

Noam Chomsky's Politics

By Richard Lichtman

For more than three decades Noam Chomsky has produced a body of intellectual work whose significance both in linguistics and politics can easily, and without hyperbole, be described as extraordinary. The fact that what makes the linguistic and political projects so compelling requires assessment by radically different criteria is itself one of the notable features of Chomsky's enterprise. It is a cliché that Chomsky has radically altered the nature of linguistics and psychology in the 20th century and it is difficult to imagine any serious work in philosophy of mind and language which would not concede this point, whether the author were in fundamental agreement with Chomsky or a dedicated critic. One must acknowledge the obvious importance of Chomsky's project if for no other reason than the enormous influence it has exerted over those working in this field.

When we examine Chomsky's political production, however, we see immediately that the case is completely different. It is not simply the obvious fact that Chomsky's work is in no sense predominant in the area of political commentary, nor that he has evoked vituperative and vicious criticism from a broad spectrum of the political community, nor even that his avenues of publication have shrunk precipitously from that period in the 1960s when his articles could appear in such publications as the *New York Review of Books*. These are the consequences one would expect to be imposed upon a person who engages in a persistent, thoughtful, detailed and passionate condemnation of American political society, its tyrannical economic foundations, murderous foreign policy and corrupt academic and media institutions.

The more astounding consideration is that for all his enormous appeal to the vast audiences he regularly assembles for his critique of

American economic and political “friendly fascism” — a critique which clearly overlaps many analyses provided by a range of writers on the left — there is no viable dialogue between Chomsky and the American left. His work is clearly admired by left intellectuals who are happy to endorse his campus appearances and, I believe, read and learn from what is an extraordinary regularity of continuous publications. But while there is widespread admiration of Chomsky’s political acumen and persistent dedication and courage, there is no dialogue of any significance between this remarkable person and those whom one might expect would be most likely to seek him out in political conversation. From the perspective of the left, Chomsky is greatly admired, but seldom engaged and rarely if ever held up to the light of criticism.

Is it the plethora of publications which precludes conversation? Substantively, Habermas has generated a more voluminous corpus which has from the beginning been subject to careful scrutiny from a variety of perspectives. The truth is that the voluminous discourses which Chomsky creates are the product of a very parsimonious deep political grammar. It is Chomsky’s basic contention that power tends to mask its illegitimacy and that the corporate capitalist power structure, which dominates American political culture, also dominates the media, which it utilizes to “inculcate individuals with the values, beliefs, and codes of behavior that will integrate them into the institutional structures of the larger society.”¹ Since the United States is a capitalist “democracy,” its rule must be accomplished through popular consent. Hence the priority of “manufactured consent” over force, and the shaping of media form and content so as to make it highly functional for established power.² Power requires ideology; ideology mystifies and protects power.³ There is nothing very novel or complex about this basic position, though the vast production that follows from it is often quite striking in its scope and insight.

Milan Rai, in his study, *Chomsky’s Politics*,⁴ provides a useful service in setting out in clear and simple terms the basic contours of Chomsky’s political theory. His work consists of useful summaries and syntheses of Chomsky’s major positions. But Rai fails on two accounts: first, he is too much the acolyte to raise any critical questions regarding Chomsky’s political theory; and, second, his unreflective

¹Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky, *Manufacturing Consent* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1988), p. 1.

²*Ibid.*, p. xv.

³*Manufacturing Consent*, Chapter 1.

⁴Milan Rai, *Chomsky’s Politics* (London: Verso Press, 1995) p. 20.

adulation leads to a misapprehension of Chomsky's place in the larger history of progressive critical analysis. Such extraordinary citations as "In all American history, no one's writings are more unsettling than Noam Chomsky's"⁵ is a panegyric which does neither Chomsky nor the rest of us any particular good. And passing references to such matters as Chomsky's "unconventional definition of the 'state'"⁶ take Chomsky out of the long history of left, anarchist, democratic writers who have long espoused similar views. To pedestal Chomsky out of common reach is to place his work beyond public consideration and isolate Chomsky from ordinary canons of criticism.

The truth is that whatever one thinks of Chomsky's analysis of capitalist power, his view of the mystification of public consciousness through the use of power-dominated media suffers from a number of serious difficulties. In what follows I will limit myself to three basic considerations: first, that a propaganda model is a narrow and secondary (or second-order) account of the formation of public consciousness; second, that Chomsky's "instinct" theory of human motivation and the desire for freedom is not adequate; and, third, that his account of formal democracy fails to account for the depths of manipulations in capitalist democracies. Needless to say, these issues are inter-related.

I. The most fully elaborated aspect of Chomsky's work, the area that has been most thoroughly and carefully theorized, is the propaganda model of the function and effect of corporate control of the media on public consciousness. Limitations of space forbid any detailed account of this position (which I support with reservations) but its fundamental difficulty is that such a model, no matter how useful in its own domain, is a secondary phenomenon. Chomsky provides a "thin" account of the formation of consciousness. What is absent from this interpretation is an analysis of the major transformations of the modern era that have altered the nature of social relations, persons, and our conscious and unconscious functioning. Chomsky operates with what is ultimately an "enlightenment" view of knowledge and mystification: if the truth be provided and the intellect of the public engaged, knowledge will drive out ignorance and the social ills which attend it.

So, after one absorbs the legendary plethora of voluminous instances, citations and examples, the fact remains that the major features of modernity have only appeared in anecdotal manner. Absent is any systematic reference to the root features of modern life:

⁵*Ibid.*, p. 19.

⁶*Ibid.*, p. 91.

industrialization, ubiquitous technological transformation, the fragmentation of belief and morality under the influence of specialization, secularization, and bureaucratization; the subordination of use value by exchange value; the abandonment of “useless” segments of the population, children and the aged to an ever-intensifying obsolescence; the segmentation and growing powerlessness of individual resistance; and the manipulation of unconscious psychological processes beyond the limits of any previous historical periods. Consequently, the major *experiential* consequences of modernity, anxiety, ideological manipulation, personal estrangement, unconscious domination, mechanization of personal life, and the increasing sense of standardization and interchangeability are also absent. It is no surprise, then, that the contributions of Durkheim to our understanding of anomie or specialization, of Weber to our awareness of “rationalization” and disenchantment, of Marx to our insights into alienation, fetishism and ideology, of Habermas to our grasp of the decolonialization of the life world, and of the Frankfurt School to our insights into the authoritarian personality, family structure and the oppressiveness of mass culture — all pass similarly unnoticed.

In fact, consciousness is not determined primarily by the flow of media transmitted information and misinformation. The worst calamities of the 20th century, such as the rise of Nazism, the Soviet terror and the barbarism of American domestic and imperialist brutality were not due primarily to the mass participation of a public merely ignorant of the facts. As human beings we are rooted in and permeated by the economic, social, cultural and psychological dynamics which structure our lives. We are constructed not merely by ideas, but by the social forces which determine the valence and viability of our conceptual existence. In fact, the ground of media distortion is already prepared in the deep structure of social and family life. The child who enters school and then the workplace had his or her mentality already profoundly formed by the structure of family relations which in turn transmit the requirements of the larger social world. Are we really to believe that Margaret Thatcher’s invocation of TINA (There Is No Alternative) is a reference to intellectual confusion and that the mass sense of political paralysis does not begin early in childhood, in the family, and proceed through the remaining institutions of society — schools, media, workplace — to further entrenchment and elaboration?

There is, in fact, a curious similarity between Chomsky’s developed position and the early theory of ideology proposed by Marx, who in *The German Ideology* maintained that:

In every epoch the ideas of the ruling class are the ruling ideas, that is, the class that is the ruling *material* power of society is at the same time its ruling *intellectual* power. The class having the means of material production has also control over the means of intellectual production. The ruling ideas are nothing more than the ideal expression of the dominant material relationships grasped as ideas; hence of the relationships which make one class the ruling one, therefore the ideas of its domination. The individuals who comprise the ruling class possess among other things consciousness and thought. Insofar as they rule as a class and determine the extent of a historical epoch, it is selfevident that they do it in its entire range. Among other things they rule also as thinkers and producers of ideas and regulate the production and distribution of the ideas of their age. Their ideas are the ruling ideas of the epoch.⁷

There are a number of difficulties with both these approaches, but I will merely note those limitations that point to larger issues.⁸ To begin, the conviction that “the ideas of the ruling class are the ruling ideas” makes it impossible to understand how these ideas can ever be challenged and how the oppressed can ever come to develop its own vision of a fundamentally different society. If the perspective of the ruling class always prevails, no opposing group will be able to formulate a counter-hegemonic perspective. Marx knew that this simple account could not possibly be correct, or if correct, undermined his entire project of supporting the self-constitution of the working class.

In the opening pages of *The Manufacture of Consent*, Chomsky and Herman set out a “propaganda model” of the mass media. The basic contention of this theory is that the mass media communicate “messages” and thereby “inculcate individuals with values, beliefs, and codes of behavior that will integrate them into the institutional structure of the larger society.”⁹ The inequality of wealth in liberal democracies makes it possible for this class to dominate the process of media formation. Yet, despite the “elite domination of the media and

⁷Loyd D. Easton and Kurt H. Guddat, eds., *Writings of the Young Marx on Philosophy and Society* (New York: Doubleday, 1967), p. 438.

⁸For a deeper analysis, see Richard Lichtman, “Marx’s Theory of Ideology,” *Essays in Critical Social Theory* (New York: Peter Lang, 1993).

⁹*Manufacturing Consent, op. cit.*, p. 1.

marginalization of dissidents that results...” Herman and Chomsky, citing the work of Curran and Seaton, note:

Indeed, the eclipse of the national radical press was so total that when the Labour Party developed out of the workingclass movement in the first decade of the twentieth century, it did not obtain the exclusive backing of a single national or Sunday paper.¹⁰

In other words, the working class movement arose without the support of the mass media. One can only conclude that the effect of the media is less than the propaganda model suggests. Over time, Marx developed more fully the notion implicit in his earlier writings, that “ideas” are related to the nature of productive labor. If, then, the working class labors differently from the owners of capital, it would likely be the case that class consciousness would consequently differ. This recognition provides an avenue for revealing the relative autonomy of working class consciousness and the limitation which may be imposed in particular historical moments on the hegemony of the “ruling ideas.”

Marx came to realize that his analysis was not sufficiently radical; it did not reach the root of the problem. “Materialist” in the sense of locating the source of ideas in the power of the ruling class over production, the theory was not sufficiently dialectical. It failed to realize the relationship between “ideas” and the actual process of production in which they were embedded. Chomsky’s theory suffers a similar difficulty but he, unlike Marx, remains fixed at the “media,” or secondary level of analysis.

Marx’s theory of ideology can be seen as a consequence of his theory of alienation and the fetishism of the commodity. Under conditions of class domination, the labor of men and women becomes “embodied” in institutions over which they have no ultimate control. Their labor therefore appears to them as embodied in an external source that imposes its eternal necessity upon them. They do not understand themselves as the creators of their own life activity but as the recipients of activity generated from a source beyond themselves. So they lose control over their products, their labor, their tools, their relations with other human beings and, finally, themselves.

The theory of ideology traces the process of reflection and inversion operating in the structure of labor to its manifestation in consciousness

¹⁰*Ibid.*, p. 3.

and self-consciousness, which are, after all, also processes, also forms of “labor,” though obviously unique in their nature. So, in the formation of ideology, consciousness becomes alienated much as economic labor suffers alienation in the material process of commodity production.

In the third volume of *Capital* Marx asserted that the “specific economic form in which unpaid surplus labor is pumped out of direct producers determines the relationship of rulers and ruled....”¹¹ Marx’s achievement in the hugely important section of the first volume of *Capital*, “The Fetishism of Commodities,” is to show how consciousness, and false consciousness in particular, are interwoven with the process of commodity production in capitalism dominated by the logic of surplus extraction. His genius was to show that in capitalism labor is exploited in forms in which it appears that no such exploitation takes place. The form of economic domination permeates the entire economic system and eventually, the other institutions of society. Later Marxist writers such as the members of the Frankfurt School and Louis Althusser were able to take Marx’s argument one step further and to trace the system of ideological production to the constitution of subjectivity itself.

II. The absence of a social theory, and of an analysis of the manner in which consciousness is formed in social interactions, is related to Chomsky’s view of the innate and universal tendencies of human nature. This view is best articulated, of course, in Chomsky’s linguistics, in which the activity of language use and acquisition is explained in considerable part by appeal to the determinate structures of the mind. But the same contention is repeated with regard to other domains. Thus Chomsky maintains that:

There’s probably at some very deep and abstract level some sort of common-core conception of human nature and the human drive for freedom and the right to be free of external coercion and control. That kind of picture animates my own social and political concerns, my own anarchist interests...and language and thought.”¹²

¹¹Karl Marx, *Capital III* (Moscow: Foreign Language Publishing, 1962), p. 809.

¹²Noam Chomsky, *Language and Politics*, edited by C. P. Otero (Cheektowage, NY: Black Rose Books, 1988), pp. 696-97.

I do not find very helpful the idea of an “instinct for freedom.”¹³ First, so many diverse conceptions of freedom have marked the range of human societies that no determinate sense of a common core of “freedom” can be discovered in this variety of instances. If Chomsky would hold that there is an essential, abstract core of freedom in all cultures, it would have to be an abstraction so rarefied as to lose all contact with the specific forms of life in which individuals actually participate. What counts as freedom in one society may be contemptibly regarded as license in another.

Second, historical experience does not support any such conception as a universal instinct to be free of external coercion and control. This is not a matter that can be quantified, but it is fair to say that long stretches of human existence have been marked by societies that we would find oppressive and authoritarian, without any notable evidence that these societies manifested a “drive” to be free from that coercion.

Third, the idea of an instinct for freedom tends to undermine the difficult study of the relationships between social structures and the forms of freedom that arise specifically in those systems, and the instinct hypothesis similarly curtails any analysis of the manner in which self-directedness actually arises in particular historical circumstances. The bourgeois insistence on freedom from “external coercion and control” is not the freedom of medieval Christianity which proclaimed that “You shall know the truth and it shall make you free.” Nor is it tautological to hold that bourgeois freedom is a product of the bourgeois era, for it requires an analysis of the right to property and exploitation of labor to articulate the meaning of the claim. Chomsky holds that to the extent that we understand society, our knowledge is quite straightforward, and that, if there *are* deep issues, they are, in fact unknown.¹⁴ The sorts of analysis put forward by Gramsci, Lukacs, Althusser or Marcuse in relation to this subject, which refute Chomsky’s views, are (as noted above) conspicuous by their absence.

In a more recent formulation Chomsky responds to an interviewer’s suggestion that just as language capacities are genetically determined, so must be our moral capacity. Chomsky responds:

Well, for one thing, I don’t think it can really be much of a question. (That’s not to say we understand anything about it.) But we’re constantly making

¹³Noam Chomsky, *Language and Problems of Knowledge: The Managua Lectures* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1987), p. 155.

¹⁴Video of the *Manufacture of Consent*, final segment.

moral judgments in new situations, and over a substantial range we do it in a convergent fashion — we don't differ randomly and wildly from one another. Further, young children do it, very quickly, and they also converge....Of course, there are cultural and social and historical effects, but even for those to operate, they must be operating on something. If you look at this range of phenomena, there are only two possibilities; one is, it's a miracle, and the other is, it's rooted in our nature. It's rooted in our nature in the same sense in which language is, or for that matter, having arms and legs. It takes different forms depending on the circumstances, just as arms and legs depend on nutrition. But basically it must be something that flows out of our nature, or otherwise we [would] never use it in any systematic way, except just repeating what happened before. So, its got to be there.¹⁵

These are characteristic responses on Chomsky' part:

First, there is the flat, somewhat churlish assertion that there can't be much of a question regarding an issue that engaged, belabored and perplexed philosophers for generations, combined with the strange contention that we may not understand what it is that we supposedly are sufficiently certain of not to question.

Second, while it is maintained that we "don't differ randomly and wildly from one another," there is no discussion of the range of moral judgments in diverse cultures.

Third, while young children very quickly make moral judgments and are said to "converge" there is also no discussion of the evidence provided by theorists like Kohlberg who insist that the meaning of moral judgments is quite different for children at different stages and more different still from the moral judgments of adults.

Finally, the notion that moral judgment is rooted in our nature in the same sense as "having arms and legs" is wildly misleading. It is true that the development of arms and legs depends on inherent tendencies and on nutrition, but the function of arms and legs depends even more upon culture. Legs permit us to move in various ways, but they do not determine the nature of our dance. And while arms, hands

¹⁵*Z Magazine*, February 1999.

and fingers have various anatomical, physiological and functional properties in common, these characteristics do not determine our interest in playing a musical instrument, and even less do they explain what music will emerge from this capacity. In other words, playing the violin, while it involves the functional use of hands and fingers, will not in itself tell us much about whether it is Beethoven or Bach or Stravinsky that is played, why it is one rather than the other, and what the meaning of the music is.

There is a third alternative to something being rooted in our nature and its being a miracle. Human morals may also be socially invented, produced and constructed. If we keep insisting that the social artifact is rooted in our particular human nature because if we lacked our nature we could not produce, we are in danger of falling into a practical tautology. Chomsky's theory of linguistics is rooted in his nature; if he lacked the brain and nervous system he possesses it would not be possible to understand how he could have constructed the remarkable body of work for which he is known. But it is of seminal importance to note that this theory was created in a given historical context, that it was preceded by the work of other philosophers and linguists, and that its acceptance and consequences depend on the social system in which it emerged.

III. Finally, Chomsky's concept of political freedom is marked by difficulty. Chomsky operates with a propaganda model of indoctrination which is likened to "brainwashing under freedom."¹⁶ But what sort of political freedom is this? A French critic proposed to Chomsky that a deep analysis of freedom would indicate that "the so-called formal liberties, those of bourgeois democracy, are not worth anything...while a deep analysis of society...reveals, under deceptive appearances, the servitude and at least the alienation generated equally by the hard totalitarianism (without formal freedoms) and by the soft one (with them)."¹⁷ Chomsky responded by rejecting this view as "helplessly misguided" as it completely ignored the fact that so called formal liberties are an "achievement of enormous significances."¹⁸ And he has gone so far as to maintain that the United States is, from a comparative perspective, "unusual if not unique in its lack of restraints on freedom of expression."¹⁹ Yet, Chomsky continually stresses that in a formal democracy, "Since the state lacks the capacity to ensure obedience by

¹⁶*Language and Politics, op. cit.*, p. 312.

¹⁷Rai, *op. cit.*, pp. 172-173.

¹⁸*Ibid.*

¹⁹Noam Chomsky, *Pirates and Emperors* (New York: Claremont Research Publications, 1986), p. 21.

force, thought can lead to action and therefore the threat to order must be excised at the source.”²⁰

But is not a state that excises thought at the source a state that simultaneously excises some considerable part of the achievement of freedom? Or, if we wish to maintain a distinction between “formal liberties” and “freedom,” we must ask exactly what relationship exists between them. Or, to put the matter directly, what is the value of freedom of expression if the creative and critical source of that expression has been excised by state and corporate power? As Chomsky himself notes in a commentary on the press, “Those who choose to conform, hence to remain within the system, will soon find that they internalize the beliefs and attitudes that they express and that shape their work...a long process of indoctrination that begins in kindergarten.”²¹ Precisely; and it is because the great majority of individuals remain considerably “within the system” that the extent of meaningful freedom must, as the French critic maintained, be vigorously questioned. It is quite telling to come upon a passage in which Chomsky applauds Bakunin for repudiating the “purely formal liberty conceded, measured out and regulated by the State,” and for speaking on behalf of a richer notion of freedom — “the only kind of liberty that is worthy of the name, liberty that consists in the full development of all the material, intellectual and moral powers that are latent in each person; liberty that recognizes no restrictions other than those determined by the laws of our own individual nature.”²²

I mention these issues less to note the problems in Chomsky’s political perspective than to express the hope that future discussions of his work will move beyond the panegyric of Rai’s account, which while useful for the purposes of summary, does not engage Chomsky in any larger dialogue with the left and leaves us instead with the vision of a person beyond the parameters of fruitful discourse. I suspect that Chomsky cannot himself be happy with this exalted eulogy; his response to the large crowds that turn out for his talks is that “there’s just too much personalization....It’s worrisome...the ratio of passive participation to active engagement is way too high.”²³ This is certainly

²⁰James Peck, ed., *The Chomsky Reader* (New York: Pantheon, 1987), p. 132.

²¹Cited in Rai, *op. cit.*, p. 175.

²²Cited in *ibid.*, pp. 95-96.

²³Noam Chomsky, *Class Warfare: Interviews with David Barsamian* (Monroe, ME: Common Courage Press, 1996).

true; but it is also true that the ratio of left-sectarian pronouncement to useful political conversation it also far too high.

A left that recognizes the contributions of its articulate spokespeople is usefully honoring itself. A left that depends on the sense that some one person has the necessary answer to our perplexities, and also the capacity to articulate them on our behalf, reminds me of the moment in Brecht's *Galileo* when Federzoni, shocked by Galileo's recantation, proclaims: "Unhappy the land that has no heroes." "No." replies Galileo: "Unhappy the land that needs a hero." If anyone in recent American history can claim the status of "hero" it would, in my judgment, be Noam Chomsky. But this is not because his political writings are beyond dispute and revision. It is, rather, that in a period of devastating decline of democratic socialist values, in the presence of a deepening corruption which has corroded articulation, belief, and commitment, Chomsky has stood as an indefatigable conscience for a vision which provides hope for the construction of a humane world. For all his prodigious intellectual power it is finally the persistence of a passionate decency that will finally make Chomsky's most enduring political legacy.

