

The Chomsky effect or anarchism of the State

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Contents

Strengthening the State	4
“Ideal” and “realism”	5
Critiqued in the USA	6
In France: at the service of what strategy?	7

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The beginning of 2001 saw an editorial infatuation arise for the writings of Noam Chomsky, noticeable since 1998. Several collections have been published (notably by the publisher *Agone*), as well as interviews; a part of the anarchist press makes moderate use of a fair deal of Chomsky texts and interviews available on the Internet. *Le Monde libertaire*, then, gave him the front page of their re-entry issue, with prelude to a longer series on him¹. The political texts of the famous American linguist were before that hard to find for some twenty years.

This rediscovery happens almost always in a eulogistic way. “Noam Chomsky is the most famous of the contemporary anarchists; he is also one of the most famous living intellectuals”, writes N. Baillargeon (*L’ordre moins le pouvoir*, Agone, 2001). In the preface of *De la guerre comme politique étrangère des États-Unis* (Agone, 2001) J. Bricmont with glory characterizes Chomsky as “underappreciated political giant”. The “authors” of an interview curiously titled *Two hours of lucidity* (Les Arènes, 2001), don’t go easy either, welcoming “one of the last living authors and thinkers truly rebel in this young millennium”, for which one must “wait six months in advance in the beaches of free time to meet”. No doubt that these formulas, characteristics of a foreign personality cult in the libertarian tradition, make laugh the interested, whom I don’t accuse of any crime. They aim, and it is there that they are interesting, to persuade the reader that there is an opportunity to discover a thinking so absolutely original and yet hitherto unappreciated or ignored. From the part of libertarian journals and commentators (Baillargeon, etc.), it is a matter of using the reputation of the famous international linguist to spread political positions quantifiable as anarchist that he defends, which are then through authority legitimized by his academic and scientific prose. One must therefore present Chomsky as celebrity linguist doubling as great anarchist thinker. It is on legitimacy and the consequences of him as such an object of propaganda that I wish to write this critique.

One must first note that while the anarchist is presented to the militant public, the analyst of foreign politics (notably military) from the United States sees himself largely and frequently respected in the biggest (French) national presses, without necessarily getting presented as libertarian. *Le Monde*, which offers him a full page in one of their supplements on the war (22nd of november, 2001), qualifies him as “incarnation of radical thinking”. *Le Monde diplomatique*, which publishes “Terrorism, weapon of the powerful” (December 2001), does not speak of their engagements. It is also Chomsky himself who abstains from alluding to it. We may then notice – reserving ourselves to a future examination – the separation which he reveals between academic linguistics and militant activity (justified by the fact that the latter mustn’t appear reserved to the specialists), yet we are conflicted on why the “anarchist” Chomsky ignores similar large tribunes, and waits for us to ask him questions on his anarchistic tendencies, as if it were a matter of “personal affairs”, to hit on this side of things. Thus, he contributes to his own instrumentalization by ideological fabricators, still ignored (in the US, even his book *9-11*, for *September 11*, sold itself, without big press coverage, at over a hundred thousand pieces), similarly celebrated (in France) with a perfume of anti-Americanism.

¹ “*Le capitalisme en ordre de guerre*” (20th to 26th of September; text taken from the Internet; found in the fourth cover of the review *Les temps maudits* (theoretical review of the CNT), October 2001); “*À propos de la globalisation*” (27th of September to the 3rd of October); interview taken from the Internet (15th to the 21st of November 2001).

In his pamphlet of vulgarization *The order minus power*, unanimously saluted by the anarchist press, Baillargeon estimates that Chomsky has “prolonged and renovated” the anarchist tradition. He abstains at the same time – and for reasons! – from describing in what way this “renovation” would constitute itself. Chomsky himself seems closer to the truth when he precises (in 1976): “I do not really fancy myself an anarchist. Let us say that I am but a fellow traveler.” Outside of his identification with revolutionary anarchist trade unionism, obtained in numerous interviews with militant journals, it is not easy – in spite of the plethora of recent publications – to give oneself a clear idea of what Chomsky’s anarchistic companionship signifies. I have limited my quest to the essential question of the destruction of the State and doing away with the capitalist system.

I indicate here, for the convenience of my intent, that I consider “revolutionary” precisely he or she who takes part in such a rupture, judged by a prior necessity to construct an egalitarian and libertarian society. Symmetrically, he who is “counter-revolutionary”, is he who would proclaim such a rupture impossible, undesirable or ultimately works to in reality go against this prospect.

Strengthening the State

In one of the recently published texts², Chomsky recommends a politics which – from the anarchist point of view – merits the characterization of being original: the strengthening of the State.

“The anarchist ideal, in whatever form, has always contended, by definition, towards a dismantling of State power. I share this ideal. However, it often comes directly into conflict with my immediate objectives, which are to defend or even reinforce certain aspects of State authority [...]. Today, in the frame of our societies, I contend that the strategy of the sincere anarchists must be to defend certain State institutions against the assaults they undergo, while simultaneously opening themselves up to a bigger and more effective popular participation. This view is not inherently contradictory either strategically or ideally; it proceeds naturally of a practical hierarchization of ideals and of a just as practical evaluation of means of action.”

Chomsky returns to the subject in another text not translated into French, so I will provide us with the essence of its contents before critiquing a thing or two.

Interviewed on the odds of realizing an anarchist society Chomsky, using a slogan used by agricultural workers from Brazil, answers: “They say they have to enlarge their cage until they can break the bars.” Chomsky asserts that, in the current US state of things, one must defend the cage against external predators; defend power – however certainly illegitimate – of the State against private tyranny. It is, he says, “an evidence for all people troubled by injustice and unfreedom, for example someone who thinks children must be nourished, but this seems difficult to make understand many who fancy themselves libertarian or anarchist.” “In my view”, he adds, “it is one of the irrational and self-destructive instincts of good people who consider themselves left who, in fact, distance themselves from the legitimate lives and aspirations of suffering people.”

Except for the reference, more precise than in the prior text, to only the US, it is here again the same classic defense and illustration of the so-called realistic reformist. This time, in spite of the oratory precautions, the *actual* opponents of the State are supposed to be more foolish than

² Reponsabilité des intellectuels, *Agone*, 1998, p. 137.

anyone else preoccupied with justice and, incidentally, are incapable of understanding their contributions to letting children die of hunger! The “sincere anarchists” are thus invited to recognize honestly finding themselves in a reformist impasse.

Let us immediately observe that this Statist fatalism, doubled of a crusty and reformist moralism, is not without echo here in France. The French libertarian *La Griffe* published in its summer issue of 2001 a “State dossier” in which the first article ended with the same formula, signed Chomsky: “the State [sic] is today the last bulwark against the private dictatorship which, in particular, will not give us any gifts.”

Since such similar enormities can be published today in libertarian reviews without its authors seeing in it anything but a legitimate view as any other, it is indispensable to counter the effects of the Chomskyan “pedagogy” by putting the record straight.

“Ideal” and “realism”

Recent history provides us with examples of struggles led partially in the name of defending “public services” (transportation, social security, etc.) which certainly did not deserve to be condemned with an abstract anti-State principle. I have, for example, analyzed the dismantling of the traditional railway system and its replacement with the “TGV system”, predestined first and foremost to a clientele of roaming cadres between the large European metropolises. It was quite apparently part of the larger historical push to privatize the valuable “services” (transportation, health, mail and telecommunications, water, gas, electricity) and the nefarious consequences which stem from them. It did not occur to me to – because there exists no logical connection between the two suggestions – to deduce from this a “practical hierarchization of the ideals”, which should inevitably lead to theorize a support to the State institution which would apparently be desired as destroyed.

That there can exist, in a historical given moment, different enemies, dangerous on unequal levels, and that a revolutionary may find the painful (and aleatory) necessity to play one adversary against the other, one would need a foolish dogmatism to not agree. It is then not inconceivable to press on this attachment to “public service” (on the condition that one desecrates it) to hit the brakes on, for as much as it is possible, the appetites of the large firms. It is wrong that this should be seen as equivalent to a necessary denouncing, of which the quasi-Leninist “withering of the State” – which Chomsky precisely reincarnates – would give us the calculated formula. In other words: strengthening the State to better erase it afterwards, we have already been pranked by this before! Consequently, if oppositional movements within the current tendencies of capitalism lead to restore, temporarily, certain State prerogatives, I do not see a reason to lose any sleep.

We will notice that Chomsky also inverts the process. For him it is the *ideal* (of the dismantling of the State) which enters in conflict with the immediate objective. Or, the immediate objective is not reinforcing the State (or is it?), but for example to delay the privatization of public transportation in opposition to the restriction of circulation they necessarily bring. The partial “reinforcing” of the State is thus a *consequence* and not an objective. Elsewhere, we will see that the fact of baptizing as “ideal” the destruction of the State it comes back to reject this objective outside of the real. Qualification is worth disqualification.

The veritable realism, it appears to me, consists in remembering that a State disposes of but two eventual and complimenting strategies to answer to social movements and even more a revolutionary agitation: repression and/or reform/recuperation. A revolutionary movement, beholden by a desire (conscious or not) to rupture with the system in place cannot – by definition – obtain the approval of a State. On the flip side, it can constrain it to play reform, retreat and demagoguery.

The inconvenience of reformism as strategy (increasing “popular participation” of the democratic State, as per Chomsky) is that it never reforms anything at all. This is for the excellent reason that the auto-adaptive State arranges for itself reforms at least as well as certain popular assemblies. The State defuses them, the phagocyte, reduces them to nothing. The State as such does not exist, outside of struggle, knowing that the guarantee of “progressive” reform will not be emptied of its content, but we must realize this evidence, paradoxical only in appearance, that it is indeed revolutionary action that is the way of reforming society. Many institutions and social apparatuses are truly the result of insurrectionary workers’ struggles. The fact that they have been effectuated by either politician or capitalist can but lead to see the welcoming of a strengthened “State”, conceived as abstract entity or as a type of inert matter, a dyke for example, which we would have to consolidate to protect ourselves from floods. The State institutionalizes in a historical moment the matters of existing classes in a society. Let us remind ourselves of the definition (in constitutional rights) of the modern State which yields the monopoly on violence. An anti-Leninist like Chomsky knows otherwise very well that there can exist no “worker’s State”; speaking very well that the State is by nature a bourgeois arm.

Critiqued in the USA

The positions defended by Chomsky and his Canadian admirers do not reflect, without fault, the general viewpoint of militant libertarians or anarchist trade unionists in the USA. They are very notably critiqued in the trimonthly *Anarcho-Syndicalist Review*, to which he had accorded an interview. The metaphor of the aggrandizing of the cage, which Chomsky judges as particularly enlightening³, sets off the ire of James Herrod: “The predators are not outside of the cage; the cage, it’s them and their practices. The cage itself is mortal. And when we realize that the cage is of world-systemic proportions, and that there is no “exterior” to which we may escape, then we can see that the only way to not get culled, brutalized or oppressed, is to destroy the cage itself.”

If the ensemble of the contributors attribute to Chomsky the merit of having analyzed the foreign policy of the USA⁴, gives visibility to the American anarchist trade unionist movement, furnishes a critique of the media which seems novel outside of the Atlantic, three of which (out of four⁵) absolutely notice and scorn his reformism. “It is possible that Chomsky does this, as

³ *Outside of the cited text, Chomsky uses this metaphor in his interviews with D. Barsamian, The Common Good, Odonian Press, 1998.*

⁴ *In the analysis of geopolitics, the domain where his competences are least subject of caution, Chomsky adopts the same democratic and reformist twist. The new military humanism. Lessons from Kossovo (Page deux editions, Laussane, 2000) makes a call to meditate on the merits of international human rights from which the principal advance would be, according to the author Chomsky appreciatively cites, “the outlawing of war and the prohibition of resorting to violence”. What the prefacing author qualifies as “a reasoning of quasi-mathematical rigor” outlines here a legalistic silliness.*

⁵ *Only Mike Long delivers himself to a lengthy advocacy for pragmatism which leads him to, for example, a sympathetic evaluation of the Castro regime.*

purported trade unionist [he is wearer of the badge of supporter of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), revolutionary trade unionist organization], and to defend the benefits of liberal democracy, but that is neither anarchist trade unionist or anarchist”, writes Graham Purchase. “It would be an error for us”, adds James Herrod, “to turn ourselves towards Chomsky to ask him about his opinion on subjects that he has not truly studied, because his priorities were elsewhere, notably that which touches upon anarchist theory, the revolutionary strategy, conceptions of a free life, etc.”

In France: at the service of what strategy?

Why forget today the texts of Chomsky on anarchism? Let us widen the simplistic hypothesis of a French-Quebec co-editorial, financially supported – including in France – by Quebec cultural institutions⁶, even if the originality of the editorial mode merits to be signaled. Is it more a matter of publishing without proper judgment a theoretical body – by its volume –, produced by a reputed scientific, and bringing a real caution to an “anarchism” of which the precise content would bring little? This second hypothesis is informed by the simultaneous publication of N. Baillargeon’s texts, which takes in detail the Chomskyan distinction between objectives (at very long terms) and immediate goals, the latter being “determined while taking into account possibilities enabled by circumstances”⁷, which would serve to justify a compromise of – and the word is of Baillargeon – “certain cyclical, provisional and measuring matters with the State”. Baillargeon also takes over from Chomsky his tear jerking arguments (little starving children) and his calls for “intellectual honesty”: “This means then, if we don’t play word games, to bring ourselves to defend certain aspects [*sic*] of the State.” He advances even, achieving this way the Chomskyan inversion of the historical perspective, that the obtaining of reforms “is without a doubt the necessary condition” for the maintaining of an anarchist ideal. Reformism is then thus not a lesser evil, but the immediate way of laying the foundations upon which will be built an apparatus allowing the obtaining of revolutionary aims. We doubt this: neither the nature of this apparatus nor its mode of propulsion are specified or even indicated.

This “libertarian” rehabilitation of reformism finds its echo in the French or French-speaking anarchist milieus, as it does in other walks like those of Attac, already critiqued in these columns, which does certainly refer to the “libertarian ideal” but resorts to the phraseological and the imaginary utopia of the proletarian world (cf. *Oiseau-tempête* no. 8). The reformist-libertarian fashion expresses itself equally in the echoes coming from the theses of the “municipalists”, taken from Bookchin, in the attempt to create an academic-libertarian caucus, within which participate the wise seminars of the ACL (Lyon) editions and in certain measures the editorial *Réfractions*. That this or that initiative be accompanied by excellent comrades is here not taken into account. At a time where libertarian ideals arouse a certain renewed interest in the editorial or even the militant, this fact is given testament through the creation of anarchist libraries (in Rouen, Besançon, etc.) and numerous publications animate themselves to present as compatible an anarchist tradition with an original reformism, given as only possible *ersatz* the toppling of the world.

⁶ *It is the case for* Instinct de liberté *and* De l’espoir en l’avenir (Chomsky) *and for* Les Chiens ont soif (Baillargeon; cf. note suivante)

⁷ Les chiens ont soif. Critiques et propositions libertaires, *Agone*, Comeau and Nadeau, 2001. Released in Quebec. Published within the competition of the Conseil des Arts du Canada, of the program of income tax for the edition of the Quebec government and with the SODEC.

As an American critic of Chomsky reminds us, each one has well the privilege to take a position which is as such – to speak strictly – of counter-revolutionary character. It must be deconstructed and critiqued – with disciplined language –, and this must be done with as little complacency as is found draped in the folds of the black flag which is given plume and and pedigree to a flattering *anarchism of opinion*, which has become academic discipline, actor of democratic plurality and museological curiosity.

Within the rupture with the capitalist system, necessary path towards towards the construction of a communistic and libertarian society, dwells a point of fracture that is essential between those who accept this world – liberal-libertarian cynics or citizen suppléments – and those who want to invent another world. On the most immediate level, we would like that all honest libertarians who solicit Chomsky, publish Chomsky and sell Chomsky in piles take from that the consequences and tell us if, after considering it, they are rallying themselves behind the strategy of compromise, the anarchism of the State.

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