

Chomsky, Anarchism, and Socialism

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FOR SEVERAL YEARS I worked closely with an anarchist youth collective in Indianapolis that ran a left-wing bookstore. While they were a bold, feisty group of determined activists (a welcome change from the timid and hidebound peace church "progressives" that dominate the left in Indianapolis) with whom I very much enjoyed working, I did find their anti-intellectualism disquieting. When I raised this to one of the members of the collective as a blemish on their otherwise sterling radical commitment and activity, he objected, "But we have people who don't even read Chomsky!"

That makes this Noam Chomsky collection published in 2007, *Chomsky on Anarchism*, all the more relevant. Good activism requires good intellect and knowledge, and activism alone is simply insufficient, and ultimately ineffective, without these. Which makes it even more disquieting; for, I'm afraid, these young anarchist youth "who don't even read Chomsky" would find this compact volume simply above their heads — for all the wrong reasons. For Chomsky is nothing if not erudite, knowledgeable and scholarly, truly the MIT professor he is both as anarchist and as distinguished linguist. He is indeed these, even though he can also be repetitive, simplistic, and given to misplaced sarcasm — all of which can be found in *Chomsky on Anarchism*, but which judicious editing and selection has thankfully kept to a minimum. Which means *Chomsky on Anarchism*, a compendium of selected interviews, essays and book excerpts from 1969 to 2004, plays on Chomsky's strengths — his erudition, knowledge, and scholarly approach — and much less on his weaknesses. This makes *Chomsky on Anarchism* both valuable and informative, even for those of us on the left who question his basic anarchist premises.

Chomsky is quite straightforward about the appeal anarchism holds for him. He raises it at the beginning of an interview from 1995, where he notes that he was drawn to anarchism as a teenager because it expressed to him "the conviction that the burden of proof has to be placed on authority, and that it should be dismantled if that burden cannot be met." (p. 178) But he also affirms the desirability of democracy and generally accepting community norms unless they are intolerable (and for Chomsky, mere disagreement with them is insufficient for violating them), and objects to the notion (held by many other anarchists) that democracy is simply "a tyranny of the majority." Chomsky further refuses to conflate democracy with parliamentary or legislative rule, and bluntly notes that the Founding Fathers wished to establish a system that, while democratic as compared to the political systems then extant in Europe, would first and foremost prevent "crimes" against property, and that U.S. legislative democracy was used in the 19th century to uphold both the chattel slavery of Blacks as well as the wage slavery of industrial workers. (p. 182) So there is much in Chomsky's somewhat unorthodox notion of anarchism (many anarchists see Chomsky as essentially a reformist) that we "state socialists" would agree with, defend and applaud! Indeed, much that as a Marxist I could readily accept, so already there is an important political common ground here.[1]

Of course, an important parting of the ways between anarchists and many socialists occurs on the nature of the Bolshevik Revolution and its course, not just on Stalin and afterwards, but also on the nature of the Revolution under Lenin and Trotsky. Here Chomsky gets simplistic, as not only does he question whether the Bolsheviks were harbingers of socialism at all, but also, he sees the authoritarian rule of Lenin and Trotsky as laying the foundations for the totalitarian rule of Stalin, and sees the demise of an authentically working-class, democratic socialism in Russia and elsewhere as stemming in part from the doctrines and practices of Marx and Engels themselves.[2] The nefariousness of the Bolsheviks is a topic extensively featured in *Chomsky on Anarchism*.

Against Leninism and Bolshevism Chomsky upholds for keen political insight not only Bakunin (whom he holds as prophetic); Daniel Guérin, for whose *Anarchism: From Theory to Practice* he wrote an introduction; and anarchist theorists Rudolf Rocker, Emma Goldman, and Alexander Berkman; but also Marxists such as Rosa Luxemburg, Paul Mattick, Anton Pannekoek, Karl Korsch and even the pre-Bolshevik Trotsky, whom he sees as libertarian foils and correct prognosticators of Leninism and its disastrously authoritarian, anti-socialist consequences.[3] Chomsky's position on Leninism, while oversimplified, is not without elements of merit and political insight for revolutionary socialists to seriously consider.

For Chomsky, the democratic aspirations and practices of the "primitives" are the core of any truly socialist revolution, and their democratic self-determination its very heart and soul. *Chomsky on Anarchism* devotes three substantive sections to affirming this: first, Chomsky's discussion of the initial anarchist success and later destruction of the Spanish Revolution of 1936-1939 (pp. 40-74); and again, in the resistance to dismantling egalitarianism in the former Communist countries by the working people there (pp. 196-198), and of factory workers and organized labor in the United States in the 19th and early 20th centuries (pp. 202-205).

Suppressing this "inner nature" through elitist manipulation of people's consciousness and outright imposition of anti-democratic values and practices by technocratic intellectuals serving private and state-sponsored tyrannies, both "socialist" and capitalist, is a key concept in Chomsky's political thought, and is discussed at length a number of places in *Chomsky on Anarchism*, notably in regard to the "pacification" of Vietnam in the 1960s (pp. 11-39, 74-75); the "engineering of consent" and dulling of the "instinct for freedom" in the political, economic, and social realm of modern societies against the "rabble" (pp. 158-172); and the role of Taylorism and the undermining of the liberating aspects of labor-saving technology to impose and maintain "industrial feudalism" (pp. 224-230).[4] For Chomsky, there is a direct confluence of ideas in the elitist notions of liberal capitalist intellectuals such as Daniel Bell (of *End of Ideology* fame), Walter Lippmann, and Edward Bernays, "father of public relations," and the "Leninist idea of a vanguard party that leads the stupid masses to a better life that they cannot conceive or construct on their own." (See p. 41 for Bell, pp. 167-169 for Bernays and Lippmann. The quote on Leninism occurs on p. 169.) While some of this "confluence" is a typically Chomskian oversimplification, there's a strong kernel of truth to it that dare not be denied, dismissed, or ignored by we of the Marxist left. Just think of Richard Nixon chummily hobnobbing with "Leninists" Mao Zedong and Leonid Brezhnev!

Another oversimplification by Chomsky here lies in his negative view of intellectuals, which deterministically reduces them to careerists, commissars, or apologists, regardless of ideology. Perhaps it's just in the hyperbolic and absolute way he describes intellectuals, but, by Chomsky's own use of language, he can't describe how a Noam Chomsky could arise out of this pile of bought-off satraps called the intelligentsia! Starting with a very valid distinction between "aristocrats" and "democrats" which he attributes to Thomas Jefferson, he then asserts that this distinction was further developed by Bakunin, who predicted the rise of a "new class" of intellectuals who would impose their rule on the masses in the form of a "Red bureaucracy" should a Marxist movement come to power. (pp. 205-6) However, Chomsky does develop out of this a very telling critique of the intellectual faddishness of Postmodernism and especially Derrida, and properly calls on "young radical activists" not to be "intimidated by the incomprehensible gibberish that [often] comes out of left-wing intellectual movements . . . which is just impossible to understand." What this "incomprehensible gibberish" does, in his eyes, is "[make] people feel they're not going to do anything because, unless I somehow understand the latest version of post-modern this and that, I can't go out in the streets and organize people, because I'm not bright enough." (p. 217)

As with the confluence notion above, despite Chomsky's oversimplification there is an important kernel of truth in what Chomsky expresses; once again, a kernel the left ignores only at its own peril.

And yes, some intellectuals are indeed "aristocrats," of both the capitalist and "communist" variety. But others choose to be "democrats," learned tribunes of the people — and among them are many of the people Chomsky expresses admiration for in this book, not to mention Chomsky himself!

Indeed, there are many kernels of truth contained in *Chomsky on Anarchism*, much that is perceptive, insightful, and establishes common political ground between those who are more traditional socialists and those who are anarchists. Of especial interest in this regard is the discussion of the nature and restructuring of work (pp. 141-148) and the nature of language, and how it relates to freedom (pp. 101-114).

Especially relevant here for establishing common ground for productive political work that unites both socialists and anarchists is Chomsky's limited, pragmatic support for state authority in order to protect the people's rights and gains, which even calls for a strengthening of state authority in some cases. (pp. 193, 214, and 231)

This is the traditional socialist notion of using the state to advance the people's struggle, to achieve positive gains for the people. Chomsky even admits he votes, especially in local elections, but also supports voting for Greens and other independents in national ones. Common political ground between socialists and anarchists indeed.

And last, *Chomsky on Anarchism* even offers us left activists important caveats for improving and strengthening our work, and not simply getting stuck in the routine of going to meeting after meeting despite the lack of results. One of those caveats, as expressed above, is brooking no tolerance for "incomprehensible gibberish" from supposedly left-wing intellectuals. Two others involve considering the dangers inherent even in democratically structured meetings, and properly emphasizing the importance of tactics as well as principles. Chomsky writes very perspicaciously on the last:

Talk of tactics sounds sort of trivial, but it is not. Tactical choices are the ones that have real human consequences. We can try to go beyond the more general strategic choices — speculatively and with open minds — but beyond that we descend into abstract generalities. Tactics have to do with decisions about what to do next, they have real human consequences. (p. 237)

In short, *Chomsky on Anarchism* is a valuable political text on a myriad number of subjects. Which is precisely why the book's lack of an index is a glaring flaw in an otherwise highly useful and valuable book.