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What is Anarchism?

Noam Chomsky

November 18 2013

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Transcript of

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This is a transcript of the talk that Noam Chomsky gave at MIT Wong Auditorium on November 18, 2013. The event was sponsored by the Boston Review and based on the topic of Chomsky's new volume, *On Anarchism*.

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It's hardly a secret that the terms of political discourse are not exactly models of precision. And considering the way terms are used, it's next to impossible to try to get a meaningful answer to such questions as what is socialism or what is capitalism or what are free markets and many others in common usage. That's even more true of the term "anarchism." It's been not only subject to varied use but also quite extreme abuse, sometimes by bitter enemies, sometimes, unfortunately, by people who hold its banner high. So much is the variation and abuse that it resists any simple characterization. In fact, the only way I can see to address the question that's posed this evening, "What is anarchism?" is to try to identify some leading ideas that animate at least major currents of the rich and complex and often contradictory traditions of anarchist thought and, crucially, anarchist action.

I think a sensible approach can start with remarks by the perceptive, important anarchist intellectual and also activist, Rudolf Rocker. I'll quote him. He saw anarchism not as "a fixed, self-enclosed social system," with a fixed answer to all the multifarious questions and problems of human life, but rather as "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.” That’s from the 1930s.

These concepts are not really original. They derive from the Enlightenment and the early Romantic period. In rather similar words Wilhelm von Humboldt, one of the founders of classical liberalism, among many other achievements, described the leading principle of his thought as “the absolute and essential importance of human development in its richest diversity.” That’s a phrase that John Stuart Mill took as the epigraph to his *On Liberty*.

It follows from that that institutions that constrain such human development are illegitimate, unless, of course, they can somehow justify themselves. You find a similar conception widely in Enlightenment thought, so, for example, in Adam Smith. Everyone has read the opening paragraphs of *The Wealth of Nations*, where he extols the wonders of division of labor, but not many people have gotten farther inside to read his bitter condemnation of division of labor and his insistence that in any civilized society the government will have to intervene to prevent it because it will destroy personal integrity and essential human rights, will turn people, he said, into creatures as “stupid and ignorant” as a human can be. It’s not too easy to find that passage, whatever the reason may be. If you look in the standard scholarly edition, the University of Chicago Press bicentennial edition, it’s not even listed in the index, but it’s one of the most important passages in the book.

Looked at in these terms, anarchism is a tendency in human development that seeks to identify structures of hierarchy, domination, authority, and others that constrain human development. And then it seeks to subject them to a very reasonable challenge: Justify yourself, demonstrate that you’re legitimate, and maybe in some special circumstances or conceivably in principle. And if you can’t meet that challenge, which is the usual case, the structures should be dismantled, not just dismantled but reconstructed from below.

The ideals that found expression during the Enlightenment and the Romantic era foundered on the shoals of rising industrial capitalism, which is completely antithetical to them. But Rocker argues, I think quite plausibly, that they remain alive in the libertarian socialist traditions. These range pretty widely. They range from left anti-Bolshevik Marxism, people like Anton Pannekoek, Karl Korsch, Paul Mattick, and others, including the anarchosyndicalism that reached its peak of achievement in the revolutionary period in Spain in 1936. And it's well to remember that despite its substantial achievements and successes, it was crushed by the combined force of fascism, communism, and Western democracy. They had differences, but they agreed that this had to be crushed. The effort of free people to control their own lives, that had to be crushed before they turned to their petty differences, which we call the Spanish Civil War.

The same tendencies reach further, to worker-controlled enterprises. They're springing up in large parts of the old Rust Belt in the United States, in northern Mexico. They've reached their greatest development in the Basque country in Spain. Mondragon is partly a reflection of the achievements of the long, complex, rich Spanish tradition of anarchism, and partly it comes out of Christian anarchist sources. Also included in this general tendency are the quite substantial and cooperative movements that exist in many parts of the world, and I think it also encompasses at least a good part of feminist and human rights activism.

In part, all of this sounds like truism. So why should anyone defend illegitimate structures? No reason, of course. And I think that perception is correct. It really is truism, I think. Anarchism basically ought to be called truism. But truisms have some merit. One of them is the merit of being true, unlike most political discourse. This particular truism belongs to an interesting category of principles, principles that are not only universal but doubly universal: they're universal in that they're almost universally accepted

and universal in that they're almost universally rejected in practice. There are many of these.

For example, the general principle that we should apply to ourselves the same standards we do to others, if not harsher ones. Few would object, few would practice it. Or more specific policy proposals, like democracy promotion or humanitarian intervention. Professed generally, rejected in practice almost universally. All doubly universal. This truism is the same—the truism that we should challenge coercive institutions of all kinds, demand that they justify themselves, dismantle and reconstruct them if they do not. Easy to say, but not so easy to act on in practice.

Proceeding with similar thoughts, I will quote Rocker again. “Anarchism seeks to free labor from economic exploitation and to free society from ecclesiastical or political guardianship, and by doing that opening the way to an alliance of free groups of men and women based on cooperative labor and a planned administration of things in the interest of the community.” Rocker was an anarchist activist as well as political thinker, and he goes on to call on the workers' organizations, other popular organizations to create “not only the ideas but also the facts of the future itself” within the current society. That's an injunction that goes back to Bakunin.

One traditional anarchist slogan is “Ni Dieu, ni Maître,” “No God, no Master.” It's a phrase that Daniel Guérin took as the title of his very valuable collection of anarchist classics. I think it's fair to understand the phrase “No God” in the terms that I just quoted from Rocker — opposition to ecclesiastical guardianship. Individual beliefs are a different matter. That's no matter of concern to a person concerned with free development of thought and action. That leaves the door open to the lively and impressive tradition of religious anarchism, for example, Dorothy Day's very impressive Catholic Worker Movement. But the phrase “no master” is different. That refers not to individual belief but to a social relation, a relation of subordination and dominance, a relation that anarchism,

consider them as the honest and safe, although not the most wise, depository of the public interest.”

The modern progressive intellectuals—the Wilson, Roosevelt, Kennedy intellectual left, those who seek to put the public in their place and are free from democratic dogmatisms about the capacity of the ignorant and meddling outsiders to enter the political arena—they're Jefferson's aristocrats. These basic views are very widely held, though there are some disputes, namely, who should play the guiding role. Should it be what the liberal intellectuals call the technocratic and policy-oriented intellectuals, the ones we celebrate as the Camelot intellectuals, who run the progressive knowledge society, or should it be bankers or corporate executives? In other versions, should it be the central committee or the guardian council of clerics? They are all pretty similar ideas.

And they're all the examples of the ecclesiastical and political guardianship that the genuine libertarian tradition seeks to dismantle and reconstruct from below, while also changing industry from a feudalistic to a democratic social order, one that's based on workers' control, community control, respects the dignity of the producer as a genuine person, not a tool in the hands of others, in accordance with a libertarian tradition that has deep roots and, like Marx's old mole, is always burrowing quite close to the surface and ready to spring forth.

benefit. We have to “regiment the minds of men the way an army regiments their bodies,” and we have to discipline the institutions responsible for what they called “the indoctrination of the young”: schools, universities, churches. If we can do this, we can get back to the good old days — this is complaints about the 1960s — when “Truman had been able to govern the country with the cooperation of a relatively small number of Wall Street lawyers and bankers,” then we will have true democracy.

These are quotes from icons of the liberal establishment: Walter Lippmann, Edward Bernays, Harold Laswell, the founder of modern political science, Samuel Huntington, Trilateral Commission, which largely staffed the Carter administration. The conflict between these conceptions of democracy goes far back. It goes back to the earliest modern democratic revolution in 17th century England. At that time, there was a war raging between supporters of the king and supporters of parliament. That’s the civil war that we read about. But there was more. The gentry, the men who called themselves “the men of best quality,” were appalled by the rabble, who didn’t want to be ruled by either king or parliament, like the Spanish workers in 1936, neither side. They had their own pamphlet literature, and they said they wanted to be ruled by “countrymen like ourselves that know our wants. It will never be a good world while knights and gentlemen make us laws that are chosen for fear and do but oppress us and do not know the people’s source.” That’s 17th century England.

The essential nature of this conflict, which is far from ended, was captured nicely by Thomas Jefferson in his later years. He had serious concerns about both the quality and the fate of the democratic experiment. He made a distinction between what he called aristocrats and democrats. The aristocrats are “those who fear and distrust the people and wish to draw all powers from them into the hands of the higher classes.” The democrats, in contrast, “identify with the people, have confidence in them, cherish and

if taken seriously, seeks to dismantle and rebuild from below, unless it can somehow meet the harsh burden of establishing its legitimacy.

By now we’ve departed from truism and, in fact, to ample controversy. In particular, right at this point the rather peculiar American brand of what’s called libertarianism departs very sharply from the libertarian tradition. It accepts and indeed strongly advocates the subordination of working people to the masters of the economy and, furthermore, the subjection of everyone to the restrictive discipline and destructive the features of markets. These are topics worth pursuing. I’ll take them up later, if you would like, but I’ll put them aside here, though also recommending to you about bringing together in some way the energies of the young libertarian left and right, as indeed sometimes is done. For example, it’s done in the quite important and valuable theoretical and practical work of economist David Ellerman and some others.

Anarchism, of course, is famously opposed to the state while at the same time advocating “planned administration of things in the interests of the community,” Rucker’s phrase again, and beyond that, broader federations of self-governing communities at workplaces. In the real world of today, the same dedicated anarchists who are opposed to the state often support state power to protect people and society and the Earth itself from the ravages of concentrated private capital. Take, say, a venerable anarchist journal like *Freedom*. It goes back to 1886, formed as a journal of socialist anarchism by supporters of Kropotkin. If you open its pages, you will find that much of it is devoted to defending rights of people, the environment, society, often by invoking state power, like regulation of the environment or safety and health regulations in the workplace.

There’s no contradiction here, as sometimes thought. People live and suffer and endure in this world and not some world that we imagine. And all the means available should be used to safeguard and benefit them, even if the long-term goal is to displace these de-

vices and construct preferable alternatives. In discussing this, I've sometimes used an image that comes from the Brazilian workers' movement. It's discussed in an interesting work by Biorn Maybury-Lewis. They use the image of widening the floors of the cage. The cage is existing coercive institutions that can be widened by committed popular struggle. It happened effectively over many years. And you can extend the image beyond. Think of the cage of coercive state institutions as a kind of protection from savage beasts that are roaming outside, namely, the predatory, state-supported, capitalist institutions that are dedicated to the principle of private gain, power, domination, with the interest of the community at most a footnote. Maybe revered in rhetoric, but dismissed in practice and, in fact, even in Anglo-American law.

It's also worth remembering that anarchists condemned really existing states, not visions of unrealized democratic dreams, such as government of, by, and for the people. They bitterly opposed the rule of what Bakunin had called "the red bureaucracy," which he predicted 50 years in advance would be among the most savage of human creations. They also opposed parliamentary systems that are instruments of class rule. The contemporary United States, for example, which is not a democracy, it's a plutocracy. That's very easy to demonstrate. The majority of the population has no influence over policy. As you move up the income/wealth scale, you get more and more influence. The very top people get what they want. Well established by academic political science but familiar to everyone who looks at the way the world works. A truly democratic system would be quite different. It would have the character of "an alliance of free groups of men and women based on cooperative labor and a planned administration of things in the interests of the community."

In fact, that's not too remote from one version of the mainstream democratic ideal. Actually, one version. I'll stress that. I'll return to others. Take, for example, the leading American social philosopher of the 20th century, John Dewey. His major concerns were

ties for reading, discussion, mutual improvement. Along with the factory girls, the journeyman, the artisans bitterly condemned the attack on their culture.

The same was true in England, incidentally, where conditions were much harsher. There's actually a great book about this by Jonathan Rose called *The Intellectual Life of the British Working Classes*. It's a monumental study of the reading habits of the working class of what we think of as Dickensian England. He contrasts what he calls "the passionate pursuit of knowledge by proletarian autodidacts" with the "pervasive philistinism of the British aristocracy." Actually, I'm old enough to remember residues that remained among working people in New York in the 1930s, who were deeply immersed in the high culture of the day. It's another battle that may have receded, but I don't think it's lost.

I mentioned that Dewey and American workers and farmers held one version of democracy with very strong libertarian elements. But the dominant version has been radically different. Its most instructive expression is at the progressive end of the mainstream spectrum. That is among people who are good Woodrow Wilson, FDR, Kennedy liberals. Here are a few representative quotes from icons of the liberal intellectual establishment on democratic theory.

The public are "ignorant and meddling outsiders." They have to "be put in their place." Decisions must be in the hands of an "intelligent minority" of "responsible men," namely, us, and we have to be protected "from the trampling and roar of the bewildered herd" out there. The herd does have a function in a democratic society. They are supposed to lend their weight every few years to a choice among the responsible men. But apart from that, their function is to be "spectators, not participants in action." And all of this is for their own good. We should not succumb to "democratic dogmatism about men being the best judges of their own interests." They are not. They are like young children. You have to take care of them. We are the best judges of their own interests. So their attitudes and opinions have to be controlled for their own

reaction to this demeaning spirit, there were quite enormous and active rising movements of working people and radical farmers. Radical farmers actually began in Texas and spread through the Midwest and much of the country. It was, of course, an agricultural country then. These are the most significant democratic popular movements in American history. They were dedicated to solidarity, mutual aid. They were crushed by force. We have a very violent labor history as compared to other countries. But it's a battle that's not over, far from over, despite setbacks, often violent repression.

There are familiar apologists for the radical revolution of wage slavery, and they have an argument. They argue that the workers should indeed glory in a system of free contracts voluntarily undertaken. There was an answer to that 200 years ago by Shelley in his great poem "The Masque of Anarchy." This was written right after the Peterloo massacre in Manchester, England, when the British cavalry brutally attacked a peaceful gathering of tens of thousands of people—the first major example of huge, nonviolent protest and the reaction of the state authorities to it. They were calling for parliamentary reform. Shelley wrote that we know what slavery is. "Tis to work and have such pay/As just keeps life from day to day/ In your limbs, as in a cell/For the tyrants' use to dwell. ... Tis to be slave in soul/And to hold no strong control/Over your own wills, but be/All that others make of ye."

That's slavery. That's what working people and independent farmers were struggling against. The artisans and factory girls who struggled for dignity and independence and freedom might very well have known Shelley's words. Observers at the time noted that they were highly literate. They had good libraries. They were acquainted with the standard works of English literature. This is before mechanism and wage slavery. The wage system ended, or at least curtailed, the days of independence, high culture, and security. Before that, Ware points out, a workshop might be what he called a lyceum. A journeyman would hire boys to read to them while they worked. These were social businesses, with many opportuni-

democracy and education. No one took Dewey to be an anarchist. But pay attention to his ideas. In his conception of democracy, illegitimate structures of coercion must be dismantled, and that includes domination "by business for private profit through private control of banking, land, industry, reinforced by command of the press, press agents, other means of publicity and propaganda." He recognized that "power today resides in control of the means of production, exchange, publicity, transportation, and communication. Whoever owns them rules the life of the country," even if democratic forms remain. And until these institutions are in the hands of the public, politics will remain "the shadow cast by big business on society." Very much what we see around us, in fact.

It's important that Dewey went beyond calling for some form of public control. That could take many forms. He went beyond. In a free and democratic society, he wrote, the workers should be "the masters of their own industrial fate," not tools rented by employers, not directed by state authorities." That position goes right back to the leading ideas of classical liberalism articulated by von Humboldt, Smith, others, and extended in the anarchist tradition.

Turning to education, Dewey held that it is "illiberal and immoral" to train children to work "not freely and intelligently but for the sake of the work earned," to achieve test scores, for example, in which case their activity is "not free because it's not freely participated in" and it's quickly forgotten too, as all of us know from our experience. So he proceeded to conclude that industry must be changed "from a feudalistic to a democratic social order" and educational practice should be designed to encourage creativity, exploration, independence, cooperative work — exactly the opposite of what's happening today.

These ideas lead to a vision of society based on workers' control of productive institutions, the links to community control within the framework of free association and federal organization. In the general style of thought that includes, of course, along with many anarchists, others too, say G.D.H. Cole's guild socialism in England,

left anti-Bolshevik Marxism, a current development, such as, for example, the participatory economics and politics of Michael Albert, Robin Hahnel, Stephen Shalom, and others, along with important work in theory and practice by the late Seymour Melman, his associates, and many others, notably Gar Alperovitz's very valuable recent contributions on worker-owned enterprise and cooperatives. Not just talk but actual taking place.

Going back to Dewey, he was as American as apple pie, to borrow the old cliché, right in the mainstream of American history and culture. In fact, all of these ideas and developments are very deeply rooted in the American tradition and in American history, a fact which is kind of suppressed but is very obvious when you look into it. When you pursue these questions, you enter into an important terrain of inspiring, often bitter struggle. That's ever since the dawn of the Industrial Revolution, which was right around here, Lowell, Lawrence, eastern Massachusetts, mid-19th century.

The first serious scholarly study of the industrial worker in those years was 90 years ago. It's by Norman Ware. It's still very much worth reading. He reviews the hideous working conditions that were imposed on formerly independent craftsman and immigrants and farmers, as well as the so-called "factory girls," young women brought from the farms to work in the textile mills around Boston. He mentions that, he reviews it. But he focuses attention on something else—what he calls "the degradation suffered by the industrial worker," the loss "of status and independence," which could not be cancelled, even where there occasionally was some material improvement. And he focuses on the radical capitalist "social revolution, in which sovereignty and economic affairs passed from the community as a whole into the keeping of a special class of masters," often remote from production, a group "alien to the producers." Ware shows, I think pretty convincingly, that "for every protest against machine industry and privation there can be found 100 protests against the new power of capitalist production and its discipline." In other words, workers were struggling and strik-

ing not just for bread but also for roses, in the traditional slogan of the workers' communities and organizations. They were struggling for dignity and independence and for their rights as free men and women.

Their journals are very interesting. There's a rich and lively labor press written by working people, artisans from Boston, factory girls from the farms. In these journals they condemned what they called the "blasting influence of monarchical principles on democratic soil, which will not be overcome until "they who work in the mills will own them," the slogan of the massive Knights of Labor, "and sovereignty will return to free and independent producers." Then they will no longer be "menials or the humble subjects of a foreign despot, the absentee owner, slaves in the strictest sense of the word, who toil for their masters." Rather, they will regain their status as "free American citizens."

The capitalist revolution instituted a crucial change from price to wage. It's very important. When a producer sold his product for a price, Ware writes, "he retained his person. But when he came to sell his labor, he sold himself." I'm quoting from the press. That's a big difference. He lost his dignity as a person as he became a slave, a wage slave, to use the common term of the period. One hundred sixty years ago, a group of skilled workers repeated the common view that a daily wage was equivalent to slavery, and they weren't warned, perceptively, that a day might come when "wage slaves will so far forget what is due to manhood as to glory in a system forced on them by their necessity and in opposition to their feelings of independence and self-respect," a day that they hoped would be far distant. These were very popular notions in the mid-19th century, in fact, so popular that they were a slogan of the Republican Party. You could read them in editorials of The New York Times. That's then, not now. But that day may come back. Let's hope.

Labor activists of the time warned, bitterly often, of what they called "the new spirit of the age: Gain wealth, forgetting all but self." That was the new spirit of the age 150 years ago. In sharp