

Autarky

Autarky is the characteristic of self-sufficiency; the term usually applies to political states, societies or to their economic systems. Autarky exists whenever an entity survives or continues its activities without external assistance or international trade. If a self-sufficient economy also *refuses* to conduct any trade with the outside world then economists may term it a "**closed economy**".^[1] (Economic theorists also use the term "closed economy" technically as an abstraction to allow consideration of a single economy without taking foreign trade into account – i.e. as the antonym of "open economy".) Autarky in the political sense is not necessarily an exclusively economic phenomenon; for example, a military autarky would be a state that could defend itself without help from another country, or could manufacture all of its weapons without any imports from the outside world.

Autarky as an ideal or method has been embraced by a wide range of political ideologies and movements, especially left-wing creeds like African socialism, mutualism, war communism,^[2] council communism, Swadeshi, syndicalism (especially anarcho-syndicalism) and leftist populism, generally in an effort to build alternative economic structures or to control resources against structures a particular movement views as hostile. Conservative, centrist and nationalist movements (such as in the American system, Juche, mercantilism,^[3] the Meiji Restoration, social corporatism, and traditionalist conservatism) have also adopted autarky in temporary, limited ways - usually in an attempt to preserve part of an existing social order or to develop a particular industry. Some fascist and far-right movements occasionally espoused autarky as a goal but in practice crushed^[4] existing movements^[5] towards self-sufficiency and established extensive capital connections to serve as a basis for war and/or genocide^[6] while allying with traditional business elites.^[7]

Autarky may be a policy of a state or other entity when it seeks to be self-sufficient as a whole, but also can be limited to a narrow field such as possession of a key raw material. For example, many countries have a policy of autarky with respect to foodstuffs^[8] and water for national-security reasons. By contrast, autarky can result from economic isolation or from external circumstances in which a state or other entity reverts to localized production when it lacks currency or excess production to trade with the outside world.^{[9][10]}

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Etymology

The word *autarky* is from the Greek: αὐτάρκεια, which means "self-sufficiency" (derived from αὐτο-, "self", and ἀρκέω, "to suffice"). The term is sometimes confused with autocracy (Greek: αὐτοκρατία "government by single absolute ruler") or autarchy (Greek: αὐταρχία – the idea of rejecting government and ruling oneself and no other).

History

Ancient and medieval

Early state societies that can be regarded as autarkic include nomadic pastoralism and palace economy, though over time these tend towards becoming less self-sufficient and more interconnected. The late Bronze Age, for example, saw formerly self-sufficient palace economies rely more heavily on trade, which may have been a contributing factor to the eventual Bronze Age Collapse when multiple crises hit those systems at once. After that collapse, the ideal of *autarkeia* formed a part of emerging Greek political culture, emphasizing economic self-sufficiency^[11] and local self-rule.

During the Late Roman Empire, some rebellions and communities pursued autarky as a reaction both to upheaval and to counter imperial power. A prominent example is the Bacaudae, who repeatedly rebelled against the empire and "formed self-governing communities" with their own^[12] internal economy and coinage.

Medieval communes combined an attempt at overall economic self-sufficiency through the use of common lands and resources with the use of mutual defense pacts, neighborhood assemblies and organized militias to preserve local autonomy^[13] against the depredations of the local nobility. Many of these communes later became trading powers such as the Hanseatic League. In some cases, communal village economies maintained their own debt system^[14] as part of a self-sufficient economy and to avoid reliance on possibly hostile aristocratic or business interests. The trend toward "local self-sufficiency" increased^[15] after the Black Plague, initially as a reaction to the impact of the epidemic and later as a way for communes and city states to maintain power against the nobility.^[16]

While rarer among imperial states, some autarkies did occur during specific time periods. The Ming dynasty, during its later, more isolationist period, kept a closed economy that prohibited outside trade and focused on centralized distribution of goods produced in a localized farms and workshops.^[17] A hierarchy of bureaucrats oversaw^[18] the distribution of these resources from central depots, including a massive one located in the Forbidden City. That depot was, at the time, the largest logistical base in the world. The Incan Empire also maintained a system of society-wide autarky based on community levies of specific goods and "supply on command."

19th and early 20th centuries

In some areas of the antebellum South, the enslaved and free black populations forged self-sufficient economies in an effort to avoid reliance on the larger economy controlled by the planter aristocracy. In eastern North Carolina maroon communities, often based in swampy areas, used a combination of agriculture and fishing to forge a "hidden economy" and secure survival.^[19] The relative self-reliance of these maritime African-American

populations provided the basis for a strongly abolitionist political culture^[20] that made increasingly radical demands after the start of the Civil War. Due to tense relations with some Union commanders and political factions during and after that war, these communities "focused their organizing efforts on developing their own institutions, their own sense of self-reliance, and their own political strength."^[21]

Autarkic ambitions^[22] can also be seen in the Populist backlash to the exploitations of free trade in the late 19th-century and in many early Utopian Socialist movements. Mutual aid societies like the Grange and Sovereigns of Industry attempted to set up self-sufficient economies (with varying degrees of success) in an effort to be less dependent on what they saw as an exploitative economic system and to generate more power to push for reforms.

Early socialist movements used these autarkic efforts to build their base with institutions like the Bourse de travail, socialist canteens and food assistance. These played a major role in securing workers' loyalty and building those parties into increasingly powerful institutions (especially in Europe) throughout the late 19th and early 20th-centuries. Through these cooperatives^[23] "workers bought Socialist bread and Socialist shoes, drank Socialist beer, arranged for Socialist vacations and obtained a Socialist education."

Local and regional farming autarkies in many areas of Africa and Southeast Asia were displaced^[24] by European colonial administrations in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, who sought to push smallholder villages into larger plantations that, while less productive, they could more easily control. The self-sufficient communities and societies ended by colonialism were later cited as a useful example by African anarchists^[25] in the late 20th century.

Communist movements embraced or dismissed autarky as a goal at different times. In her survey of anarchism in the late 1800s, Voltairine De Cleyre summarized^[26] the autarkic goals of early anarchist socialists and communists as "small, independent, self-resourceful, freely-operating communes." Some socialist communities like Charles Fourier's phalansteres strove for self-sufficiency. The early USSR in the Russian Civil War strove for a self-sufficient economy^[27] with War Communism, but later pursued international trade vigorously under the New Economic Policy. However, while the Soviet government during the latter period encouraged international trade, it also permitted and even encouraged^[28] local autarkies in many peasant villages.

Sometimes leftist groups clashed over autarkic projects. During the Spanish Civil War, the anarcho-syndicalist CNT and the socialist UGT had created economic cooperatives in the Levante that they claimed^[29] were "managing the economic life of the region independent of the government." But communist factions responded by cracking down on these cooperatives in an attempt to place economic control back in the hands of the central government.

Right-wing totalitarian governments that have also strived for autarky, developing national industry and imposing high tariffs but have crushed other autarky movements. In 1921, Italian Fascists attacked existing left-wing autarkic projects at the behest of large landowners, destroying roughly 119 labor chambers, 107 cooperatives and 83 peasant offices that year alone.^[30] Nazi Germany under economics minister Hjalmar Schacht strived for self-sufficiency but still pursued major international trade, albeit under a different system, to escape the terms of the Treaty of Versailles, satisfy business elites and prepare for war. The regime would continue to conduct trade, including with countries like the United States, including connections with major companies like IBM and Coca-Cola.^[31]

After World War II

Economic self-sufficiency was pursued as a goal by some members of the Non-Aligned Movement, such as India under Jawaharlal Nehru^[32] and Tanzania,^[33] under the ideology of Ujamaa^[34] and Swadeshi. That was partly an effort to escape the economic domination of both the United States and the Soviet Union while modernizing

the countries' infrastructure.

Small-scale autarkies were sometimes used by the Civil Rights Movement, such as in the case of the Montgomery Bus Boycott. Boycotters set up their own self-sufficient system of cheap or free transit to allow black residents to get to work and avoid using the then-segregated public systems in a successful effort to bring political pressure.

After World War II, Autonomist efforts in Europe embraced local autarkic projects in an effort to craft anti-authoritarian left-wing spaces, especially influencing the social center and squatters' rights movements. Such efforts remain a common feature of Autonomist and anarchist movements on the continent today. The Micropolis social centre in Greece, for example, has gyms, restaurants, bars, meeting space and free distribution of food and resources.^[35]

Around 1970, the Black Panther Party moved away from communist internationalism towards "intercommunalism," a term coined^[36] by Huey P. Newton, "to retain a grasp on the local when the rest of radical thought seemed to be moving global." Intercommunalism drew^[37] from left-wing autarkic projects like free medical clinics and breakfast programs, "explicitly articulated as attempts to fill a void left by the failure of the federal government to provide resources as basic as food to black communities."

Autarkic efforts to counter the forcible privatization of public resources and maintain local self-sufficiency also formed a key part of alter-globalization efforts. The Cochabamba Water War had Bolivians successfully oppose the privatization of their water system to keep the resource in public hands.^[38]

Contemporary

Today, national economic autarkies are relatively rare. A commonly-cited example is North Korea, based on the government ideology of Juche (self-reliance), which is concerned with maintaining its domestic localized economy in the face of its isolation. However, even North Korea has extensive trade with Russia, China, Syria, Iran, Vietnam, India and many countries in Europe and Africa. North Korea had to import food during a widespread famine in the 1990s.

A better modern example at a societal level is the autonomous region of Rojava, the autonomous northern region of Syria. Largely cut off from international trade, facing multiple enemies, and striving for a society based on democratic confederalism and the ideals of Murray Bookchin (who repeatedly referenced the Greek ideal of *autarkeia* as an essential part^[39] of the history of leftist efforts for local liberation) Rojava's government and constitution emphasize economic self-sufficiency^[40] directed by neighborhood and village councils. Under changes made in 2012 property and business belong to those who live in or use it towards that goal, while infrastructure, land and major resources are commons run by local and regional councils.

An example of a contemporary effort at localized autarky, incorporating the concept's history from black nationalism, Ujamaa, African-American socialism and the civil rights movement, is Cooperation Jackson,^[41] a movement aimed at creating a self-sufficient black working class economy in Jackson, Mississippi. The movement has aimed^[42] to secure land and build self-sufficient cooperatives and workplaces "to democratically transform the political economy of the city" and push back against gentrification. Cooperation Jackson also saw a gain in electoral political power when its involvement proved pivotal to the 2013 mayoral election of Chokwe Lumumba and the 2017 election of his son, Chokwe Antar Lumumba.

Support and opposition

Local autarky

- Anarcho-Primitivism
- Commune

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Societal autarky

Support

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Opposition

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- [Stateless communism](#)
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Macroeconomic theory

Support

- [Alexander Hamilton](#)
- [Alter-globalization](#)
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- [Murray Bookchin](#)
- [Celso Furtado](#)
- [Core-periphery model](#)
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Opposition

- Andre Gorz^[43]
- Austrian School of Economics
- Economic liberalism
- Free trade agreement
- Free trade
- Globalization
- Milton Friedman
- Neoclassical economics
- Privatization

Relevant microeconomic theory

- Fundamental theorems of welfare economics
- Robinson Crusoe economy

See also

- Domestic sourcing
- Swadeshi

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