’s attack the Agorist revolution will be complete. As we move from Phase 3 to 4, Konkin notes that the first three changes “are actually rather artificial divisions; no abrupt change occurs from first to second to third.” However, he envisions the change from the third to fourth step to be “quite sudden”.

#### Phase 4: Agorist Society with Statist Impurities

Once the State has gasped it’s dying breath, the counter-economy becomes the freed market where exchanges are free of coercion. Konkin predicts that “division of labor and self-respect of each worker-capitalistentrepreneur will probably eliminate the traditional business organization – especially the corporate hierarchy, an imitation of the State and not the Market.” He imagines companies as associations of independent contractors, consultants and entrepreneurs. After the

remnants of the state are apprehended and brought to justice, freedom becomes the basis of ordinary life and “we tackle the other problems facing mankind”.

Whether the totality of Konkin’s vision becomes realized, the world has, at the least, made some slight progress through the phases predicted in the NLM. All signs point to the counter-economy and consciously practicing agorist movement to be somewhere at the tail end of phase 1 and merging into phase 2. As mentioned above, the internet (and technology as a whole) has greatly increased the chances for success of the Konkian revolution. While mankind is being exposed to the value of a life free of coercion, they have not yet been properly exposed to the tools with which to create such a world. If the agorist movement and counter economy continue to expand in equal rate to the violence and theft of the state, it will only be a matter of time before we see protection agencies with the capacity to defend the people. Konkin believed that once the people recognize the state is weakened and in decline they would naturally gravitate towards the counter-economy, leading his agorist vision to become reality.

To understand the potential for agorism to provide a solution to our current unsustainable, destructive system we must look to the real world. Political theories are fine on paper, but if the ideas don’t reflect what we see in the physical world they serve as nothing more than mental masturbation. As Konkin wrote in the introduction to *An Agorist Primer*, “Remember always that agorism integrates theory and practice. Theory without practice is game-playing; taken seriously, it leads to withdrawal from reality, mysticism, and insanity.....Agorists believe that any theory which does not describe reality is either useless or a deliberate attempt by intellectuals to defraud non-specialists.” So then, are there real world examples of counter-economics in practice? And if so, is there evidence that the practice leads to more freedom and prosperity?

To find an answer to these questions, let’s look to the “informal sector” of Peru during the 1980’s and 90’s. The informal sector was made up of individuals who operated outside government laws and regulations. The activities of the informal sector are conducted outside the legal system without regard to government regulations. Collectively, the activities represent the informal economy. In his 1989 book, *The Other Path*, Hernando De Soto provides a detailed study of the emergence and operation of the Peruvian informal economy. De Soto argued that government regulations on housing, transportation, and trade should be removed to allow the dynamics of the informal economy to take over. Unfortunately, De Soto and *The Other Path* seem to equate capitalism with the free market, going as far as promoting “market-oriented reforms” which will allow the informal economy to become the new statist economy. Rather than promoting total liberation through the use of the informal economy and a truly freed market, De Soto and his Institute for Liberty and Democracy believe that a capitalist system of government will liberate the people. Despite these shortcomings, *The Other Path* is recommended for any student of counter-economic activity.

Another important point on Peru’s informal economy is the fact that these black market entrepreneurs were investing in and creating informal businesses as a direct attempt to escape the regulations of the state, and the violence of the Maoist-terror group, “The Shining Path.” When *The Other Path* was released it was designed to counteract the Marxist propaganda of The Shining Path, who had been teaching the peasant class the market was something to despise rather than a tool for liberation. The book would become a best-seller and help the growing informal economists recognize the power of unfettered trade and market action. Unfortunately, in the absence of a truly informed and organized agorist movement, the informal economy seems to have been absorbed by the Peruvian statist economy.

Still, during the rise of Peru's informal economy, the Institute for Liberty and Democracy reported that "extralegal entrepreneurs" and their extended families accounted for around 60 to 80% of the nation's population and operated 56% of all businesses. In the 2002 update to *The Other Path*, De Soto writes that the underground economies of Russia and Ukraine accounted for 50% of Gross Domestic Product, while 85% of all jobs in Latin America and the Caribbean were created in this informal or counter-economy. Obviously, the informal or counter-economy has become as important as Samuel Konkin predicted.

*The Other Path* not only highlights the importance of the countereconomy, but also illustrates how the state's restrictive and intrusive regulation of voluntary exchange directly lead to the growth of the underground markets. According to case studies conducted by the ILD, the average person attempting to launch a retail market in Peru during the 1980's would face 13 years of legal and administrative hurdles. In addition, it would take 26 months to get authorization to operate a new bus route, and almost a year, working 6 hours a day, to gain the necessary licenses to legally operate a sewing machine for commercial purposes.

"There is class warfare in Peru, to be sure. But the main line bisecting Peruvian society today is not a horizontal one dividing entrepreneurs from workers. The principal dividing line is a vertical frontier, to the right of which are politicians, bureaucrats, and businessmen who profit and live off the government's favor and to the left of which are legal and extralegal producers who are excluded from favor," De Soto wrote in 2002.

Faced with ongoing violence and the Maoist rhetoric of *The Shining Path* on one side, and statist regulation and theft on the other, the people of Peru chose to travel to the countryside and create informal marketplaces for trading, ridesharing, and housing. This is what free thinking people will do when faced with the constant threat of theft and bureaucracy. Eventually, the people tire of having every aspect of their lives invaded by the state, so they will seek outside solutions. This may include reformist schemes like electoral politics and voting, or possibly violent revolt. Counter-economics and agorism offer a third path towards liberty. A path that is peaceful, consistent and reflects the realities we see unfolding in the world today.

There are also numerous documented examples of this countereconomic reality in China, North Korea, Cuba, and throughout Africa. Radical propaganda and Western media are smuggled into North Korea via USB drives while street vendors around the world operate without paying any mind to the state's permission slips. According to Kenya's National Bureau of Statistics, the informal sector created 713,000 new jobs in 2015, constituting a total of 84.8% of all new jobs created "outside small scale agriculture sector and pastoralist activities". Further, in the book *Stealth of Nations: The Rise of the Global Informal Economy*, Robert Neuwirth documents the global reach of the counter-economy, or, as he calls it, System D. Neuwirth reaches the same conclusion that we have: people will organize outside of the state as a necessity, and, in many cases, with a preference for the untaxed, unregulated counter-economy.

It is clear that the workers of the world have a desire to exchange their goods and services without oppressive, elitist barriers to entry in the marketplace. The people desire to voluntarily associate and exchange without interference or intervention. This desire will always lead to the creation of counter-economic activity in the black and grey markets as long as the "mainstream" statist economy is subject to the whims of the current puppets in control. However, seeking to escape the state's regulation is not the only goal to our agorist and counter-economic strategy. The endgame is a stateless society where free people are not bound by the force and coercion of the parasitic state and corporate class.

Though it is rarely discussed in public schools or mainstream media, there are several examples of stateless societies and communities existing throughout history. For those interested in studying past stateless societies we recommend examining medieval Iceland, James Scott's *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia*, and Pierre Clastres' *Society Against the State*. We should also stress that those who believe a stateless society cannot exist because they do not see an abundance of examples, are only limiting themselves by setting preconceived barriers and assumptions regarding the potential of the human experience. If the hearts and minds of the world seize the opportunity and put agorist theory into action we will see the rise of the counter-economy. As we will explore in the next chapter, all it takes is a self-aware, organized agorist movement to seize the potential of the counter-economy and truly weaken the state.

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