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# Noam Chomsky ...

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## Mainstream Media

### "The Triumph of Anarchism"

Shelley Walia, The Hindu

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Noam Chomsky deserves the recent vote that ranks him as the most important intellectual today; a thinker who is an effective counterweight and an independent critic of the state. A comment.

***"Each individual, according to Chomsky, has the responsibility and the creative acumen to take control of his/her society."***

An essay supporting the anarchist philosophy at the age of 10; hours spent at the bookshops on Manhattan's 4th Avenue engaged in anti-authoritarian polemics; and then a life time spent in analysing what ails international relations in the context of the widespread infringement of human rights and the numerous wrongs which fester our society. Indeed, Chomsky deserves the recent vote that ranks him above Umberto Eco or Howard Zinn as the most important intellectual today, an intellectual who is an effective counterweight and an independent critic of the State. As he writes in a famous essay "Objectivity and Liberal Scholarship": ". . . access to power, shared ideology, professionalisation may or may not be deplorable in themselves, but there can be no doubt that they interact so as to pose a serious threat to the integrity of scholarship in fields that are struggling for intellectual content and are thus particularly susceptible to the workings of a kind of Gresham's law. What is more, the subversion of scholarship poses a threat to society at large."

One of the repercussions of Chomsky's lifelong work is that human language and most behaviour are dependent on a huge, impulsive capacity for creativity, an "instinct for freedom" to use a term by Bakunin. This concept places Chomsky at the "frontier of psychology, philosophy and linguistics and square in the 18th-Century tradition of the Enlightenment - Rousseau, the Cartesians and other ferocious libertarians." Believing that the best way to maximise our genetically endowed freedom is through anarchism, Chomsky defines his worldview as "libertarian socialism." Such a brand of anarchism has both a historical force and stands for a deeply positive ideology that aims towards the absolute welfare of the public, though in the hands of the media and its controllers, this school of thought takes a rather destructive and a negative complexion.

## War and patriotic fervour?

As an activist with an anti-fascist ideology, Chomsky has always been sceptical of the patriotic fervour behind wars. For this reason he stands against the treatment of the German prisoners of war and is deeply disturbed by the atomic bombing of Hiroshima. The libertarian anarchist stance combined with a left-wing communism that he adopts under the influence of his linguistics teacher, Zellig S. Harris, lead to his attention to causes of social justice and the perceptible duplicity of the intellectuals. He sees his theory of Universal Grammar as a uniformity of human genetic inheritance, a uniting force that sees more similarities in the human race than conflicts arising out of ethnic affiliations or narrow provincialism. The essence of creativity is innate in all humans, which enables them to think and introspect. Language being inherently a creative entity, its original usage gives one a sense of freedom. Inequality and suffering in the world, therefore, have to be taken into consideration to finally eliminate division. A Marxist standpoint with class as the central tenet thus forms the essence of anarchist theory and practice. Chomsky adds to it the idea of the human linguistic abilities that have the power to resist any social oppression or straitjacketing. External authority cannot control the evolution of moral and intellectually rebellious culture. Wilhelm von Humboldt, the founder of the University of Berlin, and John Dewey, the philosopher, convinced Chomsky that political control is used by the State at the behest of the moneyed class. As argued by Adam Smith, it is all a self-promotion programme premeditated for the sole intention of profit at the cost of apathetic abuse of the masses. Chomsky remains equally impressed by other anarchist thinkers such as Emma Goldman, Pannekoek, Rudolph Rocker and Diego Abad de Santillan.

## Tradition of anarchism

Chomsky's essays and interviews throw light on the 150 years tradition of anarchism that "has sought social and economic justice without the mediation of bosses, politicians or bureaucrats." Rather than lay out a plan for any single revolutionary moment that would bring about the intended social transformation, Chomsky, along with George Woodcock, emphasises the imperceptible changes that would occur under a protracted process that would counter capitalism. No sudden demise of capitalism is envisaged. As he emphatically maintains:

"The record of anarchist ideas, and even more, of the inspiring struggles of the people who have sought to liberate themselves from oppression and domination, must be treasured and preserved, not as a means of freezing thought and conception in some new mold but as a basis for understanding of the social reality and committed work to change it. There is no reason to suppose that history is at an end, that the current structures of authority and domination are graven in stone. It would also be a great error to underestimate the power of social forces that will fight to maintain power and privilege."

This tradition of liberal thinking has its roots in the 18th-Century Enlightenment project, often employed negatively in Eurocentric imperial strategies, but in the hands of Descartes and Rousseau, turns into a philosophy of social justice that is passed on to contemporary thinkers like Chomsky. This school of thought is blatantly anti-capitalist with the underpinnings of a non-hierarchical social structure in which the workers are to be given the control of the means of production. Liberalism of the American New-Dealish brand of cut throat competition and corporate authoritarianism in the industrial sector is what the elite intellectuals take upon themselves to support, whereas the socialist anarchist stands polemically opposed to such hierarchical fascism so integral to corporate thinking which has full control of the policies of the government and is always opposed to trade unionism. The labour force is the foe and has to be constantly persuaded to switch sides on the fake trust that there is complete harmony in the workplace. This deception is cast by the media, by the flood of literature at all levels of special institutions such as schools, churches, television and cinema to make the workers believe in the "sincerity" and moral action of the State. The endeavour is to destroy all left-wing thinking and take society towards a conservative way of life. The façade of classlessness is cast over the public and many begin to believe that the State favours equal opportunities. They are not aware of the fact that income inequality is the highest in America. Interestingly, the corporations remain unscathed behind the scene, and it is the government that bears the brunt of criticism.

John McGilvray, Canadian philosopher, posits a pertinent question in his book on Chomsky: "Isn't anarchism the complete absence of any obligations towards others?" He then goes on to take the view of James Buchanan who says, "the ideal society is anarchy, in which no one man or group of men coerce another." But in the next breath he contradicts himself by saying that "any person's ideal situation is one that allows him full freedom of action and inhibits the behaviour of others so as to force adherence to his own desires. That is to say, each person seeks mastery over a world of slaves."

In the context of economic accumulation and domination this view is correct. But Chomsky disagrees:

"In today's world, the goals of a committed anarchist should be to defend some state institutions from the attack against them, while trying at the same time to pry them open to more meaningful public participation- and ultimately, to dismantle them in a much more free society, if the appropriate circumstances can be achieved."

## A type of "voluntary socialism"

Thus, according to Chomsky, anarchism is a type of "voluntary socialism" and is synonymous with "libertarian socialism." This is not found in capitalist societies where labour is subjected to coercion when it is not allowed to own the means of production or have any effective control over the productive activity. Freedom and creativity are two privileges of human beings so essential to their need; any unjust exercise of power leads to victimisation as well as psychological depression. To fulfill human nature and to see to it that human life thrives, it becomes essential to counter any form of oppression or control. This is the reason that Chomsky supports anarchosyndicalism, which according to McGilvray "is defensible as an empirical claim about the nature of a society in which human beings cannot just survive but thrive, by fulfilling their natures."

Chomsky, argues McGilvray, "sees anarchosyndicalism as a modification of the basic Enlightenment conception of the person as a free and responsible agent, a modification required to meet the challenge of private power. Empowering individuals by putting control back into their hands is the best way to meet this challenge and provide a meaningful form of freedom." Chomsky suggests that the anarchist way of putting an end to the imposition of control from the top is one step towards implementing a worker's control over the means of production. Thus anarchosyndicalism used as a critical practice refuses to put all initiatives and solutions in the hands of the technocrats or bureaucrats. Each individual, according to Chomsky, has the responsibility and the creative acumen to take control of his/her society. Therefore, the idea is not to overthrow governments but to take over the corporates so that they begin to work more in favour of the people. Anarchism, in favour of the people, involves the recognition of plurality and diversity, and difference of interests, ideas and opinions. This is the Cartesian underpinning to Chomsky's thought, an impulse towards the non-systematic and highly relative and flexible character of everything in society from organisations to individuals. He takes governance inherently as a communal activity not to be left simply in the hands of the specialists who focus too narrowly on their respective areas of interest, ignoring the larger well being of society. For instance, undesirable jobs like cleaning the sewerage system, or repairing the electrical wires during a snowstorm should necessarily be mechanised, and if there still exist more undesirable jobs, the community should share them. Another solution that Chomsky suggests is that people who do unpleasant jobs should be paid the highest, not the lowest.

The examination of the history of social and political dissent demonstrates that there have been "a number of otherwise loyal, upright, law-abiding citizens who believed that they had been driven by their conscience to break the law over certain specific issues." In fact, we are all dissidents at one time or another. Protest has to be allowed in society, as we live in a world that is constantly changing, and it is by protest that the laws are changed for a better future. As Vaclav Havel writes, "You do not become a 'dissident' just because you decide one day to take up this most unusual career. You are thrown into it by your personal sense of responsibility, combined with a complex set of

external circumstances. You are cast out of the existing structures and placed in a position of conflict with them. It begins as an attempt to do your work well, and ends with being branded an enemy of society." Under the overwhelming force of capitalism, bureaucracy and religious difference there are always the smouldering undercurrents of anarchism that, in the words of Rudolf Rocker, underscores "a definite trend in the historic development of mankind, which . . . strives for the free, unhindered unfolding of all the individual and social forces in life."