

Anarchism, the Chomsky Effect and the Descent from the Ivory Tower¹

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Noam Chomsky's commitment to work beyond the ivory tower, which has made him the occasional target of popular media (in terms of his having been idolized, ignored, misrepresented, or censored), is based upon a truly radical conception of society.

His work places him in the company of intellectual figures like Albert Einstein Zellig Harris, Seymour Melman, Bertrand Russell and Edward Said, who have also pursued radical political work beyond academia, while making lasting contributions to their respective fields. Chomsky explicitly and implicitly recalls ideas proposed by anarchists and anarcho-syndicalists like Michael Bakunin and (especially) Rudolph Rocker, Council Communists like Karl Korsch, Rosa Luxembourg, Paul Mattick, and Anton Pannekoek.² He also cites conceptions of the "good society" upheld more recently and in varying ways, by the likes of Michael Albert, Murray Bookchin, and Howard Zinn. His views on Israel and Palestine harken back to idealist conceptions about the socialist state that proponents of the Kibbutz Artzi planned to erect in Palestine, and by various organizations that favored increased cooperation between oppressed Arabs, Jews, and Palestinians in the Middle East and beyond, such as Avukah, Hashomer Hatzair, and the League for Arab-Jewish Cooperation.

These ideas have great currency for Chomsky on account of his early influences, which included intense discussions to which he was privy during visits with a remarkable uncle who ran a newsstand and a kind of spontaneous literary political salon on 72nd Street in New York City. This model of intense, open-ended discussion remains critical for Chomsky and is one of the legacies of his own approach when he meets with individuals, whether in his MIT office or in the course of rallies, talks, or discussions beyond the ivory tower. Referencing his approach to linguistics research, Chomsky has remarked that

very few people do scientific work by sitting alone in their office all their lives. You talk to graduate students, you hear what they have to say, you bounce ideas off your colleagues. That's the way you get ideas, that's the way you figure out what you think. That's the way, and in political life or social life, it's exactly the same thing. ("Old Wine, New Bottles," 1993, February 10)

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I hope to show that Chomsky is popular (and unpopular) for a range of reasons, but few people, I think, realize that his objective, like that of the Catalonians earlier this century, is none other than a radical overturning of society as we know it today.

Intellectual Origins

Chomsky was born in 1928 in Philadelphia into a noteworthy family. His father, William, was described in a 1977 New York Times obituary as “one of the world’s foremost Hebrew grammarians.”³ Chomsky’s mother, who taught alongside his father at the religious school of the Mikveh Israel congregation, is remembered for her intellect and her uncompromising approach to critical concerns for the family, which included Zionism, the Hebrew language, and, of course, Jewish cultural affairs. The son expanded his array of formative influences through his readings, notably of anarchist and anti-Bolshevik writers and, beginning in 1945, through direct contact with people at the University of Pennsylvania, including his teacher and mentor Zellig Harris (Barsky, *in press*). Harris’s influence upon Chomsky’s general approach to questions of language and politics is substantial; indeed, many people claim intellectual debts to Harris. All of this suggests that understanding Noam Chomsky demands an investment in careful study of formative influences and of the ways in which he has updated historical approaches (inspired by Enlightenment thinking and anarchist work) to accord with the complexities and challenges of contemporary society.

The simultaneous study of historical works and Chomsky’s own thinking helps contextualize in particular Chomsky’s approach to the “good society,” and the extreme distance that must be traveled to see a manifestation of this society in our lives. Not only does Chomsky consider that these ideals could be achieved, he also insists in his historical writings (and there are many) that we look back to past moments when concrete advances were made in that direction. For example, social advances occurred in Catalonia until the victory of Franco’s fascists, and a range of other powers, including the British, Soviets, and Americans, chipped in to destroy populist movements and free associations set up in variance with the more brutal model of contemporary capitalism.

Chomsky’s commitment to a radical overturning of society makes him quite different from so-called “public intellectuals.” Indeed, some of his earliest writings outside of the field of linguistics were critical of the New Mandarins, who are regularly summoned by elites to legitimize or explain (justifiably) unpopular legislation to those deemed too ignorant or stupid to understand. “Contrary to widespread belief and self-serving doctrine produced by the intelligentsia themselves,” he wrote

the fact is that, by and large, intellectuals have tended to be submissive and obedient to one or another state—generally their own, though naturally episodes of apologetics for foreign states tend to receive more attention, conformity to domestic power being tacitly assumed as the norm. (Chomsky, 1981, p. 24)

Chomsky's Anarchy

Many people express surprise when they learn that Chomsky's views are this radical—"anarchist"—because they equate anarchy with violence and chaos, or with some brand of unattainable, and therefore undesirable, idealism. Chomsky persistently emphasizes the anticapitalist, procooperative and spontaneous roots of anarchism and the many ties it has, especially in the United States, to the history of the working class. The spontaneity of anarchist uprisings is important, since it suggests a natural accord between anarchy, actual human needs (when they are freely expressed), and the natural propensities of human beings for creativity and cooperation. Perhaps this is the reason for the historically valid perception that, if allowed to spread, true anarchy would find deeply rooted popular support. And Chomsky hastens to point out that this occurs despite the lousy press that anarchism has received over time, press that makes a rather convenient link in people's minds to that which is violent, uncontrollable, and menacing.

There are historical reasons for the link frequently made between anarchy and violence, including the (justifiable) lack of an institutional basis for anarchism and a collective amnesia that many anarchist ideas grew from historical precedents, such as the loose and free association of groups in ancient Greece and, more recently, the workings of certain segments of Spanish society in the 1930s. Instead, the legacy of anarchy that remains for many people grows out of memories of anarchy's so-called "terrorist phases," including one which lasted from March of 1892 until June of 1894, during which time nine people were killed, and numerous others wounded in 11 separate detonations in France, all linked in some way to anarchists. As Mina Graur suggests, in a recent biography of anarchist Rudolph Rocker

that was the time when the stereotype of the vile anarchist, a dagger in his hand and a fuming bomb in his pocket, was planted in the public's mind. The press and the police did their best to reinforce this image and frighten the public with the specter of the "great international anarchist conspiracy." (Graur, 1997, p. 90)

However, this image is far from the anarchy proposed by the likes of Chomsky, who in turn has been influenced by a range of anarchists, including Rocker.

Chomsky and Zionism

If Chomsky's anarchy has been cause for confusion for supporters and detractors, his views on Judaism and Israel have been a source of veritable bewilderment for many more. Once again, though, Chomsky's views on Israel and Palestine hearken back to a corpus of idealist historical works, notably conceptions about the socialist state that was to be erected in Palestine by proponents of the Kibbutz Artzi and by various organizations that favored increased cooperation between the oppressed (Arabs, Jews, Palestinians) in the Middle East and beyond.

In this respect as well, Chomsky is quite similar to Rocker, who befriended a series of radical Jewish groups in France, which were quite distant from what today would

be considered “Zionist” organizations and which, even then, stood apart from other organizations or Jewish radicals. Graur (1997, p. x) writes:

Unlike the Bund, which supported Otto Bauer’s formula of an extraterritorial autonomy as a solution to the Jewish national problem, or the Zionists, who favored political self-determination in the form of a Jewish state, the radical Jews in Paris treated Jewish national self-determination as an essentially non-national issue. Instead, they regarded the problem as part of a more general social question, which would, accordingly, be resolved by means of an all-engulfing social revolution. Rocker was fascinated by these anarchists who embodied in their very existence the Bakuninist type of revolutionary, dedicating themselves, body and soul, to the idea of the revolutionary.

In fact, Chomsky has much in common with a range of early radical Zionists about whom many people (including contemporary Zionists) know very little, largely because their ideals have been replaced by organizations and individuals who actively link Zionism to organized religion or Israeli state politics. As the son of one of this century’s great Hebrew scholars, and himself a highly trained reader of Hebrew texts, Chomsky is also very much the Jewish intellectual, who speaks of his admiration for the general questioning approach of Jews to their world and to the types of close readings proposed by scholars of the Talmud. He recalls:

I was raised in a Jewish tradition and I learned Hebrew very young. My parents were both professors of Hebrew. They observed religious customs without being themselves very religious. It is necessary to realize in fact that Judaism is a religion founded upon the carrying out of certain rights, but it does not require an act of faith. You can be an observant Jew while at the same time be an atheist. My wife was raised in the same milieu as me. Neither of us are either believers nor observers. I continue to read the Hebrew press and Hebrew literature, and I am profoundly implicated in questions that were of concern to me during my childhood (*Le Monde* September 1, 1998, my translation).

This will sound strange to some readers who have come to associate Chomsky with a complex anti-Zionism or even anti-Judaism attitude on account of his critique of Israeli militarism or his defense of Robert Faurisson’s write to conduct research about the Holocaust. The former is consistent with his general approach to states which act as aggressors, and therefore has nothing to do with Judaism, and the latter is consistent with his Enlightenment-inspired approach to freedom of speech and inquiry (Barsky, in press).

Unleashing Human Potential

Chomsky is unlike other popular figures from the sciences such as Jacques Cousteau, Stephen J. Gould, Stephen Hawking, Carl Sagan, Benjamin Spock or David Suzuki, because his views are more contentious. He makes many people unhappy. There are linguists who feel that they have not received from him their due, Zionists who consider his views on Israel painfully similar to those upheld by anti-Zionists, and a range of people who have been swayed by arguments suggesting that his approach to East Timor, academic freedom, Pol Pot, the United States, Israel, or, moreover, Faurisson, are unacceptable.

One point I would insist upon, however, is that as much as Chomsky tries to convince people that his views are accurate, he does not prescribe a formula for appropriate behavior or accurate thinking. What is interesting about his belief in a recognizable and (eventually) knowable human nature is the concomitant effort, everywhere apparent in his work, to postulate a set of cognitive tools, intrinsic to all people, which can be employed to unleash human potential. The link between his postulating these ingrained abilities and his political work is his confidence that a world free of oppression, authoritarian structures, and “leaders,” whatever form it might take, would be a vast improvement over the present situation.

For me, then, Chomsky’s is an anarchy of generosity. In this sense, he has the effect of a facilitator, catalyst, and inspiration, rather than the leader of some form of (anarchist) vanguard. Thus, I would argue that support for Chomsky’s approach should not be equated with blind allegiance to specific comments he makes or to the battles he has chosen to wage, but rather to the values he upholds. So, to the degree that we consider our own values in accord with his, we are likely to feel more or less sympathetic to him. Those who cannot comprehend or find value in his approach can and sometimes do consider him an adversary or, in more extreme cases, an “enemy.” These are two sides of this Chomsky Effect.

What I find inspiring about Chomsky (and my sympathy for his stance is well known; Barsky, 1998) is the positive effect he has upon people who are dissatisfied with the world as they experience it. We are encouraged in schools, companies, religious institutions, and society at large to respect the views of those empowered (teachers, journalists, ‘experts’) to dictate how we should react to events. When someone of Chomsky’s intellectual and academic stature says that what seems to us unfair, unjust, or prejudiced in the workplace, the household, the neighborhood, or the world is indeed aberrant by standards of decency or justice—that is, when he confirms in plain and simple English that bombing innocent civilians and then starving them over a prolonged period in Iraq is perverse, that ignoring or turning our back on East Timor during massacres effected by Indonesian troops, bombing Tripoli, or supporting murderous Contras is obscene, and that not assisting those in need for obviously corporate-inspired reasons while preaching freedom and equality is hypocritical—we become empowered.

We have come to expect that the great and well-respected are going to either shy away from basic issues or use obscure terms and convoluted reasoning to legitimize perverse trends, like ever-growing corporate profits, insane military budgets, the “streamlining” of industry, or the “paying down” (with moneys from the poor) of our “national debt.” To hear Chomsky talk about these matters generates amazement and even gratitude from those encouraged, or through various means forced, to accept what seems to them intrinsically wrong. As an anarchist, he has taught us to be wary of movements or “solutions” proposed from above, movements which, in the end, have turned out to be ineffectual or (as in the case of state Marxism or Maoism, for example) downright murderous. This approach is one of the things that makes Chomsky popular, and one of the ways that he serves to popularize ideas beyond the ivory tower.

An examination of Chomsky's career could also be a source of inspiration for those with some degree of power both inside of and beyond the ivory tower (intellectuals, writers, teachers) because he offers a concrete example of how one can employ a privileged position (in his case, a named Chair at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology) to advance the cause of the downtrodden against forces of oppression. Despite his having been arrested, threatened, included on the Nixon 'most wanted list' and marginalized by some groups, he has been compensated both by the sense that his own decisions have been made on the basis of consistent adherence to what I would consider decent values (rather than careerism, the profit motive or the will to power) and by triumphs in the public domain, evidence for which can be found at virtually any of his innumerable public lectures.

The appreciation of his generous version of anarchy is obvious. Wherever he goes (and he travels extensively, even today), Chomsky fills whole auditoriums with admiring devotees, he is swarmed by curious on-lookers, and he is swamped by demands that he grant interviews, accept honorary degrees, and speak to local activist groups. A *Baltimore Sun* article, "Chomsky Swims against Mainstream" (3 January 1999), captures the emotional appeal. It states that

millions of Americans have been drawn to the books and speeches of Chomsky the political analyst. His vast knowledge, clarity and strong commitment to humane values make Chomsky an appreciated speaker—and an energizing catalyst for social activism. At frequent appearances across the country, overflow audiences of thousands are routine.

He is for these people a beacon, an inspiration, a catalyst for action in a world where marginal groups find themselves ignored and despised. Of course, not everyone agrees, even among those who come to see him. The *Los Angeles Times* ("The Unbridled Linguist," Kathleen Hendrix, February 1, 1988) reported that at one speech "one man yelled out he'd bet \$100 that one of Chomsky's claims about National Security Council policy would turn out to be 'a lie.' ("I'll take that bet," actor Ed Asner called out)." Another woman angrily asked, "Why do you live here?"

But for close to 30 years, Chomsky's following has continued to expand and now extends in a range of surprising ways. Punk and rock musicians, perhaps surprisingly, turn out to be Chomsky fans. Chomsky has been played at Pearl Jam concerts in between sets. REM wanted Chomsky to tour with them and to open their act with a talk (he turned them down). The punk band, Bad Religion, added a Chomsky talk to the B-side of a record. Rage Against the Machine included a photo of a Chomsky book inside the CD cover of "Evil Empire." And a former producer for the Rolling Stones and Bonnie Raitt has worked on an album by well-known rockers who will pound out rhythms to back Chomsky's lyrics. Chomsky is hip.

Coming down from the Ivory Tower, offering his anarchist message of hope, Chomsky surely will continue to be a target for attacks and adulation. Yet, as he approaches his 80th birthday, I hope others can find ways to be as courageous and creative in the face of illegitimate authority as he is.

Notes

- [1] This is a small part of a larger discussion about the “Chomsky Effect,” which appears in my forthcoming book *People Are Dangerous: Anarchism, Classical Liberalism and the Chomsky Effect* (Barsky, in press). A version of this text was published in the Vanderbilt University student newspaper *Orbis*, on November 10, 2005.
- [2] See, for example, Pannekoek (2002).
- [3] Cited at <http://www.utexas.edu/coc/journalism/SOURCE/j363/chomsky.html>.

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