

Private Property as Violence

Why Proprietarian Systems are Incompatible with the Non-Aggression Principle

By T.Collins Logan

The proposition here is that the condition of private property is itself an act of violence. This is not to say that it only *causes* violence, or somehow indirectly invites violent conditions; no, the assertion being made is that private property is itself a violent act. How? Through *exclusion* and *deprivation* as forms of deliberate aggression. With careful consideration we will see that this assertion is both obvious and readily evident in the real world – it's just not readily accepted under the current status quo. Let's begin with some straightforward examples.

First, a property owner need not be present for property ownership to do violence to others. Consider your family getting lost in a dry desert area. When you come upon an oasis where I have enclosed all of the available water, you believe your family will be saved from dehydration. But I have locked the enclosure securely, as any property owner has the right to do, removing what was once freely available water from public access. So the vital resource your family needs to survive is not available, simply because proprietarian controls were imposed. *In such instances, it is merely the condition of private property that is doing harm.* The intent to *exclude* or *deprive* others is conscious and deliberate, but the predictable negative consequences are being ignored.

There are of course circumstances where the owner of property has a duty to rescue (or be a good Samaritan) as a matter of social convention or established law. If I am drowning in the open ocean, and the only nearby means of rescuing myself is to crawl up into your boat, then the fact that you own that boat – that it is your private property – means that you have the power to decide whether or not I will survive. In such instances, however, there is a “duty to rescue,” which intervenes to override what would otherwise be lethal *exclusion* and *deprivation* created by private property in such a situation – you will be required to use your boat to help a drowning person. It should be noted, however, that duty to rescue laws are *negating private property rights* in such instances; the owner is losing control over their possession.

In many other situations, however, a property owner does not have a *legal* obligation to use their property to help someone else – even though compassion or societal expectations may create a sense of cultural obligation. If someone is trying to escape from harm – from a dangerous storm, or violent mob, or toxic air, or lethally cold temperatures – a property owner is not required to allow them access to safety, and this is specifically a consequence of private property rights. As the rightful owner of property that could potentially provide shelter or safe haven, you can decide to watch me die right outside of your door, with only your conscience to mitigate consequences. In some U.S. States and localities, there are laws about contacting emergency services on behalf of others when we observe they are in imminent danger...but even that isn't a universal or codified expectation. Again, this indicates a *de facto* characteristic of private property that perpetrates violence on non-owners. In the most obvious moral sense, non-action (not using one's resources to aid others) in these situations is – from the perspective of the person being *excluded* and *deprived* of aid – an act of aggression.

This same principle extends to intellectual property as well. If you own the patent for a drug that can treat my chronic disease or terminal illness – or save my entire community from suffering or death – you have the right to negotiate whatever payment you desire from anyone who needs that drug to alleviate suffering or prevent loss of life, and you can entirely control its production. Your property rights place you in a God-like position of determining my fate and

the well-being of my community. You can, essentially, commit murder with impunity via the rights of *exclusion* and *deprivation* inherent to your intellectual property rights. Even when we remove the State (i.e. patents) from the equation, to “own” an idea that benefits others, but instead use it to enrich oneself at the expense of others’ safety and well-being, is a prominent feature of conceptions of private property.

And so it goes...the condition of private property can *exclude* and *deprive* any non-owner from accessing sustenance, shelter, safety or aid, directly resulting in real suffering, grievous harm, and death. And the rightful owner of a given resource need not be present to actively direct this *exclusion* or *deprivation* – because these are the default conditions of private property itself. Thus the aggressions of private property can occur via an inanimate gate, lock, fence or wall, or by the implied threat of violence toward anyone trespassing those boundaries, or by the withholding of vital information and ideas that would otherwise prevent harm, and so on.

So how have these fundamental characteristics been so neglected in discussions of property, and indeed in discussions about the Non-Agression Principle or NAP?

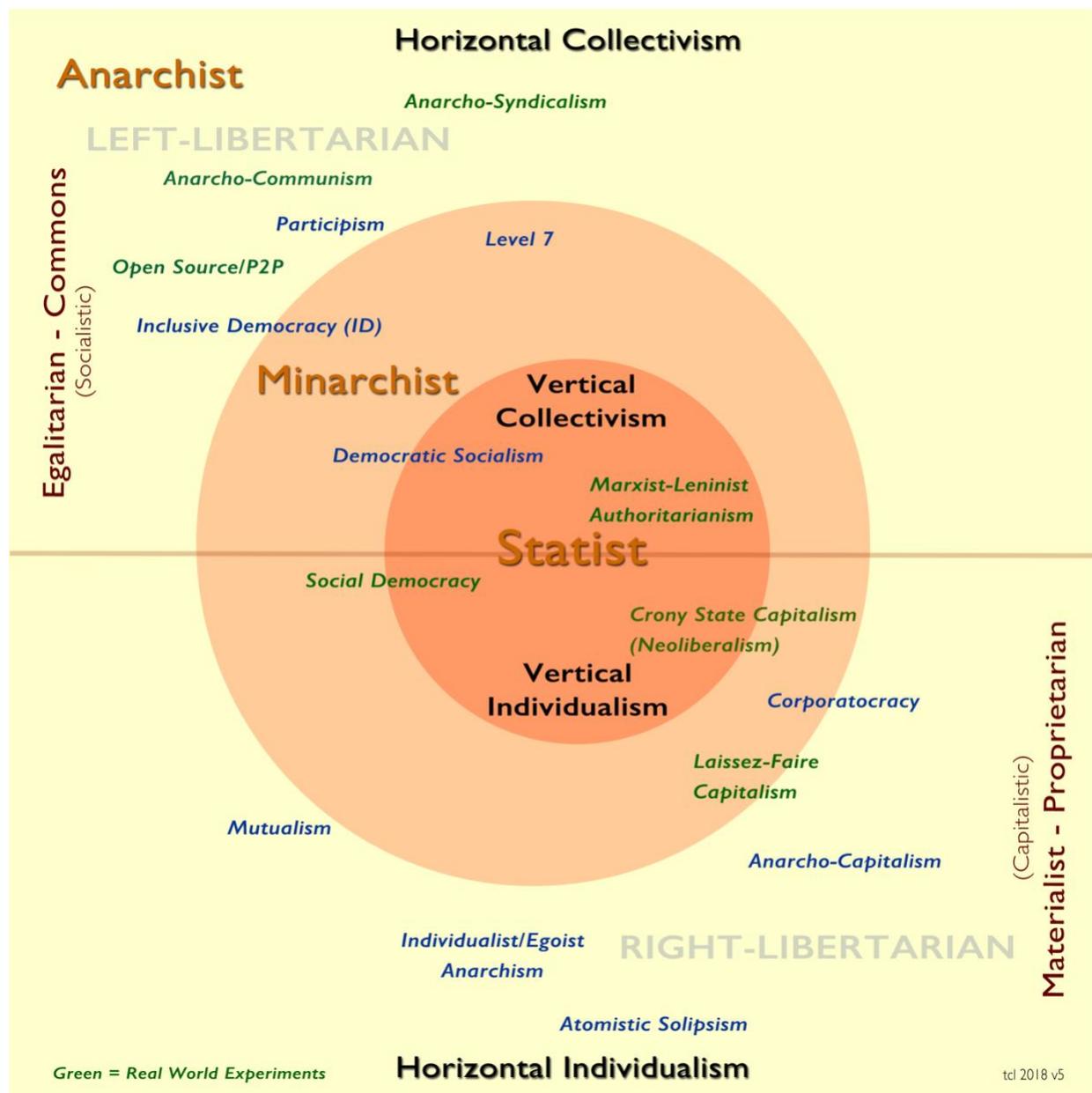
Defining the Landscape

In the United States, much of the terminology around freedom, property and the NAP has become increasingly confusing – and even contradictory – over time. Sometimes this has been the consequence of gradual evolutions of language and political thought, such as the bifurcation of classical liberalism into social liberalism (“progressivism”), and economic liberalism (“market fundamentalism”). Then again, sometimes this confusion has been quite deliberate in the context of a war of ideologies and a plethora of supportive propaganda. One example is how “libertarian” became associated mainly with right-libertarian thought and the Libertarian Party in the U.S., when in reality left-libertarianism – that is, libertarian socialism – has been a much older and more pervasive tradition in the rest of the world.¹ So in order to create a fixed snapshot of the situation, the chart below offers many terms as they are most broadly understood as of this writing. (As a side note: For those interested in an in-depth

exploration of left-libertarian thought, I recommend both Peter Mashall's book, [Demanding the Impossible](#), as well as the plentiful YouTube videos of [Noam Chomsky discussing libertarian socialism.](#))

The following chart has three axes: *individualism vs. collectivism*, *socialistic vs. capitalistic*, and *vertical vs. horizontal*. Defining these terms is important when deciphering the chart. The *vertical vs. horizontal* axis – as a concentric representation – differentiates hierarchical, centralized authority (*vertical*) at the center of the chart from decentralized, participatory, consensus-driven authority (*horizontal*) at the chart's periphery, and so progresses from Statist to Minarchist to Anarchist. The *socialist vs. capitalist* axis differentiates economic materialist economic orientations that enshrine private property (*capitalistic*) on the right side of the chart from egalitarian and commons-centric orientations that reject the primacy of private property (*socialistic*) on the left side of the chart. And the *individualism vs. collectivism* axis represents a spectrum of social and moral philosophical orientations, ranging from a prioritization of "I/Me/Mine" (*individualism*) at the bottom of the chart, to attenuating individual concerns in favor of shared societal concerns (*collectivism*) at the top.

Within this framework, where does libertarianism fit in? Right-libertarianism tends to be more horizontally individualist and private-property-centric, so it plots toward the lower right portion of the anarchistic periphery. Left-libertarianism tends to be more horizontally collectivist and commons-centric, so it plots toward the upper left portion of anarchism. These will become critical distinctions as we further explore the themes of freedom, property and the Non-Aggression Principle.



Some version of the Non-Aggressions Principle, or NAP, has been discussed by a wide variety of thinkers over centuries. Locke, Jefferson, Spencer, Mill, Rand and others all had variations of the central idea,² but it was mainly Murray Rothbard who popularized the concept in the context of right-libertarianism. As Rothbard wrote in his essay [“War, Peace and the State:”](#)

“The fundamental axiom of libertarian theory is that no one may threaten or commit violence (“aggress”) against another man’s person or property. Violence may be

employed only against the man who commits such violence; that is, only defensively against the aggressive violence of another. In short, no violence may be employed against a nonaggressor. Here is the fundamental rule from which can be deduced the entire corpus of libertarian theory.”

As is evident in his wording, Rothbard was also insistent that the NAP not only pertain to an individual’s person, but also their property, which is a central tenet for Rothbard. As he wrote in *The Ethics of Liberty*: “...there are two senses in which property rights are identical with human rights: one, that property can only accrue to humans, so that their rights to property are rights that belong to human beings; and two, that the person's right to his own body, his personal liberty, is a property right in his own person as well as a ‘human right.’” Rothbard then asserts that whenever human rights are not put in terms of property rights, they become “vague and contradictory.” This is a distinction that, as alluded to earlier, differentiates right-libertarian proprietary thinking from left-libertarian egalitarian approaches. For the right-libertarian, private property ownership is a fundamental building block for enabling and protecting personal liberty. For the left-libertarian, private property ownership is viewed as substantively interfering with personal liberty, and so “aggression against one’s person” does not extend to property that is, after all, shared by everyone in common under libertarian socialist proposals.

In examining the underlying ethical stance of the NAP, what becomes clear is that in a world without private property ownership, the NAP doesn’t need to extend to property at all. As Max Stirner argued in [*The Ego and Its Own*](#), “theft becomes possible only through property;” unless there are lawful rights of ownership, there can be no unlawful violation of those rights. So if someone in a left-libertarian community enters a communal garden to harvest tomatoes, there is no possibility of theft – or a violation of anyone’s sovereignty of self – as the tomatoes belong to the entire community. By the same token, someone utilizing a public road isn’t “stealing” access from others, but simply participating in cooperative sharing of that resource. But where the NAP does come into play is when a person decides to destroy any remaining tomato

harvest – or access to a public road, as the case may be – so that no one else can have any.³ And such destruction of communally managed property becomes like any other act of aggression in society, as it is clearly intended to harm others. It doesn't matter that private property hasn't been defined. But in a world where private property ownership is pervasive, the NAP understandably extends into every privately owned tomato, because no one would have access to tomatoes unless they either privately owned some, or traded with those who owned some – it is indeed difficult to argue against that conclusion.

The result is that whenever private property is involved, even actions without malicious intent, such as inadvertently trespassing onto private land, can become violations of the NAP that invoke a justifiable assertion of control. Thus all of Rothbard's arguments and examples around human rights as property rights (for example, that free speech can't occur on someone else's property without their agreement) are predicated on the *preexistence* of private property. And yet – and this is the point I am trying to make – none of the conundrums Rothbard wrestles with have any relevance where “the locus of ownership” is diffused, communal or nonexistent. Again, sharing use with others simply does not equate theft, or any violation of the NAP, when there is common ownership (or temporary possession without ownership).

So we might well ask: why are right-libertarians persist in their preoccupation with property rights when discussing the NAP? Although it is true that many right-libertarian thinkers have been immersed in a status quo where property rights are a de facto standard, can't they see beyond the status quo to these other possibilities? In fact, this isn't just a failure of imagination, it's also a failure of observation. Returning to the chart above, it is notable that many left-libertarian, non-proprietary experiments have actually been tried in the real world. From the past Free Territory in Ukraine, Revolutionary Catalonia, and Shinmin Prefecture of Korea, to the current libertarian socialism of Rojava in Syria, Landless Workers' Movement in Brazil, and Fejuve in Bolivia, there is plentiful data to choose from (see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_anarchist_communities). *These alternative approaches to property held in common are both obvious and readily evident in the real world.* Therefore,

rather than leaping past the *presumption of necessity* that there be private property, it seems reasonable that we first turn our attention to the conditions of private ownership, and evaluate just how necessary they really are.

Central Features of Western Property Philosophy

Most of our understanding of property – including what is codified into law – was initially derived from the laws of ancient Rome. In the opening chapter of [Political Economy and the Unitive Principle](#), I elaborate on the Roman tradition of *res nullius*, *res privata*, *res universitatis*, *res publica*, etc., and I recommend investigating those definitions to appreciate how they continue to shape our modern understanding. In brief, the Romans defined seven categories: potential property, private property, public property, common property, sacred property and wild things – and most of these categories have persisted into modern discussions of property. This is likely why Proudhon and others revisited the Roman system in their own critiques and defenses of property – these concepts have been enshrined in Western culture for a very long time.

However, how these categories intersected with individual and collective rights – and how they could be morally justified – became an especially hot topic during the Enlightenment. In particular, John Locke’s theory of labor appropriation had a profound influence, both in his time and for subsequent theorists. Here is how Locke summarizes his proposal in his [Second Treatise on Government](#):

“Though the earth and all inferior creatures be common to all men, yet every man has a ‘property’ in his own ‘person.’ This nobody has any right to but himself. The ‘labour’ of his body and the ‘work’ of his hands, we may say, are properly his. Whatsoever, then, he removes out of the state that Nature hath provided and left it in, he hath mixed his labour with it, and joined to it something that is his own, and thereby makes it his property. It being by him removed from the common state Nature placed it in, it hath by this labour something annexed to it that excludes the common right of other men. For

this 'labour' being the unquestionable property of the labourer, no man but he can have a right to what that is once joined to, at least where there is enough, and as good left in common for others."

Locke goes on to describe act of gathering acorns as the moment when those acorns become the private property of the gatherer:

"And it is plain, if the first gathering made them not his, nothing else could. That labour put a distinction between them and common. That added something to them more than Nature, the common mother of all, had done, and so they became his private right."

And that was it...as long as people didn't take more than their share (i.e. "where there is enough, and as good, left in common for others;" i.e. what later became known as the *Lockean Proviso*), then such mixing of labor with resources produced an unassailable, natural right to ownership – at least according to Locke.

William Godwin first insisted in his [Enquiry Concerning Political Justice](#) that everyone have equal access to all property for their own use, benefit and need, and that any interference with such an egalitarian standard was morally wrong. But then he also seems to waffle, admitting that the accumulations of one person resulting from their exceptional ingenuity or industry should be managed and distributed solely at their discretion – even if this perpetuates inequality in society. Here Locke's theory of labor appropriation seems to rear its ugly head as an immutable feature of Godwin's reality. Godwin's persisting hope seemed to be that communities could reason their way through this, and constrain both excesses and impoverishment through collective consent. But I think the trajectory of his arguments was as incomplete, because they just could not let go of Locke's version of natural property rights.

By contrast, in his book [What is Property?](#), Pierre-Joseph Proudhon famously destroys the Roman definition of property, *the right of use and abuse* associated with it, and variations of

Locke's theory of labor appropriation as argued by Proudhon's contemporaries. In Proudhon's view, there is only the collective right of *possession* that serves public utility, but not of individual *proprietorship* – especially in the context of excluding others from use. As he writes:

“Not only does occupation lead to equality, it *prevents* property. For, since every man, from the fact of his existence, has the right of occupation, and, in order to live, must have material for cultivation on which he may labor; and since, on the other hand, the number of occupants varies continually with the births and deaths – it follows that the quantity of material which each laborer may claim varies with the number of occupants; consequently, that occupation is always subordinate to population. Finally, that, inasmuch as possession, in right, can never remain fixed, it is impossible, in fact, that it can ever become property.

Every occupant is, then, necessarily a possessor or usufructuary – a function which excludes proprietorship. Now, this is the right of the usufructuary: he is responsible for the thing entrusted to him; he must use it in conformity with general utility, with a view to its preservation and development; he has no power to transform it, to diminish it, or to change its nature; he cannot so divide the usufruct that another shall perform the labor while he receives the product. In a word, the usufructuary is under the supervision of society, submitted to the condition of labor and the law of equality.”

For Proudhon, property – and any rights associated with it – does not come into existence except through force or fraud: “it is a negation – a delusion – NOTHING” and “a right against Nature and against reason.” Strong words, stronger even than the phrase “property is theft,” which is so often associated with Proudhon. It is important to acknowledge Proudhon as preceding Marx in tying proprietarian concepts and practices to all sorts of social and economic problems, and that he almost certainly influenced Marx's perspectives on these issues.

In Max Stirner's egoist anarchism, we also find a consistent oppositional argument regarding property, though considerably less compassion for fellow human beings. In Stirner's [The Ego](#)

[and Its Own](#), he dismisses all social agreements around property rights, instead elevating an “unlimited dominion” of the individual over everyone and everything else. In Stirner’s view, there are no moral, ethical or justifiable constraints around any individual’s use of resources, tools, objects or even other people. There are no moral obligations, no subjection to rules or laws or social status, only an insistence that all decisions and actions be self-determined, self-governed, and originating from carefully detached reason. Thus everything I create, take, destroy, imagine or experience is “my property” – again without limit. This rejects the Lockean Proviso as a boundary for individual appropriation, as well as Locke’s theory of labor appropriation itself – those containers are too small for egoist anarchism. So in Stirner’s case, we do find a consistent and complete arc regarding a universal equality around property utilization as an extension of the self...just not very compassionate or kind regarding the capacity of others to meet (or compete with) such highly individualistic standards.

Marx was another thinker who followed his own arc of reasoning regarding property – and in particular private property as a social and economic concept – to a fuller conclusion. In Marx’s understanding of the human condition, the whole concept of ownership – and especially ownership justified by the mixing of labor with materials – *is a destructive objectification and commodification of our humanness*. That is, it is a mechanism of self-alienation and estrangement from our own essence, a means of converting our creativity and individuality into something that can be used, exchanged and valued by others: into capital. Like Proudhon and Stirner, Marx was able to see past the status quo. Marx’s arguments against private property infuse much of his writing, as in the essay, [“Private Property and Communism,”](#) where he writes:

“Private property has made us so stupid and one-sided that an object is only *ours* when we have it – when it exists for us as capital, or when it is directly possessed, eaten, drunk, worn, inhabited, etc., – in short, when it is *used* by us. Although private property itself again conceives all these direct realizations of possession only as *means of life*, and the life which they serve as means is the *life of private property* – labor and conversion into capital.

In the place of *all* physical and mental senses there has therefore come the sheer estrangement of *all* these senses, the sense of *having*. The human being had to be reduced to this absolute poverty in order that he might yield his inner wealth to the outer world.”

And so, Marx reasons, in order to restore humans to themselves – and restore human relationships to something mutually supportive of each other’s humanity – the objectification of human worth into private property must be relinquished. In stark contrast to Stirner, Marx wants us all to be clearly and deeply concerned about the well-being of our fellow humans (especially if they are not part of the bourgeoisie), and aims to mend what he sees as the harmful downward spiral of alienation and impoverishment that private property ownership represents.

Externalization, Objectification and Commodification

In my essay, [“The Goldilocks Zone of Integral Liberty,”](#) I address the relationship between private property and conceptions of freedom from a left-libertarian perspective. Building on the insights of others (Cohen, Rudmin, Arielly), I assert that private property of any kind is one of several modern conditions that substantively interferes with individual liberty on a daily basis. Why? Because it disallows individuals the supportive means to achieve and maintain liberty, restricting the foundational resources of personal liberty to a select few (i.e. those who own the most property) while excluding everyone else. But I, too, seem to have inadvertently truncated my own trajectory of thought, resisting more severe conclusions about the destructive conditions of private property itself. In Marx’s narrative, he sees private property as the outcome of a pernicious spiral of self-estrangement – of humanity being alienated from its own essence. But do the principles of *exclusion* and *deprivation* outlined at the beginning of this essay harmonize with Marx’s perspective? Do they connect any dots for a more well-rounded understanding? And how do these ideas interact with right-libertarian conceptions of the Non-Aggression Principle?

To answer this question, I returned to some of my own writings over the years about consumerism, individualism, codependence, materialism and so on to examine sentiments around what I have called *externalization*.

From [“The Stupefaction of Human Experience:”](#)

“But my favorite angle on this is that our self-imposed technodependence is mainly the result of a basic human impulse: we enjoy worshiping created things. We like to imbue inanimate objects with quasi-magical abilities just as our ancestors did. Whether it is the carving of a beloved deity, a newly developed drug or the latest Apple product, we want to believe that some help for our condition, some relief for our suffering, some aid to our success and thriving can exist outside of our interiority. But technolatry is just one more unnecessary externalization of our deliverance. And like any other externalization, we are only distracting ourselves from the real work to be done: the difficult, courageous, disciplined work of getting to know our innermost selves. Technology may be a projection of that inner essence – and a fantastically creative, dazzling and wondrous one – but *it is not us*, it does not define our true identity, and it does not even point us in the right direction for answers. Yet we worship it nonetheless, refusing to pause in our devotion long enough to evaluate the real and lasting value of our toy-gods.”

From [“Escaping the Failures of Capitalism:”](#)

“It is fairly straightforward to summarize the most negative impacts when nearly everything becomes private property available for trade; these include:

- A deliberate conditioning of consumption habits that create lifelong dependencies and interrupt healthy self-nourishment. I have called this ‘externalization,’ which is simply the incorrect and disempowering assumption that all paths leading to physical, emotional, spiritual and intellectual nourishment (i.e. happiness, love, satiation, contentment, safety, success, belonging, purpose, etc.) are dependent on

the consumption of goods and services provided by other people. This estrangement from the wealth of internal, self-sufficient resources available to every human being contributes to the povertization of individuals and cultures, and to an increasing number of health problems among commercialized populations.”

From [“Compassion and Codependence:”](#)

“In the case of *externally dependent* relationships, our affection and commitment are conditional; we must receive certain benefits to sustain the association. In *internally empowered, interdependent* relationships, our affection and commitment are not conditioned on the benefits we receive. But there is more to it than this. In *externally dependent* relationships, we have completely abdicated our responsibility to care for ourselves. We are not seeking a partner, friend or soul mate, we are seeking a parent. We are perpetuating a child---like dependence on another person to feel safe, loved and whole. At the same time we are trying to become someone else’s parent by allowing them to depend on us in the same way. In contrast, the parent---child dynamic is entirely absent in *internally empowered, interdependent* relationships. Each person is invested and skilled in caring for themselves with love, having become whole in the process, and thus able to share that whole, fully loved person with someone else. One mode is like a broken cup that can never be filled enough, and the other is like a flawless cup endlessly filled to overflowing. And this is how we can define the former mode of being as codependent, and the latter as authentically compassionate.”

In fact, a primary focus of the Integral Lifework system of self-care that I’ve developed over the past decade is to “shift our focus from external fulfillment to internal fulfillment, supplanting dependence on consumables with self-reliance and healthy interdependence.”⁴ In many instances I’ve also described the pressures of consumerism as *infantilizing* the human condition, as in this excerpt from [“The Goldilocks Zone of Integral Liberty:”](#)

“The dominant feature [of successful commercialistic consumerism] is a specific psychology that consumers believe, at a fundamental and persistent level of self-

concept, that they are helpless infants, completely dependent on the goods and services being sold them in order to obtain happiness, social status, success in friendship and love, existential safety and security, physical health, skills and abilities, and so on. Every desirable quality of life is projected onto an external consumable, rather than modeled or taught to be internally generated. In this way, commercialistic consumerism supplants love, trust, personal responsibility and meaningful relationships with the soft, warm teat of its externalizing psychological dependence. In essence, the more a marketing campaign can successfully infantilize consumers, the more a company can rely on an ever-increasing dependency of those customers to bolster revenue. Thus such marketing campaigns will either appeal to the ‘lowest common denominator’ perceptions of wants and needs – or create artificial wants and needs that are shiny and new – in order to induce more suckling.”

It seems clear that I long ago concluded private property to be at the center of a maelstrom of disabling and coercive harm, dysfunctional and debilitating relationships, deprivations of liberty and equality, and pervasive ruination of both a healthy self-concept and the equanimity of the human condition itself. To my mind, there is no escaping that modern conceptions of private property facilitate a profoundly violent assault on human dignity. As an *externalization* that distorts self-concept and self-sufficiency, private property has drawn to itself an amalgamation of nasty characteristics that destroy, distort or corrupt what I would describe as our *prosocial ground of being* (and which Marx might call “our natural essence”). Regardless of the source of our descriptors – whether we turn to revered humanist philosophers, enduring wisdom traditions, or the greatest healers and sages of the modern age – all that is compassionate, kind, affectionate, encouraging, mutually supportive and enduringly good about human beings has been attacked or weakened by the existence of private property.

Therefore, from the perspective of an *externalizing* process that does indeed resonate with Marx’s concerns about *objectification* and *commodification*, the existence of private property itself does real violence – both directly and indirectly, and both individually and collectively – to society. It generates interference with well-being and indeed sovereignty of the self, and with

the natural interdependence and trust relationships between people that are the glue of civil society. And, if this is the case, can anyone who subscribes to the Non-Aggression Principle really advocate for private property rights? Can they really insist that private property is supportive of liberty and social good? I don't think this is possible, and here is why....

First, private property really isn't necessary to facilitate liberty. How can we be certain of this? Because it has been conclusively demonstrated through excellent research. As one example, Elinor Ostrom's work on *common pool resource management* that has arisen organically around the world definitively disproves the underlying assumption that a tragedy of the commons will always occur without private property rights. Instead, Ostrom documents a set of guiding design principles that allow cooperative, self-managing folks to utilize shared resources without ownership. You can read about those in detail here: <http://www.level-7.org/Philosophy/Ostrom/>. Government isn't required, and private property isn't required...it is truly a middle way that ensures equity in access and utilization. And again, this is evidence from the real world...not hypothetical speculation. Perhaps if Locke had been apprised of such evidence – or in fact the wealth of data we now have on primitive societies where the concept of ownership appears to be quite rare⁵ – he would have come to very different conclusions about his labor theory of appropriation. There simply no reason to insist that labor mixed with resources must result in ownership...and, in hearty agreement with Proudhon, certainly no “natural law” in this regard.

In addition, as alluded to earlier, there are many examples of successful left-libertarian experiments – again in the real world – where participants have felt enriched and empowered by collective arrangements around property and resources. To echo the insights of Paulo Freire, when folks are allowed to participate in their own emancipation, their own governance, and their own education – when there are enduring dialogical and participatory currents across all of civil society – then people not only feel free, but are able to perpetuate conditions for their own freedom; they become aware of how liberty itself is shaped and reified, and are quite willing and able to empower themselves to make it their reality.⁶

All of this further supports a conclusion that private property is violence – and violence of a particularly insidious order. Returning to Marx, here is a response I recently offered in an online discussion regarding why Marx was so opposed to private property:

“What is an object? It’s a thing, right? Just a thing...basically only valuable in terms of its utility or commodification. Its function or someone’s desire for it determines its purpose and worth. But is that what a human being is? Just a thing...? A thing that it only valuable because of its utility or someone’s desire for it, and without any other essence or purpose? Is our only function to...ultimately...be objectified by others? To be used? Meditate on this for a bit. ‘Private property’ is, in its most essential characteristic, the thingification of the world; that is, the forceful categorization and boundarizing of everything as ‘stuff.’ That is, *as objects that are used, and only valuable because of their utility and desirability, and not because they have any intrinsic value or purpose that transcends material exchanges or the capricious whims of humans.* Ownership is enslavement to the will of the owner. This is a pretty profound observation, don’t you think? And yet it escapes most people that everything they do — and everything they are — in a capitalist system distances them from their own intrinsic, non-material value, and turns them into an object...a slave. Thus private property, as the primary building block of a capitalist system, ultimately results in the commodification of the human spirit...and in a society that is mired in cultural poverty and alienation.

This is what Marx is getting at with his theory of alienation and ‘self-estrangement.’ And IMO it is incredibly important to understand this component of Marx’s thinking, *because everything else in his philosophy flows out from this central observation.* Thus the capture and imprisonment of all natural things into a state of ‘private property’ destroys their inherent value — strips them of their essence — and replaces that inherent value with commodification. In the same way, the ‘commodified’ human being relinquishes their will, their choice, their imagination, their self-determination, their creativity, their

social relations and fundamental purpose...purely in order to serve the will of profit. To be a slave. *To be a thing*. When understood in this way, it is no surprise at all that Marx was so opposed to private property. As comprehensive definitions of 'evil' in humanistic terms, private property's annihilation of our humanity presents a fairly compelling case. It does require some thoughtful effort to awaken to this perspective...but once we wake up, it's pretty hard not to see why Marx was so passionate about moving beyond the capitalist status quo as quickly as possible, and to return all property to the commons."

However, *it does require some thoughtful effort to awaken to this perspective*. As a profound example of David Foster Wallace's analogy of fish not realizing they live in water, we are too often totally unaware of our condition. And I think many writers and thinkers have struggled with precisely that problem: how can awakening be encouraged without alienating people? How can we skillfully point out a mistake in reasoning someone has made, without making them mad or defensive? Specifically, let's consider Hardin's ["The Tragedy of the Commons,"](#) an essay about population control that is often misused to support private property rights. In that essay, a tragedy of resource exhaustion occurs because "each herdsman seeks to maximize his gain" by adding cattle to his herd. But those cattle are actually examples of private property, with the herdsmen competing with other privately-owned herds over the same limited, commonly held resources. And so yes, a very real problem arises...but not because of the freedom of the commons, *but because of the competing interests of private ownership!* If the cattle were also all held in common, wouldn't the individualistic, self-serving "maximization of gain" Hardin describes simply evaporate? Once again, according to Ostrom's research of *common pool resource management* around the world, this is precisely how the challenge is remedied. But this sort of misattribution of causality, and consequently forcing circumstances to conform with those misattributions, runs rampant among those who are overinvested in a status quo that supports their given worldview.⁷

In the case of right-libertarians, a persuasive *post hoc* fallacy has been constructed that asserts private property rights have a causal relationship with liberty – that they somehow facilitate

freedom – when in reality most conceptions of liberty arose in opposition to the conditions that private property rights created. Specifically, when the wealthy and powerful have accumulated more and more property to themselves, they have consequently increased the *deprivations* and *exclusions* of everyone else in society. In many cases, this then led to enslaving the poor and working classes into the service of the wealthy few; often this became a matter of pragmatic, self-sustaining necessity for those plutocrats to maintain their wealth and power. And this inequality, in turn, fomented revolts, revolutions, rebellions and resistance – despite the promises of trickle-down wealth, assurances of benevolence from the richest elite, the fallacy of equal opportunity for all in a “free market,” or the presence of [an elaborate spectacle](#) to distract and medicate those being abused. Increased suffering, dissatisfaction, alienation and rebellion are the inevitable outcomes of all political economies organized under the materialist-proprietarian umbrella of capitalism – including anarcho-capitalism and other forms of right-libertarianism.

To be sincerely committed to the Non-Aggression Principle thus invites opposition to any system that deliberately causes harm to other human beings, or creates conditions where harm is much more likely than when that system’s constraints are absent. And although the State is often cast in the role of boogeyman in this regard by anarchists and libertarians, far more destructive tendencies have been evidenced in large corporations – throughout history and into present times – who have callously disregarded the well-being of workers, consumers, delicate ecosystems, and indeed planet Earth itself in the name of profit. But the hundreds of millions of deaths from cigarettes and other engineered vices, or the Type II Diabetes epidemic that was created but highly profitable and now ubiquitous poor-nutrition foods, or mass-marketed technological addictions that have disrupted childhood development or induce ADHD... all of these are immaterial when compared to the infantilization and extinguished agency that commercialism and conspicuous consumption have wrought in successive generations. This is where the real coercive violence has occurred, and where the most lives continue to be ruined. This is the loudest evidence for *property as violence*, and why proprietarian systems are utterly incompatible with the NAP. But again, without careful consideration of the facts, our habit will

be to turn to each other and ask, “What the hell is water?” finding solace in our mutual affirmation of ignorance.

Escaping an Anthropocentric Trap

Lastly, it is worth touching upon the absurd anthropocentrism of the NAP itself. The vast negative externalities of modern industrial production are well-documented.⁸ Carcinogens, microplastics, neurotoxins and heavy metals permeate natural environments – especially in water supplies and in the creatures that rely upon them. Colony Collapse Disorder among bees is a consequence of widely-used pesticides. An acceleration of global climate change that is decimating entire ecosystems was caused by human carbon emissions. The loss of more and more species of life on Earth with each passing year is a legacy of humanity’s activity and expansion around the globe. All of these are acts of aggression against other species, but most formulations of the NAP don’t consider this type of violence.

There is one notable exception to the routine anthropocentrism of the NAP, and that is Nozick’s argument in favor of “moral side restraints” in [*Anarchy State and Utopia*](#) – that is, that no one may be sacrificed for the needs of another. In Chapter 3, Nozick imagines the arrival of an alien race that is more morally advanced than humans:

“We also might imagine people encountering beings from another planet who traverse in their childhood whatever ‘stages’ of moral development our developmental psychologists can identify. These beings claim that they all continue on through fourteen further sequential stages, each being necessary to enter the next one. However, they cannot explain to us (primitive as we are) the content and modes of reasoning of these later stages. These beings claim that we may be sacrificed for their well-being, or at least in order to preserve their higher capacities. They say that they see the truth of this now that they are in their moral maturity, though they didn't as children at what is our highest level of moral development.”

Nozick explores the idea that, even if we consider animals on Earth to be of a “lower moral order,” we should probably navigate the question of aggression towards any living being with the same care that we would want the aliens to navigate the issue regarding “lower moral order” human beings. After all, Nozick reasons, what is the particular threshold of any given characteristic (intelligence, autonomy, moral agency, ability to plan, etc.) that warrants such consideration? And how do we go about determining what that threshold is? Nozick doesn’t answer these questions definitively, he just pokes some holes in anthropocentric assumptions.

And yet, with astounding arrogance – and indeed ignorance of human dependence on all other species and ecosystems – a sizable percentage of modern humans either dismiss such concerns, or deny evidence of negative externalities, or argue that the inherent superiority of human beings trumps considerations of anything else, or run away from complexity in favor of black-and-white reasoning, or insist that Divine providence will remedy all of humanity’s worst mistakes. And, not surprisingly, this denial, dismissal and divestment of responsibility plots in parallel with the individualistic egocentrism of the lower right region of our political economy chart. Those fully immersed in an “I/Me/Mine” moral orientation do not care about things that don’t directly interfere with their personal sense of safety, security and well-being – or that of folks in their immediate circle. And so part of solving the riddle of property, and of skillfully applying the Non-Aggression Principle on any scale, will be to encourage not only awareness of actual causal relationships in the world, but also the moral maturity that carries us beyond self-centeredness to compassionate concern for an all-inclusive good. In the world of moral development hierarchy that Robert Nozick entertains, it seems particularly ironic that those who restrict the NAP only to human beings can become the annihilators of both higher-order moral thinking, and the future of humanity itself – whether advanced aliens come to visit Earth or not.

Thesis and Afterthoughts

To reiterate: through *exclusion* and *deprivation*, private property not only begets violence, it is a violent act *in-and-of-itself*. Individually and collectively, experientially and socially, private property rights extinguish our individual humanity and the prosociality of our relationships and culture – all of which occurs merely as a feature of private property existence and enforcement of its boundaries. Further, this extends to intellectual property as well. Private property inherently alienates us from ourselves and from each other, conditioning our interiority to *externalize* our agency, happiness, knowledge, wisdom, freedom and creative capacities – *indeed even the meaning of life itself* – into objects that can be bought and sold. And all of these forms of property-related destructiveness do not require a conscious, deliberate or malicious actor for them to occur. Annihilation is inherent to ownership. Therefore, regardless of the scope of the Non-Aggression Principle – or who is honored with the personhood of its application – the spirit of the NAP and private property rights are fundamentally incompatible.

It is this underlying contradiction that has, I believe, contributed to many of the tensions, antagonisms and conflicts of modern life. To whatever degree civil society has attempted to rein in or soften the tyranny of private property (rather than end it entirely), this eventually leads to a sort of boomerang effect where the destructive energies of *exclusion* and *deprivation* return with equal or amplified force. Government regulation is captured and then overridden by special interests; open elections are distorted by dark money; freedoms of citizens are pushed aside in favor of corporate personhood; the right to self-defense becomes a right to “stand your ground;” the privilege of property ownership becomes an endless spiral of debt; and both proprietary wealth and political power concentrates more and more into the hands of a very few owner-shareholders. All of these consequences can be explained by the fundamental tension between liberty and private property rights, and by how even the most heroic efforts to reconcile that tension is like trying to mix oil and water. Increasingly, however, with the scale and complexity of a more globalized and homogenized political economy, our vain striving to cling to the concept of ownership is creating an ever-enlarging and persistently enduring mess – a mess that invites destruction on an equally global scale.

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- ¹ <https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/the-anarchist-faq-editorial-collective-150-years-of-libertarian>
- ² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Non-aggression_principle
- ³ <http://www.quotationspage.com/quote/35615.html>
- ⁴ <http://www.tcollinslogan.com/images/RoadToEmpathy.pdf>
- ⁵ "Cross-Cultural Correlates of the Ownership of Private Property," Floyd Rudmin (1992)
- ⁶ <http://www.comminit.com/democracy-governance/content/pedagogy-oppressed-paulo-freire-analysis>
- ⁷ <http://www.tcollinslogan.com/resources/VirtualCausalityV1b.pdf>
- ⁸ See <https://journals.openedition.org/rccsar/443> and <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2790601/>