

Critiques of Neoconservatism

Horowitz, Chomsky, and the Neoconservative Ideology

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January 2002

Noam Chomsky is one of the latest on the Left to fall under David Horowitz's guns. Horowitz's "**The Sick Mind of Noam Chomsky**" appeared last fall, in two parts, in **FrontPage Magazine**. In a lot of ways, Chomsky deserves it. He has plenty of weaknesses and failings that Horowitz could have exploited mercilessly, had he so wished.

For one thing, he has a tendency to play fast and loose with his sources. He often seems to be making it as hard as possible to look up his source for some assertion. In the past, I have read a paragraph in **Deterring Democracy** or the like, containing several statements about, say, U.S. ties to death squads in Central America. But instead of providing a separate citation for each item of fact, he footnotes the entire paragraph once, and then lists a dozen sources (or two) in the note. So unless the titles themselves provide sufficient contextual clues, it's necessary to look up all of them (several hours' work at the library) just to find out which source refers to which assertion. On top of that, many of his references are not to the primary source, but to some other work by Chomsky in which he cites the primary source. Worse yet, he sometimes cites his work like this: "See chapters three, five, and seven, in..." And if that were not bad enough, in some cases (albeit far from a majority), the original source doesn't explicitly say what Chomsky extracted as its import. It turns out that the statement footnoted in Chomsky's writing is not an actual fact from the original source, but Chomsky's characterization of the meaning of the original fact (which he doesn't actually quote). I think this last failing, in all fairness, reflects not so much intellectual dishonesty as sloppiness in distinguishing the bare facts from his reading of their significance; but it surely makes it a chore to check his work.

Chomsky is often referred to as a "prolific writer"—it's almost a Homeric epithet. Unfortunately, his prolific writing is in part due to his tendency to recycle the same stock paragraphs in every new piece he writes (I'm afraid to say too much on this count, since I have the same failing). Chomsky has repeatedly referred to Bakunin's fears that Marx's state socialism would degenerate into a "Red Bureaucracy." The only source Chomsky ever cites is a letter from Bakunin to Ogareff and Herzen, quoted in a work in French by Daniel Guerin—not exactly accessible to the average reader who wants to find out more (see above paragraph). So I did a word search of "Bakunin" and "red bureaucracy." Guess what? 104 references, about two-thirds of them from Chomsky. And in each of them, he referred to the stock Bakunin quote in almost exactly the same words, and gave the same inaccessible reference (if he gave a source at all). Another reason for Chomsky's

literary fecundity is the number of collected interviews from Z Magazine, or by his Boswell, David Barsamian.

Far from the least of his shortcomings is intellectual inconsistency. He regularly comes under attack from anarchists and others on the libertarian left for his claims to be an anarchist, and the peculiarly statist nature of his “anarchism.” In the past he has referred to the difference between his “goals” and “visions.” His long-term vision is to abolish the state and devolve power to a federation of direct democracies. But since our society is dominated by concentrations of private power, it is necessary first of all to strengthen the power of the state to dismantle corporate power. So his immediate goal is to vastly increase federal power, under the control of “progressive” forces, to break the power of corporate tyrannies before the state can be allowed to wither away. I’m pretty sure another “anarchist” named Lenin had the same “vision” and “goals.”

But a central theme in Chomsky’s work is the extent to which existing corporate capitalism depends on the state as a source of subsidies and cartelizing regulations; so it stands to reason that the cure for capitalism is not to strengthen the state, but to abolish it and let the free market destroy corporate power. Engels pretty aptly summed up the difference between anarchists and state socialists over a century ago: “*They say abolish the state and capital will go to the devil. We propose the reverse.*” By this standard, Chomsky sounds a lot closer to Engels than to Bakunin.

But Horowitz didn’t attack any of these things. He preferred to attack a straw man. Although he made repeated reference to Chomsky’s statements about the role of ruling class interests in U.S. policy, Horowitz didn’t answer them. He simply characterized them. His method was to quote them outside of any context, in a “can you believe he actually said this?” tone, and then to denounce them as “unAmerican.” The heretical statements, judged a priori to be outrageous, need not be refuted—just denounced. In Part Two of “Sick Mind,” he responded to reader complaints that he hadn’t actually answered Chomsky’s arguments by dissecting a carefully selected handful of assertions. But almost every reference was to a Chomsky pronouncement in one of the Barsamian collections, What Uncle Sam Really Wants. The Barsamian interviews are not where you’d go if you wanted to see Chomsky’s arguments fully developed, with documentation provided.

Horowitz comes across, to me anyway, as at least as disingenuous as Chomsky. I suspect the reason he failed to answer Chomsky on grounds of fact was that he knew he couldn’t. For all the cloud of obfuscation that surrounds Chomsky’s use of sources, a great deal of what he says about U.S. policy in the Third World—its support of death squads and right-wing dictators, and the role of corporate interests in formulating such policies—is heavily documented and hard to refute. It’s one thing to answer a general pronouncement about the iniquity of U.S. power with an equally general counter-assertion about the virtue and altruism of U.S. policy. It’s another to answer documentation on ties between the Atlacatl Battalion and the School of the Americas, or on United Fruit Company activities in 1954. To argue the facts with Chomsky might well undermine his simplistic Snidely Whiplash picture of U.S. motivation; but it would also risk, to a much greater extent, exposing as hogwash a centerpiece of neoconservative ideology—the benevolence of American empire.

Which is an inelegant segue to my next point. Horowitz’s faults are, more generally, the faults of the neoconservative movement as a whole.

Neoconservatism’s central defining characteristic is its repugnance to the genuine American conservative tradition. The views of Horowitz would not only be unrecognizable as conservatism to anyone born before 1914, but (with the possible exception of authoritarian centralists like

Hamilton) would have been repudiated with disgust by the leading figures in the first two generations of American history. The American tradition from the revolutionary period to the present has been fixated on the dangers of power, and on the tendency of power to corrupt. And it has been quite explicit on the kind of corruption it feared. Either the state apparatus would become an aristocracy in its own right, from the love of power and privilege, or it would function in the interests of an aristocracy of corporations and moneyed interests. Empire, to the revolutionary generation and the American mainstream up until 1941, was inconsistent with the survival of American constitutional traditions. Its concomitants, a large permanent military establishment and a powerful executive, were themselves great threats to liberty.

Horowitz and the neocons, in contrast, positively worship power. Their literature is full of nostalgia over past total wars, and the spirit of wartime sacrifice on behalf of the State. Their heroes are wartime dictators like Lincoln, Wilson and FDR. They insist on referring to the Cold War as WWII, and the “war on terrorism” as WWIV. They are the most strident advocates of turning the latter into a total war against the whole Islamic world. And nearly every day we see the neocons, in the journals of opinion, defending the abrogation of still more of the Fourth Amendment by the USA Patriot Act, the suspension of habeas corpus for Jose Padilla, etc., as necessary sacrifices “for the duration”—which could be decades. They are enthusiastic on the potentials for global welfare of “benevolent empire,” and they support presidential “national security” prerogatives reminiscent of a Stuart monarch.

Although they make much of the social pathologies resulting from the Great Society, they are generally fairly accommodating to the New Deal form of state capitalism. The reason, perhaps, is that many neocons are former Cold War liberals who didn’t move left with McGovern. Despite the neoconservatives’ professed horror at the “statism” and “authoritarianism” of the left, their only real problem with big government is apparently that it isn’t being used to beat the right values into people.

Of all the Neocons’ manglings of “American” values, the worst example is their close association with the Straussians. Straussians have a very odd interpretation, to say the least, of the U. S. Constitution. The nature of Straussian constitutionalism was made pretty clear in debates between the Straussian Harry Jaffa and the traditionalist M. E. Bradford. The proper way to interpret legal and historical documents (at least outside the Straussian priesthood) is in the context of the time they were written, according to the understanding of their contemporaries; in the case of the Constitution, this means according to the understanding of the ratifiers. The method of the Straussians, however, is to take a handful of documents—the Declaration of Independence, the Preamble, the Gettysburg Address—as Sacred Texts. One interprets them by looking up “Common Defence and General Welfare” in Mortimer Adler’s *Syntopicon* to see what Aristotle and Aquinas had to say on the subject, and then importing these ideas into the text of the Constitution itself.

Straussians commonly assert that the values of the Declaration were somehow mystically incorporated in the Constitution, and are legally enforceable as such even when no warrant can be found on the face of the Constitution. This Straussian methodology resurrects many of the idiosyncracies of the “antislavery Constitutionalism” of the pre-Civil War period—or what I like to call “Shiite Constitutionalism.” The idea of substantive due process comes from that cultural milieu. So does the Howard Phillips (U.S. Taxpayers’ Party) dogma that the Fifth Amendment is not just a prohibition against the federal government, but actually empowers the President to enforce the rights of citizens against the states. And so does the idea that “Common Defense

and General Welfare” in Article I Section 8, far from being a qualification of the fiscal power, is a general grant of power that renders the subsequent delegation of powers moot.

In the Straussian ideology, Liberty and Equality (always capitalized) are central values; but somehow the plain old right just to be left alone, or to control the things that affect your life, isn't. And these grand abstractions of Straussian/ Neoconservative “Liberty” and “Equality” somehow always seem to require a massive imperial commitment, with associated national security state, for their survival. The old fashioned kind of (small l) liberty was obtained by old-fashioned, hell-raising American anti-authoritarianism—the kind that actually distrusted the benevolence of American power. In their willingness to augment the Leviathan state, and sacrifice real liberty on the altar of grand abstractions like “Liberty” and “Equality,” the neoconservatives sound a lot like the left-wing statist Horowitz holds in such contempt.

Besides his ignorance of the genuine American conservative tradition, Horowitz is amazingly fuzzy in his conception of “the Left.” First, he ignores the fact that traditional American conservatism is historically on “the Left”—in the sense that they would have sat with the Third Estate in the Estates-General or the Whigs in Parliament. Even the founding father of traditionalist conservatism, Edmund Burke, was a Whig who supported the Glorious Revolution and denounced the corruption (and decided non-benevolence) of British empire. If Mr. Horowitz had been alive then, he would probably have defended Warren Hastings against Burke’s “unBritishism.”

And second, he ignores the existence of a genuine anti-statist left. The Left has just as many nuances, complexities and subcurrents as the Right; but Horowitz’s motivation is less a desire to understand things on their own terms, than to grab “whatever comes to hand in a fight.” Horowitz delights in using the terms progressive, socialist and communist interchangeably. In quoting Chomsky’s doubts on the genuine left-wing credentials of Lenin, Horowitz crows, “*You have to pinch yourself when reading sentences like that.*” Now I would suspect that Horowitz, as a former member of the Left himself, knows quite well that there are more varieties of anti-Leninist Marxism than there are of Leninism. A whole current of libertarian-communist and council communist types from Luxembourg and Liebknecht to Pannekoek and Mattick denounced the Soviet regime as a new form of bureaucratic class society.

If Horowitz considers their pretensions of hating Leninist/Stalinist authoritarianism to be false, he can examine Lenin’s strident denunciation of left-wing communism as an “infantile disorder.” When Lenin sent the Workers’ Opposition and the Kronstadt mutineers to the gulag, or broke the power of the workers’ committees in the factories (calling for Taylorist state managers in their place), he seemed to take their opposition pretty seriously. I cannot imagine an editor of Ramparts not being aware of these currents. He may genuinely believe that “libertarian communism” eventually leads down the same totalitarian road as Leninsim. But that is an assertion to be argued, not a question to be begged. In fact he doesn’t even acknowledge that the question exists. Another reason I suspect Horowitz of disingenuous demagogy, pretending to know less than he really does.

Despite his wilfull disregard of subtle distinctions on the left in regard to other people, Horowitz becomes an expert on all the shades of difference when his own leftist past is questioned. In response to Chomsky’s dismissal, “*I didn’t used to read him when he was a Stalinist, and I don’t read him now,*” Horowitz responded:

As a college freshman in 1956, I declared my own political identity as an anti-Stalinist “new leftist.” I strenuously opposed the Soviet invasion of Hungary, at great filial cost

within the household. Ever since that time that is for my entire writing career in the left until my last piece was submitted to The Nation twenty years later in 1979, I was a vocal anti-Stalinist.

Horowitz is admirably charitable toward himself, considering one of his favorite epithets in characterizing any leftist movement on campus is “Stalinist.”

A good many anarchists and others on the libertarian left repudiate Chomsky’s statism. And there is a lot more mutual tolerance between the libertarian left and right than I suspect Horowitz cares for. There are people on the left like Alexander Cockburn, Sam Smith, and Frank Morales who have strong sympathies for the libertarian-constitutionalist right (to the extent that they are denounced as militia dupes by Chip Berlet and his ilk). And there are many on the right who, far from denouncing straw men on the “leftover Left,” make common cause with parts of the left. Old Rightists like Joseph Stromberg, besides preserving the memory of Taft, Buffet, and Garrett, also make favorable reference to the writings of revisionist historians like Gabriel Kolko, W. A. Williams and James Weinstein in their analysis of “Corporate Liberalism” and the “Open Door Empire.” And right-libertarian free marketers like Murray Rothbard and Karl Hess sought an alliance between the Old Right and the New Left against the New Right assault on traditional conservatism. Hess, I believe, for a time even endorsed syndicalist seizure of industries whose profits depended primarily on state capitalist intervention. There is a broad ideological overlap where Karl Hess meets Alexander Cockburn, where there is little room for the shibboleths of left and right; its motto could be taken from Hess: “We should encourage the flower of liberty whether its petals be red white and blue, or red and black.”

But I suspect Horowitz disapproves of “libertarian” anything, left or right. I find it interesting to compare my attitudes toward my own ideological evolution over the years, to those of Horowitz. Ten years ago I was a traditionalist conservative, strongly influenced by the antifederalists and commonwealthmen, distributists, and agrarians—what Clyde Wilson called the “Jeffersonian conservative tradition.” In the intervening time, I gradually migrated leftward, so that I am now a mutualist, heavily influenced by Proudhon and Tucker. But my only objection to my old conservative mentors, to the extent that I have any objections, is that they either missed part of the picture or they didn’t fully realize the implications of their own premises. My “petty bourgeois” values of decentralism and localism, community, are still pretty much the same. I still dislike New Class elitists and parasites who feed off of others’ labor. I still dislike PC social engineers who presume to reeducate the rest of us. Although I am in the IWW, I still read Hilaire Belloc and M.E. Bradford with affection—but didn’t Belloc have ties to the Guild Socialists? And for that matter, the Nashville Agrarians weren’t too keen on corporate capitalism, either. The continued existence of paleoconservatism is an embarrassment to the Neocons, in much the same way Rutherford, Aronson and Jones were to Ingsoc.

I have a lot of respect for people like Christopher Lasch, who defy easy categorization according to Left-Right stereotypes, and are willing to integrate ideas from diverse sources into a new framework. But Horowitz seems to be temperamentally incapable, in the realm of ideas, of “taking what he can use and leaving the rest.” He has the air of the deprogrammed Moonie who immediately constructs a new fanatical cult in opposition to Moonie-ism. He seems to be obsessed with proving wrong everything he believed thirty years ago, at any cost—even at the cost of intellectual honesty. Truth itself is suspect, if it also happens to be something believed

by THOSE PEOPLE. In his authoritarianism, he is driven, in Orwell's words, by "*a furious desire to track down, denounce, and vaporize*" anyone who agrees with ANYTHING he believed thirty years ago.

One of the more ludicrous aspects of neoconservatism is its use of the New Class as a whipping boy—for example, Ann Coulter's defense of people in the "red states" against America-hating elitists. But neocons are not exactly situated to pose as champions of middle America against the elites. They are predominantly former Trotskyists and other leftist intellectuals, journalists, Straussian academicians, and former New Deal Democratic politicians—pretty much the entire spectrum of "rootless cosmopolitanism," from A to B. Neoconservative social and political views, in many ways, are the outgrowth of corporate liberalism—the chief New Class ideological construct in mid-twentieth century America. If you take a look at the big intellectual stars in the contemporary neocon stable, like Huntington and Fukuyama, they are throwbacks to corporate liberalism. Their work is quite in the tradition of Schlesinger's "vital center," Bell's "end of ideology," and the "interest group pluralism" of Adolph Berle. The neocons, for all their pretensions of solidarity with the heartland, have shown a visceral hostility to the genuine American populist tradition. As Paul Gottfried argued, they are very much the spokesmen of managerial tyranny. Finally, in their hawkishness and jingoism on foreign policy (e.g. the chicken-hawk William Kristol's urge to vicariously "crush Serb skulls"), today's neoconservatives are virtual mirror images of the "Progressives" at The New Republic who whored themselves out to Wilson's war propaganda apparatus.

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