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William Gillis

Radicalism or Rules of Thumb?

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December 9th, 2015

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With such a nice response from Kevin it's probably incumbent upon me to emphasize some disagreements — or perhaps just nuances — I was hoping to draw out.

Along the way there are a few quibbles I'd make in response to Kevin's commentary, because I don't think things are as clean-cut as he'd like them:

I actually don't think the case for occupancy-and-use extends merely to land. Factories are the classical example and one could easily imagine a factory that's effectively a portable commodity. A factory that is highly specialized and costly to replicate, but that's the sort of thing you could place on your desk. I'm sure Kevin can think of a few modern inventions that fit such descriptions. With sufficient costliness to such factories it may well be generally considered offensive and abhorrent for an owner to abandon one such factory for years at a time. Sure, issues of easement and the like don't apply, but there are still valid issues surrounding abandonment. Magical post-planetary society or not, we don't get to shirk these tensions or complications so easily.

Similarly I note with frustration the ignoring of my second reductio, which is to say the hyper cataloging of existing matter on Earth. In the era of hyper distributed sousveillance and “the internet of things” this is surely a pressing concern. A context in which everything on earth is owned is a plausible one. One that may be unavoidable given present tendencies within our technological ecosystems and the market.

I will also say it’s frustrating that Kevin largely ducks the second part of my one-two punch: my openness to rent, interest and other Lockean horrors. One of my major points with reputation markets is that they provide a firmer foundation and pressure release valve such that concerns about capital accumulation from a given “system of rules” can be to some degree ignored. Rent and interest are in many contexts *useful*. I expect the Lockeans or Rothbardians to recoil in horror at my suggestion that theft be sometimes seen as perfectly reasonable decisions to have their personal registry of property titles cease agreeing to the property-registry of another person’s. But I expect more fire from the red flavors of anarchism who have, over the last two decades, made a small industry out of policing exactly what is allowable moves one can make with one’s own property before they cross some magical line (by say renting one’s car to a friend) and become evil capitalists.

Kevin has largely stayed in the good graces of the stodgy reds who biblethump the Anarchist FAQ, but I think they’re being unreasonable on this, and I was hoping for some kind of commitment from Kevin in this public venue. I know it’s unfriendly to press the point, but I hope my friend will excuse my sadistic streak; I want to hear Mr. Mutualist say on record that rent and interest can be okay and shouldn’t be inherently prohibited as such!

I’m a lot less troubled than Will is at the thought of leaving things to community norms. In fact, problematic or not, I see it as a problem that’s inescapable. No set of general principles can be worked out in appli-

cation except by means of secondary rules of thumb that are to some extent arbitrary in the sense of not being the only possible way of applying the principle that can be obviously and necessarily deduced by logic from that principle. At the risk of hiding behind David Graeber again, I think that so long as the basic principles themselves reflect a generally correct set of goals and view of the central evils to be avoided, and the community shares those priorities, ordinary people can be pretty well trusted to work out the secondary rules in good faith.

Here is where my central point is lost, and perhaps that's my fault, with all my attempts to comprehensively frame the situation perhaps distracting from it. I'm not sure "rules of thumb" are a particularly organic, efficient, or natural state of society or the market. Or at least, insofar as they exist and are gravitated towards, I see the most healthy or likely situation one where they accrue a large amount of fuzziness.

I'm not troubled by leaving things to "community norms" because they'd be arbitrary so much as I'm demanding that we recognize a more anarchistic approach would be to not have any such clear cut things as "communities" so much as networks of individuals in complicated meshes that don't map into discrete sets of "communities", individuals who will always be engaged in a tug of war between differing interests and strategies. My point in addressing the innate arbitrariness or context-dependency of community norms is to motivate the need for greater fluidity.

I'm pessimistic about the capacity for such rules of thumb to dynamically update with the speed and nuance necessary in truly shifting conditions — as may well become quite common in a world of accelerated technological development and feedbacking socio-cultural complexity as any anarchistic society would see.

This is no trivial gristle. My critique is that in these debates we've focused on determining what these rules of thumb might be, implicitly accepting either a polycentric legal system that gravitates towards a single set of laws, or a singular "the community" that settles on such rules of thumb. I would like to tear into that assumption, which I think is perhaps as problematic as assuming the emergence of a single universal currency. I don't doubt that some rough approximation of broad rules or norms will hold sway in most plausible anarchist societies, but they will be so highly dependent upon context that we should really be talking about how free people might best *process* said context.

Instead of starting our analysis by talking about "community norms" and ignoring how they might arise, I think we should be beginning from the roots of individuals and their autonomous actions with regard to each other. In the same way that I'm highly critical of fetishizing organizational structures or processes. There's a sharp danger in forgetting that an organization is just a participatory lie or delusion. This kind of reification leads individuals to see their options exclusively in terms of a limited and arbitrary rule set, and in forgetting their freedom to disassociate or reform different social organisms or associations at the drop of a hat, they frequently end up locking up the broader society, impeding its capacity to organically adapt.

This perhaps shares some slight resemblance to a more egoist approach that reminds and encourages us to see the world in terms of a constantly churning contest between individuals, with property ultimately being merely whatever one can take. But the distinction here is no small one: instead of childish might-makes-right contests grounded in building and applying force, this is a contest grounded in building and applying trust or goodwill.

Practically this very much *functions* in a manner involving notions of reciprocity and fairness — they are good emergent strategies or tactics — but I do think some grave categorical errors get made when the functional dynamics of a market are taken to be

the underlying justification for having a market in the first place. Fairness and reciprocity are derivative values, they should not be taken as starting values.

I feel weird constantly appealing to Graeber since I was making these arguments in our circles before him, but he does seem to serve as a useful referee in all this, and Graeber has enunciated at length his belief that the values that markets pressured people to adopt have started to be misapplied outside their proper domain. "Mutuality" in exchange is a problematic concept because it risks overruling the greatest arguments for adopting systems of exchange. There's a widespread and largely unspoken tension in anarchist fights over economics between a communist or utilitarian ethical perspective that judges things based on their broad impact and more egoistic ones that are primarily concerned with individuals in particularity. I'm staunchly on the side of universalism and empathy that ultimately values bettering everyone indiscriminately rather than merely in proportion to good done to me.

As a radical I think such distinctions in tiers of rootedness, fundamentalness or priorness *matter*. Sure one can talk of property systems being "rules of thumb" or even the Labor Theory of Value as being a "rule of thumb" and with sufficient deft nuance still largely come out okay. But I think such broad sweeps of conceptualization are dangerous, they risk blinding us to the fundamental dynamics and, as a result, limiting our adaptability.