Materialism and Thick Libertarianism

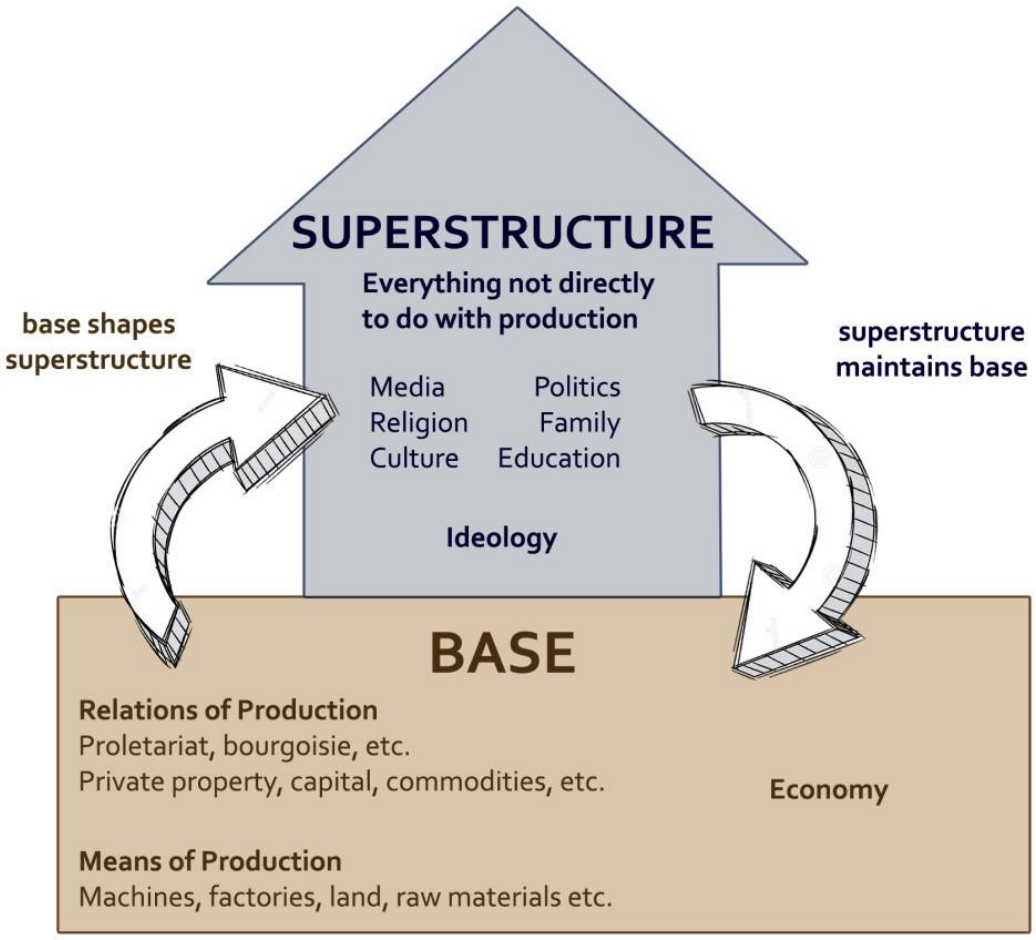
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Two years ago, I gave a presentation titled "Prerequisites for Freedom: An Individualist Anarchist Perspective" to a philosophy discussion group, in which I talked about the connection between thick libertarianism and 19th century North American individualist anarchism and how progressive and liberatory values are necessary for genuine and necessarily anti-capitalist individualism. For the uninitiated, the 'thickness' in thick libertarianism is, according to Nathan Goodman, "any broadening of libertarian concerns beyond overt aggression and state power to concern about what cultural and social conditions are most conducive to liberty." This broadening takes a number of different forms as outlined extensively by Charles Johnson: for instance, there is "strategic thickness," which holds that libertarians need to be concerned about problems like economic inequality because "[e]ven a totally free society in which a small class of tycoons own the overwhelming majority of the wealth, and the vast majority of the population own almost nothing is unlikely to remain free for long;" or there is "thickness from grounds," which maintains that opposition to ostensibly non-violent hierarchy and domination emerge from the same underlying reasons as the libertarian non-aggression principle does. The cases go on, but in its general usage thick libertarianism is often understood as any libertarianism that sees ideas such as feminism, anti-racism, queer liberation, egalitarianism, and environmentalism as *essential* to any libertarian program internally and therefore desirable for external proliferation in a libertarian society. I have written extensively about thick libertarianism: in my review of Chris Matthew Sciabarra's *Ayn Rand, Homosexuality, and Human Liberation,* I claim that "[w]e are all thick libertarians now" and that it's just a difference of whether that thickness is liberatory or reactionary; in my analysis of anarcho-capitalism's relationship to anarchism, I argue that thickness is one of *the* defining qualities that places stateless left-libertarianism within and anarcho-capitalism outside of the anarchist canon; etc. However, I have yet to explicitly connect my endorsement of thick libertarianism with material analysis (in its dialectical form)—my favored lens when attempting to make sense of the world. I will therefore take an opportunity to do so with this piece.

A final point I made in the aforementioned philosophy presentation was that such liberatory thickness or, as I put it, ideologico-cultural values extend to the economic realm and entail anti-hierarchy, cooperation, and worker power in the form of cooperatives, an ethico-cultural labor theory of value, "[c]ommunity land trusts, community currencies, open source technology, mutual banks, etc." There is nothing wrong with this model from a purely individualist anarchist

perspective, however I think that—from my personal perspective—this logic is a bit backwards. That is to say: it is actually the economic base that produces ideologico-cultural values and culture in general. This is in accordance with Karl Marx's and Friedrich Engels's model of historical materialism, which Merriam-Webster defines as "the Marxist theory of history and society that holds that ideas and social institutions develop only as the superstructure of a material economic base." According to this view, society forms around the means of production—land, labor, tools, machinery—and the relations of production—property distribution, class divisions, the commodity form—to constitute, as Marx writes in *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, on"the economic structure of society, the real foundation, on which rises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness" and, based on this core analysis, he posits in *The German Ideology* that "[t]he nature of individuals thus depends on the material conditions determining their production." It is important to note however that the influence is not entirely unidirectional. The Marxist theorist Antonio Gramsci writes of "a necessary reciprocity between structure [aka base] and superstructure, a reciprocity which is nothing other than the real dialectical process" that must not be ignored when attempting a complete socio-historical analysis. This overall model is often used to organize historical change through various types of societies—slave, feudal, capitalist, socialist, communist—but can be used on a smaller scale to demonstrate how to not only achieve immediate thick libertarian ends but also how to generate the desired thick values in general society.



Source: The Narratologist

Let's take a look at the case of producing values like anti-racism and racial egalitarianism. It must first be admitted that racism is *extremely* complicated, but one way to look at it is as a mechanism of capitalism. This can be seen on a number of levels; racism (particularly anti-Black racism), as explained by Marco La Grotta, has been used to "divide and rule for capitalist gain." Historically this can be seen in "the transatlantic slave trade, which accompanied the birth of both U.S. and British capitalism. In the early days of slavery, a firm distinction hadn't yet been drawn between black slaves and white indentured servants." So in order to quell the possibility of multi-racial rebellions, "the U.S. ruling class developed racist theories to 'prove' the inferiority of blacks, doing so to drive a wedge between their subjects, undercut rebellion and to justify their enslavement." This has continued into the present day through "codifying [racism] in law, funding racist 'science' and broadening its scope . . . [in order for] the capitalists to drive down wages, while creating a seemingly infinite set of divisions in the working class." Additionally, Robert Knox points out that…

> [c]apitalism, as an expansive system organised around the geographically and geopolitically differentiated exploitation of labour *needs* racism. Capitalist social relations expanded internationally through the racialised dispossession of non-capitalist societies, techniques of racialisation were crucial in imposing labour discipline – up to and including slavery – on the working class, and racialisation (in sometimes subtle forms) remains key in managing and dividing populations in contemporary capitalism, both internationally and domestically.

What these analyses demonstrate is that *one way* to look at racism is as a tool to solidify and expand control by capitalists over labor and the means of production.

An response to this can then be found in the work of Cooperation Jackson, who are attempting to "develop a cooperative network based in Jackson, Mississippi" built upon the "basic theory of change . . . that organizing and empowering the structurally under and unemployed sectors of the working class, particularly from Black and Latino communities, to build worker organized and owned cooperatives will be a catalyst for the democratization of our economy and society overall." Such a project addresses the immediate material concerns of anti-racists through community-based businesses, a living wage, non-hierarchical work relationships, etc. but on another level help produce anti-racist *values*. The main thrust of this argument is that if racism thrives in helping capitalism accomplish its imperatives of controlling the working class and expanding extraction/production, then this specific catalyst for racism can be challenged through the creation of economic communities—such as that promoted by Cooperation Jackson—separate from the logic of capitalism; opening up spaces for conversation, accountability, and reparations without the interference of Capital.[1] To somewhat bastardize a quote from La Grotta's piece, the potential of this project is not "that racist beliefs die as soon as capitalism disappears" or, in this model, is pushed back from autonomous spaces, it is that it…

> at last provides the *arena* to stomp out racism; and not only racism, but sexism, homophobia, and so on. Racism has material roots. It must therefore have a material solution.

[1] I am here using the term Capital in the Marxian sense, that is: a social relation based on accumulation through extraction from wage labor via private property.

It should be noted that this cooperative dual power strategy has been called "market syndicalism" by Wesley Morgan and criticized in the same breath for still participating in the logic of capitalism as units of the market economy. But what I think this analysis misunderstands is that present existence and imperatives of 'the market' revolve primarily around state-sanctioned/state-enforced monopolies and direct interference by the corporate state. Since this state-capitalist influence over market action is originally rooted in violence and/or threat of violence wielded by the state, strategies that work to dissuade or circumvent said violence—such as radical community self-defense and agorist practices—can make it possible to utilize markets autonomously of the present economy.

Another example of the connection between (dialectical) materialism and thick libertarianism is the way in which not only democratizing but also *localizing* the material base of society can help make individuals and communities more environmentally conscious and defensive. Localization, according to the P2P Foundation Wiki, describes the "production of goods nearer to end users to reduce environmental and other external costs of globalization." There is a great deal of work on how this reduction in environmental costs happens, but a central point is usually that certain economic activity—whether it be industrial agriculture or the extraction and international importation of fossil fuel—currently takes place at an unsustainable scale and needs to be radically scaled down (à la degrowth). Additionally, Helena Norberg-Hodge argues that localization "also contributes to resiliency in the face of climate change: diverse localized production systems in an interdependent network, rather than dependence for our basic needs on far-off sources, will better equip communities to withstand the upheavals to come." Internal to this localization is ideally the proliferation of cooperative enterprises to fill out community economies, which the UN sees as helping to ensure "sustainable consumption and production." Although the UN's vision of cooperatives is more globalized than localized, they do give the good examples of the IMAI Farming Cooperative in South Africa: "a women's cooperative that has partnered with non-profits and government institutions to turn surplus fresh vegetable produce into pickles. Through this initiative the cooperative increases the incomes of its members by adding value to their products while also reducing food waste." They also write of the Association of Recycling Collectors and Sorters of La Paz in Bolivia, who "formed a cooperative in 2006 to overcome the waste collection challenges. Their 40 members earn a better income through recycling in total about 194 tonnes of solid waste on a daily basis, including plastic, cardboard, metals, used clothing, glass and occasionally e-waste," the last of which is sold at an "informal market." Even specimens provided by the UN that are linked up with longer supply chains and multiple production or sale locations would seem to be more closely controlled by communities; and while these are only preliminary in terms of the local cooperativization of the means of production it does provide a glimpse of the future as well as a proof of concept.[2]

Once again, these directly address ecological concerns at an immediate level but in doing so can also, as stated above, help produce environmental concern among people. Democratization (through cooperatives) and localization can, for example, follow the logic of Aaron Koek's call for "direct confrontation with our current hierarchical conditions . . . [by] seizing the land and resources out of the hands of Capitalists and into our own. Such conditions would mean a direct interaction with individuals and their communities in regards to their immediate biological

[2] Obviously all information coming from the UN should be taken skeptically, because it's coming from… well, the UN.

surroundings, allowing them to make rational decisions based within the knowledge and understanding that comes with localized living." This new control over property by the masses as opposed to a small group of capitalists leads to "direct power to affect a meaningful relationship with the biosphere" and therefore the de-alienation of people from their local environment, allowing people to "protect the biosphere as an extension of ourselves." Additionally, environmental conservatives in the UK have latched on to the idea of "oikophilia," a term originating in the work of Roger Scruton and defined by Sarah Newton as "a family of motives at whose centre is love of one's home." The context of this idea within conservative politics runs the risk of engendering ethnocentrism, xenophobia, nationalism, and other deeply undesirable 'values,' but I do not believe there is anything inherent in it that would not allow both a love of local multiculturalism and a pursuit of something like cosmopolitan localism (the latter being environmentalist thinker Wolfgang Sachs's idea of a networked linking of mutually supportive communities across the globe). In a more general sense, oikophilia is used, as it is by Newton, to simply describe an impulse to protect one's home—including (and often especially) the environment. The idea is that when one witnesses "decreases in wildlife or flooding as a result of extreme weather" and other consequences of climate change there is a "natural urge for people to want to work together to protect their environment." Coupled with the localized ability to actually affect change in their households and communities through such projects as green energy neighborhood planning and local enterprise initiatives, this urge finds a material footing and is therefore able to flourish. I would argue this would be even more the case if the projects extended beyond the status quo economics of UK conservatives and into the localized, democratic market system gestured toward throughout this piece.

The illustrations of how alteration of the material base can cause shifts in cultural values (and in turn reinforce those alterations) go on and on—one might consider looking into the *material* social construction of gender roles (as theorized by Marxist and materialist feminists) or the understanding of queerphobia and cishetetonormativity as being schemes of Capital to enforce both the standardized reproduction of the workforce and the restricted commodification of difference. Although starting a cooperative will not magically make everyone an anti-racist or an environmentalist, as part of a broader movement toward localization of politico-economic power and autonomy from state-capitalism, a mass cooperative movement could begin to make a series of changes in the material base and thereby also the superstructure (particularly cultural values). All left-libertarians already support cooperatives wholeheartedly—either as an acceptable or ideal form of market entity—with much of the call for the labor theory of value, mutual banking, and the common ownership of natural resources centering around allowing for workers to collectively generate and operate enterprises free from capitalist clutches. Additionally, Kevin Carson—one of the most prominent theorists of left-libertarianism—has theorized in such pieces as "Economic Calculation in the Corporate Commonwealth" and "The Distorting Effects of Transportation Subsidies" that it is through state intervention that economies become artificially large-scale and delocalized, and so it stands to reason that without said state interference, it might be possible to move toward networks of local economies (à la the aforementioned cosmopolitan localism). However, it seems deeply important to emphasize how these economic projects can also directly lead to the thick libertarian cultural values that left-libertarians desire, thereby further conceptually fusing thickness and anti-capitalist economics within left-libertarianism.

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