



Episode 1,323: Agorism: Anti-Politics, Anti-State, Pro-Freedom Now

Guest: Victor Koman

WOODS: All right, so we're going to talk about Sam Konkin and his ideas and this *Counter-Economics* book that we have portions of, but that was intended to be, in effect, a magnum opus. Can we, before we get into the details of that book specifically, start with who he was?

KOMAN: Well, Sam was a Canadian from Edmonton, Alberta, and born in 1947. He studied at the University of Alberta, got his Bachelor of Science with honors, and then went to the University of Wisconsin for a couple of years. But his most important time was spent at New York University, where he met Murray Rothbard and Ludwig von Mises and others that sort of propelled his libertarian awareness, even though he started out as a social creditor, which is a Canadian party, and moved on to libertarianism, and then to invent his own expansion of libertarianism called agorism, from which *Counter-Economics* stems.

WOODS: All right, so let's talk about then agorism. I don't think I've talked about it much on the show, but I did play an interview I did on, of all things, Fox News Radio, where I shocked the hosts by mentioning it and talking about it. And I felt so subversive, because I thought, [laughing] *This Fox News audience has no idea what they're in for with this*. But I thought, what the heck, right? I mean, what's the point of being on the radio if you're just going to repeat talking points? So I did that. But explain what it is, because I think a lot of people, one of the interesting points that Sam makes is that a lot of people are already kind of living it, at least in some aspects of their lives.

KOMAN: Right, his theory was that government, any government, so intrudes on our lives, that it's almost impossible to conduct human action, von Mises' term, without violating some law or another. His favorite was: if you charge the same price as everybody else, you're guilty of collusion. If you charge more than somebody else here, you're guilty of monopolistic practices. If you charge less than somebody else, you're basically undercutting the market and engaging in harmful activity. So he'd like to say, and I'm sure other people have said this, that he breaks three laws before breakfast. So his theory was that people act, and when they act in their own enlightened self-interest, they have to act in violation of the government which seeks to control your actions and basically suck out your essence, either money or will or psychological well-being. He was a great believer in psychic profit as opposed to monetary profit. He supported both, but when people asked him, *Why aren't you doing something that'll make you rich?* he said he gets much more psychic profit from his activism.

WOODS: So he looked at the world and said there are two ways we can interact with each other: coercively and non-coercively. Coercively is the nature of the state and non-coercively

is the marketplace, and never the twain shall meet. So therefore, what was his view then of politics?

KOMAN: Oh, he was against it. He opposed the Libertarian Party. He was one of the first people to write in opposition to the concept of a Libertarian Party. He said how can you say, *We believe in human freedom and human action and rights and all that, so please put us in charge of your life and your rights and your freedom?* He was a long-time — in fact, one of the most famous exchanges was between Sam and Dave Nolan, one of the founders of the LP. So the Nolan-Konkin letters were in early issues of *New Libertarian* and maybe *Reason*, I'm not sure. I'd have to look back on that. I've got an Excel spreadsheet of all of his publications and all of his appearances and other publications, and it's pretty extensive. He was a very prolific writer.

WOODS: All right, so politics is out for that reason, but that does not mean by any means that therefore we have no recourse. There are other things we can do in the here and now. Rather than just theorize about a free society someday, there are steps we can take in the immediate run. Now, what do those look like?

KOMAN: Well, one of his theories was the most people, as you said, are acting counter-economically, even though they don't know it. Now, he coined the term "counter-economics" in the same sense of counterculture, as being an alternate, underground culture that opposed the current culture, at least back in the '60s. And counter-economics is economics that is outside of the realm of government economics or the economics of the court economists. So as an example, when you don't report all of your income on your taxes, because he did some cash work, well, you're behaving counter-economically. Now, you think you're just trying to save a few dollars, but you're also subconsciously opposing the state and the state's restrictions on you and the state's fingers in your wallet. So the book *Counter-Economics* goes into a number of things. The very first thing he starts with is tax counter-economics. That's chapter one.

And then he goes on to counter-economics in other countries. And of course, since he wrote this in the early 1980s, one of his favorite examples of how counter-economics can't be crushed by even the most powerful states, he has a chapter devoted to Soviet counter-economics and how, even in the Soviet Union, in order to get things done, the commissars, or at least the lower level apparatchiks, had to resort to counter-economics, buying things on the black market, giving higher wages to people, and just reporting lower wages just to motivate people and get things done. One of the greatest de-motivators in the world is government, and that leads to economic collapse, but it collapses not because the government can't do anything at all, even though that was his theory, but because people will act in defiance of the government without even thinking that they're defying the government. They're just trying to get something done, and they think the laws against getting something done are stupid. And that's how counter-economics can collapse entire government economies.

WOODS: Right, right, right. In fact, in that chapter, he says something like, the more the government is involved in the economy, the larger becomes the counter-economy.

KOMAN: Right. He was a big fan of *Star Wars*, and of course, one of his favorite lines from *Star Wars* is you know, "The more you tighten your grip, the more worlds will slip through your fingers." And that's counter-economics at its very essence. The more a state cracks down

on human activity, the greater the counter-economy grows. So you could conceivably have a very laissez-faire government where there's practically no counter-economy because nothing is really illegal or controlled by the state.

WOODS: Let me give a couple of just simple, basic, mundane examples of ways in which even your next-door neighbor might be participating in the counter-economy without realizing it. For example, if you have a yard sale — I mean, now I don't have yard sales, so if the IRS is listening, don't bother, because I don't have them. But if you do, are you really paying taxes on the money you're making on that yard sale? I find that highly unlikely.

KOMAN: [laughing] Or the bottles you recycle.

WOODS: [laughing] Right.

KOMAN: Yes, all those things people don't report, even though they're legally obligated to — lottery winnings. Lottery winnings is a big one. Anything under a few hundred bucks doesn't really get reported. You go to the store, you turn in your lottery ticket, and you get your money. So all of those are —

WOODS: Yeah, or for example, if like me, you have a radar detector. Well, what is the point of a radar detector if not to evade the state? And I did it specifically for that reason. I'd been pulled over for some dumb reason, and I just said to myself, *That is it. I am never giving these people one more dime*, and sitting there, I ordered it right on my phone before I even started driving again. That is it. So in other words, we all do this to some degree. But I guess for me, what I find a little bit scary about counter-economics is — I mean, maybe I don't fully understand what he's driving at, but I mean, I guess there's got to be some extent to which you have to use prudence here. I mean, unless you want everybody to wind up in prison, you have to figure out where the possibilities for building or operating within the counter-economy are.

KOMAN: Sam's goal was to increase self-awareness in people to realize that counter-economics and the black market — the underground economy, whatever you want to call it, the counter economy as he called — is not something that's far off and distance and run by guys in overcoats and slouch hats, that the counter economy is something we live every day. And if he could make people aware of that, he could build a counterculture of counter-economists in which people mutually support one another. They don't see a lemonade stand and call the health department and say, "I don't think these kids have a permit. Come on and crack down on them." He was very against counter-economics snitches. He believed that if he could create this awareness where people consciously are acting counter-economically and consciously calculate the risk versus reward of acting counter-economically, that he could build the counter-economy and build an agorist movement that could basically replace the state.

WOODS: Now, he had some critics on at least — I mean, the general idea — you know, if you agree with us that there's a serious moral problem with the state, then the general idea should be totally unobjectionable. It would only be the practicality of it. And so Rothbard, for example, said, I could see how you could apply this in some cases, but I don't see how you could have a counter-economy, let's say, for heavy industry that has to be largely visible and above board and everybody would know that it's there. How does he respond to things like that?

KOMAN: Well, he says there's really no size — he states that giant industries right now are behaving counter-economically, whether it's the oil industry changing shipping manifests to say they're shipping to one place, but actually go someplace else and just the paperwork has made the moves. And even now it's even more easy with electronics. The paper doesn't even have to move; just the digits move. He inspired my novel *Kings of the High Frontier*, and in one of the sequences, I have a character who owns a gun manufacturing company, and by day, they manufacture guns with serial numbers and everything like that, and the midnight shift is run with a skeleton crew or even robotically, where guns without serial numbers are made and sold to individuals to families in the barrio that need to protect themselves, groups in Somalia that are opposing the gangs that are running around there. So there are many ways in which they could operate counter-economically. And a lot of them do on an international scale. Between governments, there's a lot — he always said that anarchy exists between governments, because there's no super-government — despite the existence of the UN. That is not a world government — and therefore, countries have to behave, nations have to behave amongst one another as if they're already in an anarchy with no law governing their actions.

WOODS: Right.

KOMAN: Which some countries ignore at will and other countries go along with. And he views that as a sort of corrupt form of the mutual cooperation that comes with living in an anarchy.

WOODS: Let me give one more example of something that I think will help people see that this is not as, I don't want to say far out, as they might think. And that is the homeschooling movement, because that's now more or less mainstream. And that just began with people saying: we're going to do this. And there were all kinds of obstacles thrown in the faces of these people, but when you got to a point where the sheer numbers would have made it impossible to suppress it — I mean, yeah, okay, they could have rolled the tanks in and murdered everybody, but the point is that nobody has the political capital to get away with that. It just eventually became a sphere of life that civil society had carved out for itself against the state. It happened. I mean, that actually happened. And then it's no longer part of the counter-economy, really; it just becomes part of ordinary life. So do you think that's a good example?

KOMAN: Sure, and in fact, he was a lifelong supporter of homeschooling and keeping kids out of government indoctrination camps. So that fits in very well with his philosophy. And the whole idea of counter-economics was to become so accepted and so understood — being understood is the most important part — that it becomes accepted and becomes the economy. One of his chapters is "Why Isn't the Counter-Economy the Economy?" — one of his unwritten chapters — and he explains that it's mostly self-awareness. People aren't aware that they're behaving counter-economically.

WOODS: I'd like you to take a minute to tell me a little bit about the history of this book, specifically, *Counter-Economics*, and how it fits into Sam's life, because I don't know the actual history of how it — I mean, I know that this was going to be his magnum opus, but apparently it was recently rediscovered. I mean, did somebody literally find it under something? What's the story there?

KOMAN: [laughing] Okay. Originally — now, he had already written a couple of books. One was called *New Libertarian Manifesto*, which in fact, Murray Rothbard and Robert LaFave and Erwin Strauss, otherwise known as "Filthy Pierre," wrote rebuttals to, and he then wrote

rebuttals to the rebuttals, and they're all in the 25th anniversary edition. He wrote that and self-published it in 1980, along with the rebuttals, in something called *Strategy of the New Libertarian Alliance*. And I collected all of those in 2005 and republished it in a paperback edition. So he wrote *New Libertarian Manifesto*, and that got circulated and read and reviewed and so on. He also wrote something called *An Agorist Primer*, which was going to be an introduction to agorism, or agorism — I think he preferred accent on the "gor," so he said agorism. I just think agorism rolls off the tongue better.

WOODS: Yeah, me too. Yeah, he wasn't infallible.

KOMAN: [laughing] Yeah, well, when it comes to English, being Canadian, he was. He put his U in labour and humour and stuff like that.

WOODS: Ah, okay, yeah.

KOMAN: But so he wrote those books. And of course, he had *New Libertarian* in all its incarnations, *New Libertarian Weekly*, *New Libertarian*, the magazine, and so on, so he was he was very well known in the movement. *The Agorist Primer*, he started the Agorist Institute and tried to make that the interface that had some success. They published one issue of the *Agorist Quarterly*, which was supposed to be the scholarly arm of the libertarian movement.

So he started working on what he intended to be a mainstream book called *Counter-Economics*, and the original idea, he was there with another author. I won't name him because he didn't get around to finishing anything. But they were going to alternate chapters. He would do theory, and this other author would do examples in the popular culture. And the idea there was that it would be a not too-deep, very easy introduction to counter-economics, but it would be comprehensive. So he wrote six chapters and an outline and circulated it, and he was fond of saying the feedback that he got was "most pleasing." One of them, in fact, called it "the worst example of libertarian excess," something like that. He took that as a note of pride. But it circulated to major publishers, and there was very little interest. So he shelved it and went on to the other things he was doing.

He gave me the manuscript, the TypeScript manuscript of *Counter-Economics* and said, "See if you can do something with it." I held on to it for years intending to — when he passed away, I intended to finish it. He died in 2004, so I intended to write out the rest of the chapters; since I was a writer and had had three Prometheus award-winning novels, I figured I could also handle his voice and his concepts, but I never got around to it. So a couple of years ago, I guess — yeah, I guess it was last year — J. Neil Schulman approached me and said, "You know, you've got Sam's manuscript. Do something with it." He was also inspired by Sam, his novel and movie *Alongside Night* are the best distillation of counter-economics, according to Sam, in fictional form.

So I had the manuscript. I had scanned it in, and over the years, I was cleaning up the scan and correcting any errors that resulted from a very primitive scan back in the '90s. And I started looking through his emails, because I sort of inherited all of his files and some of his disks, and I found a mention years ago of him writing to someone who wanted to put *Counter-Economics* online. And he said, *Sure, you know, Victor gave me a copy of the scan. Let me see if I can find it.* But I — I, Victor — could not find anything in that email chain that said he delivered them, and obviously the book wasn't online. But it let me know that his wishes weren't that the book be finished, or rather, withheld until it's finished, that it would be

made available. So chastened, I created an epub version of the book, including the outline of the missing chapters, and put that online. Now, there were allegedly four more chapters, chapters seven through ten, that would have completed everything that he had on the book, but I can't find it. I have two of his laptops. I have a Jasmine drive that is no longer readable. I have a Bernoulli drive that I went through, actually connected it to one of the laptops, checked everything on there for anything that could be the chapters, and could find nothing. So I don't know where they are. Neil says that he may have them, electronic versions. I can't believe that Sam wouldn't have made multiple copies. But those are temporarily lost, but if we find them I will add them to the book, and new versions of the book will be available on Smashwords if it came about to that, for whoever bought the book and downloaded the latest version. I think that's how it works.

So he didn't finish it and he died. So what exists? I think that if anyone wanted to use his outline as a guide, each chapter could be a book in itself, with a proper counter-economic outlook. So you know, he lost chapters were "Smuggling Counter-Economics" — he was a big fan of smuggling — "Transportation Counter-Economics," such as citizen banned — you mentioned radar. I've known Sam since 1975, and one of our favorite songs between the anarcho village crowd was "Convoy." So we would go around singing "Convoy" as we were going to science fiction conventions and stuff. And each chapter had sub-headings like "Moving People Counter-Economically," "Air Counter-Economics," "Space Counter-Economics." "Energy Counter-Economics" was another chapter, and "Human Counter-Economics." So those are the chapters that may exist. And the unwritten chapters are "Dissenters and Intellectual Counter-Economics," "Sex Counter-Economics," "Feminist Counter-Economics." Now, it's interesting that he covered the home birth movement when it was still illegal, and now of course, it's the normal thing, so this is another example of the counter-economy just causing the state to throw up his hands and say, *Okay, whatever*. So now, home birth, I don't think it's illegal anywhere, and it's a common thing. So he would have scored that as a win if he'd lived to see that become almost the norm rather than the exception.

"Justice Counter-Economics," one of the most one of the biggest objections to agorism and counter-economics is the problem of justice. He had to deal with it many times. So this would have been his chapter on "Justice Counter-Economics." He believed in insurance and arbitration and also in a sort of a free-market counter-economic recovery team, that if somebody steals from you, you have the right to get that property restored, plus time use lost, which is like an originary rate of interest on the lost value, the time loss value. But he didn't believe in punishment. He didn't believe if somebody steals your car that you can go steal your car back and then blow up that guy's car or something. He didn't believe in anything beyond actual restitution and time loss. So he called it natural law enforcement. He believed in arbitration and so on.

"Psychology Counter-Economics" was another one. He was not a fan of psychology, but he understood that people have psychological issues that need to be addressed, and one of the way of addressing them was this book. Why should you feel guilty for indulging in the black market or engaging in a counter-economic action? He believed that mutual reinforcement was the best way to counter authoritarianism.

And finally, the last part of his book would have been a couple of chapters of real theory, like he would explain praxeology, which is the study of human action, von Mises'. He'd explain the capital pyramid of Eugen Bawerk and so on. He'd explain why counter-economics works, how it works, and then opposition or people who opposed counter-economics. He wanted to deal

with any objections to it or dead-ends. And this was his list of dead-ends: "Conservatism, liberalism, socialism, anarchism, varieties of libertarianism, pacifism, dropping out, and retreatism will all be trotted out, defined, sketched, and refuted as means of achieving a free society, again drawing heavily on the reader's experience of the rest of the book to keep it short and sweet, or quick and deadly. Once all the other options are eliminated, that will leave the final chapter, 'Social Counter-Economics,' which is the idea of building a mutually reinforcing society of people who understand why they need to act in opposition to the state or in total ignorance or defiance of the state and why that's a good thing not to feel guilty about it."

WOODS: I want to ask you a couple of really practical questions that probably would occur to people. First one that occurs to me is, presumably if I'm part of the counter-economy, I don't want to unnecessarily call attention to myself. I don't want to invite trouble for no good reason. But then in that case, how do I draw more people in if I have to kind of keep my head down?

KOMAN: Well, this is where he would have loved the current state of encryption and targeted marketing, because in the past, yes, advertising, if you were dealing drugs, you couldn't take out an ad in the paper and say, "Come and get your pot here." So most advertising is word of mouth. He strongly believed in word of mouth. But now in the age of the dark web and encryption, you can market your products specifically to people who are either, A) interested, or B) vetted by whatever system allows people onto that particular network. So you can advertise and build a group around you that is both mutually supportive and mutually protective. They won't rat you out; you won't rat them out. And if anybody infiltrates, infiltrators can be pushed out as soon as they're discovered. And there comes a point — his theory — that when the counter-economy becomes so big that it is bringing in more money than the state and the state is starved for funds, that the state just relents and shrinks or goes away. Or the most likely that we're probably seeing right now is violent death throes, where statists are thrashing all about and attacking everything in sight. And as we've seen on the left, starts attacking itself because it has nothing left to attack but deviationists.

WOODS: All right, and then I guess lastly, the most raw, fundamental question of them all, which is: I don't want to go to prison. How do I do this without going to prison?

KOMAN: Well, again, how many people are going to prison right now for violating the federal laws against marijuana? The counter-economy became so big, so many people smoked marijuana or tried marijuana, and whether they liked it or didn't like it, they didn't think it was that big a deal, that this counterculture plus the counter-economy of people that didn't think the government should be involved in pot criminalization eventually resulted in some states such as California and Colorado relenting, some federal agencies such as the Justice Department under Obama said, *Eh, we're not going to enforce that. We're not going to bother*, that eventually there is no risk. So the idea is to grow the counter-economy, increase self-awareness until such point that the government can't send everybody to jail. And right now with tax evasion, that seems to be pretty common, if they only prosecute a few high-value, high-profile people like Wesley Snipes and hope that that keeps everybody else in line and fearful. But the odds of getting caught for any crime are about 10%. I mean by the government's own statistics, which Sam quotes in the book, he always believed in conducting a risk-versus-reward analysis of each action that you intend to take that you know is illegal but is actually not immoral. He was a strong moralist. So he believed that agorism is the moral option to statism or authoritarianism.

WOODS: Well, it's interesting that these days, like if I talked to a lot of young libertarians, Sam's name doesn't come up that much. They tend to be more plugged into maybe more mainstream voices, and yet it's to the young people that I look for refreshing radicalism. So maybe some of them will listen and be exposed to something new and different, because doggone it, we could at the very least stand to have a multiplicity of strategies operating side by side and see which one wins, certainly. But certainly I would like to see people check out what Sam wrote and, in particular, this work *Counter-Economics*. I'm going to link to it on the show notes page. This is Episode 1323, so it'll be TomWoods.com/1323. The book is *Counter-Economics: From the Back Alleys to the Stars*. Victor, any final words before we depart?

KOMAN: Well, he would have loved the number 1323, because he was a discordian a big fan of Robert Anton Wilson on Robert Shae's *Illuminatus*. And second, did we say his actual full name, Samuel Edward Konkin III?

WOODS: We did not.

KOMAN: [laughing] Okay, Samuel Edward Konkin III, my dear friend Sam, or SEK III, as he was also known. So if you just type in the word "agorism" in Google, they haven't blocked it yet. You'll find all sorts of young people doing stuff about agorism, some of them crediting Sam and some not. Some don't even know; it's just a great word and a great concept, and that's how ideas permeate into the zeitgeist.

WOODS: Well, that really is — when you're actually pursuing an idea and you have no idea where it came from, then it really has permeated. In a way, it's almost better that they don't know, because it means that we've gotten past just the personality aspect of it and we've got right to the idea. Well, I've really appreciated your time and very interesting conversation. So again, TomWoods.com/1323 is the quickest way to find a link to pick up that book. Thank you very much, Victor.

KOMAN: Thank you. I enjoyed it.

