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Chomsky's Statism

An Anarchism for the Next Millennium?

Joe Peacott

17 March 1999

Noam Chomsky is seen by many as one of the more prominent anarchists in the united states. But, many times in the last several years he has come out publicly in favor of strengthening the federal government. Moreover, he argues that there is no contradiction between this stance and his advocacy of a stateless future. Such a position is in direct conflict with the traditional anarchist insight that means inevitably influence (and frequently corrupt or totally derail) intended ends, and deserves examination and rebuttal.

Chomsky bases his support for the federal government on his contention that private power wielded by corporations is much more dangerous to people than state action, and that government can, and should, protect its defenseless citizens against the depredations of the capitalists. While the power of private corporations in the united states is truly awesome and oppressive, this power exists because these businesses are supported by the state, a point that Chomsky concedes. Anarchists have generally opposed the state for precisely this reason: that it protects the interests of some, primarily the wealthy exploiters, while preventing others, especially

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working people, from challenging this power on their own. But, because of poor and working people's movements, the state has instituted some social welfare programs and instituted some regulation of private business to ameliorate the conditions of those most harmed by state-supported capitalism. These and other alleged public services are the aspects of government power that Chomsky supports and would see expanded.

Chomsky further argues that the state is the only form of illegitimate power in which people have a real chance to participate. Besides the question of whether it is moral for people to participate in the exercise of this illegitimate power, he doesn't make a very convincing argument for his contention. In one interview he states that the pentagon budget is going up, while the population oppose this by a 6 to 1 ratio. In another article he says that government regulatory mechanisms are very weak, and mostly controlled by the corporations anyway. He even quotes a poll in one of his interviews to the effect that 82% of americans feel the state is not run in the interests of the people. Nowhere does he back up his claim that government is or has been open to popular participation in any meaningful sense.

Governments have been influenced by popular pressure, however. The anti-war movement made it impossible for the military to use nuclear weapons in southeast asia, thereby preventing a united states conquest of vietnam. Anti-racist activists in the sixties and seventies pressured governments at all levels to eradicate racist laws and practices and brought about the end of most legal segregation. But these are not examples of people participating in government. Instead these are instances of outsiders (which regular people will always be vis-a-vis the state) bringing pressure on an evil institution to change its ways.

Such measures can also bring about change in private institutions as well. The labor movement brought about changes

using pressure tactics such as strikes and sabotage against private businesses, and activists have assisted workers with boycotts and public actions directed at corporations as well. While it may be easier in some settings to win concessions from government because individual politicians wish to be elected in the sham of elections, people acting for themselves can often accomplish great things on their own in both the public and private arenas..

Government is a package. The welfare state is also the warfare state, and, while Chomsky criticizes the federal government's support of prisons and corporations, he thinks government can protect people from prisons and corporations. He says that people can participate in government, but complains that it is not under popular influence. Government is force and should be done away with. People can act for themselves and take care of themselves. That is the anarchist attitude to the state, and Chomsky rejects it.

In fact, he is troubled that people might hate or fear the government. He admits that the state steals from poor people to subsidize wealthy people, but he thinks discussions about whether the government can be trusted to care for poor people are irrelevant. He dismisses as far-right the rejection of public schools. He feels that when people feel disillusioned about power, they turn to "irrational" alternatives. He arrogantly states that those who think there is a contradiction in supporting centralized state power even though one opposes it "just aren't thinking very clearly."

Chomsky seems not to be able to envision any means of offsetting the power of private tyrannies other than increasing the power of public tyrannies. Chomsky speaks glowingly of the efforts of poor people in places such as Haiti. "Poor people, people in the slums, peasants in the hills, managed to create out of their own activity a very lively, vibrant civil society with grass-roots movements and associations and unions and ideals and commitments and hopes and enthusiasm and so on

which was astonishing in scale, so much so that without any resources they were able to take over the political system,” He seems to see their assumption of state power as a victory, unable to envision that people this resourceful could continue to function quite nicely without a government. And people *are* this resourceful, both in haiti and the united states, and this is where anarchists get their inspiration.

Even Barbara Ehrenreich, a social democrat, and, with Chomsky, a member of the New Party, can countenance non-statist solutions to working and poor people’s problems. As she says, “[W]e can no longer allow ourselves to be seen as cheerleaders fro government activism....We need to emphasize strategies and approaches that do not depend on the existing government, that in fact bypass it as irrelevant or downright obstructionist.” She then goes on to mention organizing the unorganized, citizen initiatives against corporate abuses, and non-governmental self-help projects in the tradition of the feminist health centers of the 70s. In addition, she sees the state as a clear enemy in its erosion of civil liberties and the growth of the punishment industry. She calls her approach “progressive libertarianism.” Such an outlook is closer to an anarchist one than is Chomsky’s.

Unlike Chomsky, many rightly see that government schools educate badly, government welfare does not serve poor people well, and government action is largely against the interests of regular people. He is right that private corporations are not in the business of being humanitarian, but neither is the state. Instead of criticizing and fearing this anti-government feeling, we should encourage it and seek to extend it to all areas of government, including the military, police, and taxes.

Private corporate power exists only because it is protected by the state. Government reduces competition and limits entry into the market place with various licensing and regulatory schemes, and grants monopolies and subsidies to favored businesses. Chomsky himself concedes that corporations

would not be successful if forced to submit to market discipline, and that markets are under attack. But in addition to actively promoting concentration of private corporate power, the government prevents people from defending their own interests in disputes with corporations with its police powers and laws that disarm working people. Such disempowerment of people makes them unable to resist the power of public institutions as well, allowing the state to tax, regulate, and imprison people at its whim. Abolishing state power is a more effective and libertarian method of limiting private and public tyranny than is increasing the scope of the federal government. Only anarchist means have any hope of producing anarchist ends.