

On Liberated Zones Theory: Or How BIPOC Folks Are Already Doing the Work

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I have previously pointed out that the on-the-ground efforts in Rojava and Co-operation Jackson in Mississippi can be seen as...

attempting, as Wesley Morgan describes, “to create ‘dual power’ through the creation of cooperatives.” Morgan disapprovingly terms this “market syndicalism” and critiques it for simply creating “units in a market economy” and still relying “upon access to the market.” However, this opinion does not take into account the unification of this praxis within broader pushes for anti-statist autonomy such as large-scale community self-defense that, like in Rojava, are creating space for non-capitalist markets. Such a method would not be dissimilar to the call by Samuel Edward Konkin III for “agorist protection and arbitration agencies” and “protection company syndicates” to defend market growing outside of the state capitalist economy and contain “the State by defending those who have signed up for protection-insurance.”

Konkin’s vision is a somewhat cynical speculation in comparison to the lived struggle of the Kurdish fighters, but the comparison lends validity to the case that building a producer-centric cooperative economy is inseparable from direct action like self-defense or setting up networks of counter-economic exchange. For myself, these observations represent a more revolutionary and non-utopian development in the tradition of early North American anarchist Josiah Warren’s non-capitalist market community projects like Utopia, Modern Times, and the Cincinnati Time Store. But these ideas also fall under the umbrella of “liberated zones theory” as theorized (and struggled for) by comrades at Community Movement Builders. I therefore want to ‘advertise’ for their theory and praxis because I really do think it’s just that compelling. And though I will add my own thoughts (if only for the sake of thinking through some things), the real purpose of this piece is to emphasize the work already being done by BIPOC folks. In fact this article is, if anything, demonstrative of the fact that almost anything white settler anarchists like myself propose is already being done by Black and Indigenous communities.

Community Movement Builders is an incredible organization that describe themselves as “a Black member-based collective of community residents and activists serving Black working-class and poor Black communities” that “organizes to bring power to Black communities by challenging existing institutions and creating new ones that our people control.” They have chapters in Atlanta, Dallas, and Detroit, with each one adapting to their own local conditions. Some of the projects that these chapters are undertaking include land trust development, cooperative development, cop-watch programs, community gardens, mutual aid programs, and international alliances with socialist groups like Pati Kan Pèp in Haiti. All of this sits within the framework of “liberated zones theory,” the outline

of which—provided by CMB—feels important enough to reproduce in whole here:

Liberated Zones are territories where the masses (the community of people who live in and around a specific area) are in near-complete control over their political and socio-economic destinies because they control the institutions in a specific region, city, town or state. Because liberated zones/territory will exist within larger capitalist economies and hostile state institutions, complete control can't happen until another later stage of transformation. The control gained exists within a larger strategy of challenging state institutions and capitalism.

Economically, the community will run the market system through various worker-controlled enterprises and cooperatives. This is to ensure that the surplus-value of local communities' labor is controlled within the liberated zones and not exploited by the outside capitalists. For this reason, that surplus can be distributed to developing the community and addressing human needs instead of capitalist wealth. Thus, the communities will be in charge of generating and sustaining economic wealth from within.

At a further stage in liberated activity, the state governing apparatus will also be under the control of the people (current institutions or new ones). That can be done through either revolutionary political parties that truly represent the people's interest, or through the consistent political struggle of the masses. In any case, the state can be used to support cooperative economic activities and the creation of new economies to deter reactionary forces from reentering the liberated zone.

The people within the zones will control their local resources such as land, housing, and labor and will be the decision-makers on how these social elements will be maneuvered. Ideologically from our perspective as a Black self-determining organization, the masses will see themselves as a part of a larger pan-African struggle and therefore, embrace the unity and resistance struggles of African people at home and abroad.

When I read this overview, it blew my mind. Here are folks who are doing incredible praxis in the framework of very excellent theory to establish autonomous networks of cooperative—and commons-based—market economies that resist capitalist extraction and legibility. The added (and necessary) elements of anti-racism and anti-colonialism—often somewhat lacking in my own thinking—make it an even more powerful and contextual model for social change.

Admittedly, one element of liberated zones theory that might rub anarchists (and particularly market anarchists) the wrong way is the goal that “the state governing apparatus will also be under the control of the people (current institutions

or new ones).” However, I think this is much less of an issue than it might first appear. Even as CMB names “revolutionary political parties that truly represent the people’s interest,” they equally emphasize “consistent political struggle of the masses” and center the “challenging [of] state institutions.” And because of the decentralized approach of liberated zones theory, it becomes less a question of arguing over a single unified tactic and more about what is most appropriate to local conditions. For example, while *my* work often focuses on building non-state institutions like land trusts, cooperatives, and mutual aid programs, I am also on very good terms with my local branches of the Communist Party of the United States and Democratic Socialists of America and have supported plenty of local socialist candidates. I have no issue with coalitions of leftist parties and candidates winning control over the existing governments of larger urban areas to “support cooperative economic activities and the creation of new economies to deter reactionary forces from reentering the liberated zone.” In fact, this would seem to me to be one of the only ways certain policies like participatory budgeting and effective anti-trust action could be enacted. Control of local government in particular zones also fits very well with Kevin Carson’s model of libertarian municipalism. He argues that cooperative governance structures like Michel Bauwen’s and Cosma Orsi’s “Partner State” do not need to be...

so much a ‘government’ as a system of governance. It need not be a state at all, in the sense of an institution which claims the sole right to initiate force in a given territory. It is, essentially, a nonstate social association—or support platform—for managing the commons, extended to an entire geographical region. . . . In fact, it is arguably quite possible to sever the Partner State altogether from even residual forms of sovereign police power over all the individuals in a contiguous geographical area. It is possible to have an entire polycentric ecosystem of commons-based institutions with self-selected memberships or users of a particular common resource, with substantially overlapping memberships, and large minorities or even majorities of those in the same area being members of most of them. In that case adjudication or negotiation of the relationships between them will cause a body of “common law” to emerge for the system as a whole, with a substantial degree of de facto coordination over a common geographical area.

Carson sees this project as a “municipal level” version of “[t]he Saint-Simonian idea of replacing legislation over human beings with the ‘administration of things;’” an interpretation that is directly (and potentially strategically) related to Friedrich Engels’ withering away of “political rule over men” into “an administration of things and a direction of processes of production,” on the foundation of, he continues elsewhere, “a free and equal association of the producers.” But with the added

emphasis on community-specific institutions and the pluralistic overlap of many different governmental and non-governmental cooperative efforts, this and other programs gathered under the umbrella of liberated zones theory allow for common goals and, consequently, immediate collaboration between anarchists, democratic socialists, communists, and even radical libertarians to use local governance to facilitate community-owned and (particularly producer) cooperative networks.

Then there is the fascinating connection between liberated zones theory and Black Panther Huey P. Newton's theory of "intercommunalism;" an attempt to adapt dialectical materialism to a modern colonial context.¹ Newton writes:

[T]he world today is a dispersed collection of communities. A community is different from a nation. A community is a small unit with a comprehensive collection of institutions that serve to exist a small group of people. And we say further that the struggle in the world today is between the small circle that administers and profits from the empire of the United States, and the peoples of the world who want to determine their own destinies.

Currently we live in an era of "reactionary intercommunalism, in which a ruling circle, a small group of people, control all other people by using their technology." But...

[a]t the same time, we say that this technology can solve most of the material contradictions people face, that the material conditions exist that would allow the people of the world to develop a culture that is essentially human and would nurture those things that would allow people to resolve contradictions in a way that would not cause the mutual slaughter of all of us. The development of such a culture would be revolutionary intercommunalism.

This logic of community control over the means of production is extremely similar to that expressed in liberated zones theory. Newton even refers to "the people in the *liberated zones* of South Vietnam" [emphasis added] in his analysis. And in an interview with *Millennials are Killing Capitalism*, CMB's Kamau Franklin explicitly outlines how their work is in the lineage of the Black Panther Party as well as identifying a solidarity between struggles of different peoples suffering under colonialism. This international collaboration between not just the working class but all oppressed peoples lends itself, with very little modification, to liberated zones

¹Encyclopedia Britannica is correct to end their entry on dialectical materialism with the caveat: "There exists no systematic exposition of dialectical materialism by Marx and Engels, who stated their philosophical views mainly in the course of polemics." I do however highly recommend Bertell Ollman's *Dance of the Dialectic: Steps in Marx's Method*.

theory being a development on intercommunalism and, consequently, a more contextual and decentralist interpretation of dialectical materialism as a whole.

Interesting to me as well is that Rukiya Colvin and Richard Feldman, in their outline of various institutions in Detroit pushing for liberated zones, identify certain religious institutions as centers of community development. For example, they write that the Episcopal Church of the Messiah is...

more than a place of worship as they host annual anti-violence rallies, cultivate creativity through makerspaces, promote wellbeing through community gardens, support the need for digital equity through the Equitable Internet Initiative, and hold monthly coalition meetings, while also working to rebuild the neighborhood through the low income housing options they provide. Their space also serves as a small business incubator.

This resonates with me greatly as I have, in the last year or so, brought my views on religious community and collective liberation to the forefront of my mind. But again this sort of thinking has already been covered extensively by Black and Latin American theologians and clergy from Martin Luther King Jr. to James H. Cone to José Míguez Bonino and beyond. So we once again return to the main point: BIPOC folks are already doing the work and thinking outlined in this article. We as leftists need to stop bickering *and* particularly stop telling BIPOC communities what they should or shouldn't be doing. Instead, we join in on the effort to establish liberated zones in combination with other strategies like mass labor actions and revolutionary unionism.² I'd add too that market anarchists have a lot to offer to this struggle, whether it's a knowledge of Hayekian knowledge problems and collective action problems, agorist tactics (as mentioned above), a state-monopolist model of capitalism (à la Benjamin Tucker), or just our bodies and hands. So cooperate! Get to know your neighbor! Learn to defend yourself or strategize to be defended! Bypass state-capitalist legibility! Oh, and if you're interested in supporting Community Movement Builders check out their donation page!

²*Revolutionary intercommunal* liberated zones?

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