

The Coercive Anarchism of Noam Chomsky

by Barry Loberfeld

The world famous philosopher's "anarchism" ultimately amounts to its very opposite.

An essay on radical behaviorist B.F. Skinner was the last thing I expected to encounter when I picked up Noam Chomsky's classic political tract *For Reasons of State*. However, I soon recognized the value of this piece, which I found notable for its presentation of the MIT linguist's own notions of freedom and dignity — and what constitutes their negation.¹

For me, Skinnerian behaviorism has long been a dead issue because Skinner's concept of control requires an impossible definition of freedom. What would constitute for Skinner an entity with free will, a being whose behavior is governed by what's "inside the skin," not by its environment? At first, I thought only a wind-up toy would qualify. But I soon realized that even this fails to meet his standard: the toy is not "free" to walk forward if a wall blocks its way; its behavior too is determined by its environment. To Skinner, interaction with an environment is "control" by that environment. "Freedom" can only be behavior that occurs *apart from any environment* — i.e., apart from reality.

One of Chomsky's many telling criticisms of Skinner relates to this point: "The libertarian whom [Skinner] condemns distinguishes between persuasion and certain forms of control. He advocates persuasion and objects to coercion. In response, Skinner claims that persuasion is itself . . . [a] form of control." Well put, Professor. This libertarian wholeheartedly agrees, which is why I was shocked to see Chomsky later put forth a theory of behavior that itself confuses persuasion with coercion:

"The most obvious form of control . . . is differential wages. . . . Since the industrial revolution, [socialism] has been much concerned with the problems of 'wage slavery' and the 'benign' forms of control that rely on deprivation and reward rather than direct punishment." And: "There is,

of course, no doubt that behavior can be controlled, for example, by threat of violence or a pattern of deprivation and reward. . . . Sanctions backed by force restrict freedom, as does differential reward. . . . [I]t would be absurd . . . to overlook [as does Skinner] the distinction between a person who chooses to conform in the face of threat, or force, or deprivation and differential reward and a person who 'chooses' to obey Newtonian principles as he falls from a high tower."

In a passage from *Beyond Freedom and Dignity*, Skinner says much the same thing: "Productive labor, for example, was once the result of punishment: the slave worked to avoid the consequences of not working. Wages exemplify a different [approach]: a person is paid when he behaves in a given way so that he will continue to behave in that way" (p. 30, which, no, Chomsky doesn't quote). Both Skinner and Chomsky believe the same thing, that economic persuasion is not persuasion but "control" — coercion — and those subject to it are not free. Whereas the traditional taskmaster beat those who did not obey orders (force), today's marketplace employer simply fires them ("deprivation") — or, if they do obey, pays them ("reward"). Capitalism controls all behavior by matching different behaviors with different wages ("differential reward"), with zero being the wage for some behaviors (again, "deprivation").

Susan Lopez wants to be a singer like her idol, Jennifer Lopez. However, she is not *free* to be one. She isn't thrashed when she opens her mouth. It's just that no one (including Professor Chomsky) will pay her to sing; she is "free" to sing only to the extent that she is "free" to starve. Consequently, she has no choice but to work at the only job for which people will pay her — collecting bedpans at the retirement home. This is not what she wants to do at all, and she would prefer at the very least to work only part-time, but that means the loss of her medical benefits. For Chomsky, Susan Lopez is not free — free to be "able to do as one pleases," which is the "natural goal" of a "decent

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society," one in which all the Susan Lopeses will have the same freedom as "those fortunate few [e.g., Jennifer Lopez] who can choose their own work generally do today." And, as Providence would have it, the professor knows exactly what will take us to this Promised Land: the redesign of our culture to approximate the "socialist dictum, 'From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs.'" The first part will eliminate "reward," the second "deprivation."

His program for clause one is quite simple: stop paying people to work. No wages, no "wage slavery." Chomsky doesn't tell us who will accomplish this or how. He is skeptical, even scornful, of the suggestion that people work for "extrinsic reward," be it money or "prestige [or] respect," and won't work (i.e., will "vegetate," in his characterization) without it. The "decent society" will have "no shortage of scientists, engineers, surgeons, artists, craftsmen, teachers, and so on, simply because such work is intrinsically rewarding."² Any intimation that "history and experience" might cast doubt on this is dismissed as having "the same status as an eighteenth-century argument to the effect that capitalist democracy is impossible."³ He insists that "from the lessons of history we can reach only the most tentative conclusions about basic human tendencies" at one (anti-empirical) moment, only to insist elsewhere that "[w]e also find . . . that many people often do not act solely, or even primarily, so as to achieve material gain, or even so as to maximize

applause." Exactly where we find these "many people," the professor, renowned for his copious footnotes, provides not even a clue. My own impression, if I may borrow Chomsky's words against Skinner, is that "the claims are becoming more extreme and more strident as the inability to support them and the reasons for this failure become increasingly obvious."

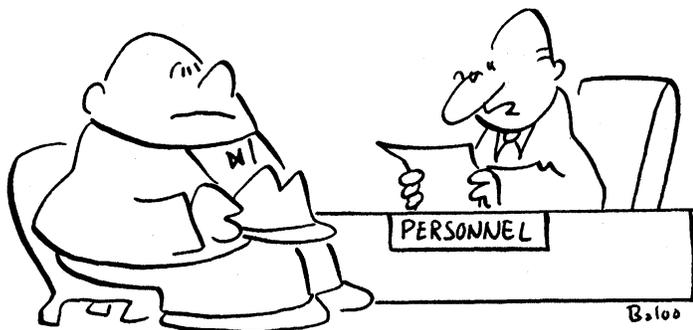
Chomsky writes, "interesting and socially useful work is . . . rewarding in itself." Socially useful — determined how and by whom, absent the mechanism of supply and demand? "Were we to rank occupations by social utility in some manner" — what manner? The answer comes in the form of a question: "Is it obvious that an accountant helping a corporation to cut its tax bill is doing work of greater social value than a musician, riveter, baker, truck driver, or lumberjack?" It is, if "social value" denotes how everyone allocates his personal resources. That's why the accountant earns far less than Jennifer Lopez but far more than Susan Lopez.⁴ But the professor uses the term "social value" to denote how *he* would allocate everyone else's resources. What emerges is another implicit "dictum": from each according to his own judgment, to all according to Chomsky's. This is a clear (though unacknowledged) echo of Skinner's behaviorist tenet that "the control of the population as a whole must be delegated to specialists."

And how can Chomsky guarantee that the jobs that are "socially useful" (e.g., bedpan collection) will be the same that people (e.g., Susan Lopez) find "interesting"? He can't, which is why we're informed that in this "decent society, socially necessary and unpleasant work would be divided on some egalitarian basis." But the obligatory mention about "egalitarian basis" tells us only *how* people will ideally do the work; it doesn't tell us *why* they'll do it. Since the work is not "interesting," it cannot be "rewarding in itself." That leaves only two alternative motivations: the button of "direct punishment" or the switch of "deprivation and reward." A self-professed "libertarian and humanist" who seeks to guide and free us from any manifestation of "authoritarian rule," Chomsky himself can find only sundry "forms of control" blocking all the exits.

For most socialists, people are selfish creatures who wouldn't even give you a smile unless you paid them and wouldn't toss a penny to the poor unless you forced them. But for Chomsky, people are selfless souls who are content to work for work's sake and are more than delighted to have the fruits of their labor given to others. These one-dimensional models of motivation simply ignore the way that many different and complex members of humanity are able to speak for themselves in the forum of the market, where each names his price and others take it or leave it. Of course, this is the very "wage slavery" Chomsky denounces.

What about the second clause — "to each according to his needs" — the other half of the moral formula to free us from such "slavery"? Here Chomsky provides no argument at all. He has nothing to say about the sort of practical policies that would be needed to implement this principle (and thus eradicate "deprivation"). Apparently, if any sense at all is to be made of this, we must make it ourselves.

One way that is sometimes suggested is a guaranteed



"How come you got fired from all these food-service jobs?"

income or a ration of basic necessities. In contrast to the free-market, the free-lunch frees Susan Lopez to sing full-time without starving. Leaving aside the question of how the government of the “decent society” will acquire the wealth for this distribution, does this distribution satisfy Chomsky’s standard of freedom? Here “history and experience” offer two answers: socialist dictatorship and social democracy. The first is easily disposed of: Noam Chomsky himself would be the last person in the Free World not to concede that Communist governments, in their monopolization of all resources, employ “deprivation and reward” as a means of exacting obedience from their subjects.

But what about a social democracy, which, as a matter of “positive rights, simply gives people what they need, no questions — or obligations — asked? A decisive *no* comes from 1971’s *Regulating the Poor*, edited by Francis F. Piven and Richard A. Cloward, which concludes that welfare programs arise “from the need to stem political disorder during periods of mass unemployment, and to enforce low-wage work during periods of economic and political stability. The institution of relief is thus best understood, not as charity, but as a system for regulating the poor.” So, “when the destitute become disorderly and tumultuous, often on a scale which threatens political stability,” the amount of a welfare payment is raised in order to quiet them down (“reward”). “Once turbulence subsides,” the amount of a payment is lowered to sub-wage levels (“deprivation”) and the poor

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“are forced off the relief rolls and into the low-wage labor pool.” Yes, “wage slavery”!

The only remaining political option is anarcho-syndicalism, so it’s hardly surprising that this approach is so closely associated with Chomsky.⁵

Here we must run our own Gedanken experiment. Let us imagine that there are no ethical or economic problems in a situation in which the kids who were hired at a Big Burger outlet Monday take over the store Tuesday. They kick out the manager and break all ties with the corporate home office, and no police intervene to protect property rights. Having truly seized the means of production from the bosses, these workers have at last freed themselves from “wage slavery” and the concomitant “deprivation and reward.” Or have they? The fact is, they *still* must arrive for work on time, look presentable, keep the place clean, cook the right food the right way, and be courteous, or else they won’t get paid — by the only real boss: the sovereign consumer, who pays (or doesn’t pay) the salaries of all the employees of Big Burger, from its CEO to the guy working the fryer.

Fundamentally, either Smith gives *something* — food, clothing, medicine, money, acknowledgment, friendship, consent, cooperation, approval, sex, love — to Jones (“reward”) or he doesn’t (“deprivation”). What isn’t either

“deprivation” or “reward”? Chomsky’s terms cover (and condemn) all of the give-and-take inherent in human interaction — “a handy explanation for any eventuality.” That’s what he says of Skinner’s theory, and it’s especially appropriate to quote it, since his own terms are, too obviously, merely commonplace synonyms for Skinner’s technological-sounding “negative reinforcement” and “positive reinforcement.”⁶ And, like Skinner’s, Chomsky’s contention that we are “controlled” by this either-or, “given the vacuity of the system . . . can never be proved wrong.”

But just who’s enslaving whom in “wage slavery”? Am I the consumer controlling the kid behind the counter

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through “deprivation” by withholding my money if he doesn’t “take my order”? Or is he controlling me through “deprivation” by withholding the burger (which I need for food) if I don’t obey his demand for a specific sum of money (for which I had to work)? Is my physician coercing me into working (for wages) by denying me medical care if I don’t pay him, or am I coercing him into working (as a physician) by denying him money (for food, clothing, etc.) if he doesn’t treat me? The very logic of “wage slavery” casts each man as both slave and master.⁷ I am reminded at this point of the wonderful cartoon that has one mouse in the Skinner box saying to the other, “Have I got this guy trained! All I have to do is press on this bar and he gives me food.”

The Chains That Bind Us All

How could it be otherwise? Freedom, for Chomsky, could only be behavior that occurs apart from any *social* environment — i.e., apart from one’s fellow human beings, whose every response to one’s every action constitutes either “deprivation” or “reward.” To free oneself from Chomsky’s “slavery,” one must live apart from society and provide his own food, shelter, medical care, companionship, etc.⁸

For money and definitions alike, bad drives out good. Absurdist conceptions of freedom serve only to undermine valid ones, which in turn exposes us to the kinds of political schemes proposed by Skinner and Chomsky. Consider how the “theory” of 30 years ago has become the “practice” of today. While Skinner’s name may not have the currency it once did, his environmental determinism has actually become the de facto psychological ideology of the “social constructionist” left, which also, in the wake of Communism’s demise, has adopted an “anarchist” persona mirroring Chomsky’s.

But there is a slight difference between the two thinkers. Skinner’s implicit vision of who would be a free man is as

unimaginable as a square circle, yet Chomsky's can (to some degree) be conceived and has, in fact, recently been dramatized: Tom Hanks in *Cast Away*. But whatever might be said of such a life, it has never been one that men of freedom and dignity have sought. □

Notes

1. This worthiness was recognized also by editor James Peck, who included an abbreviated version of the essay in 1987's *The Chomsky Reader*. As Clemson University psychologist Robert L. Campbell has observed, "Once Chomsky put forth these arguments, the demise of behaviorism . . . [was] assured. B.F. Skinner never answered Chomsky's arguments in print . . ." (dailyobjectivist.com/Extro/dividedlegacyofnoamchomsky3.asp).

2. Chomsky believes he's making a point when he asks whether a Harvard psychologist "would become a baker or lumberjack if he could earn more money that way." Personally, I'd like to ask whether Chomsky would trade the money, prestige, and respect of an MIT professorship for a post at, for example, Brooklyn Polytechnic.

Also, looking at the last item on this list, we might ask why the teachers' unions are forever telling us that we must raise salaries if we want to attract more and "better" people to go into teaching. Will people suddenly recognize the "intrinsically rewarding" nature of education once "differential reward" (i.e., the lure of better-paying jobs) is eliminated?

3. If the professor still "awaits a rational argument" for the importance of "extrinsic reward" (i.e., incentives, monetary and otherwise), he'll find possibly the best in James D. Gwartney and Richard L. Stroup's *What Everyone Should Know About Economics and Prosperity*, 1993.

4. This is not to affirm that prices are the only values. For an important clarification, see "Market Value" in Harry Binswanger (ed.), *The Ayn Rand Lexicon: Objectivism from A to Z*, 1986, pp. 280–1.

5. It would be quite an understatement to say that Chomsky's actual position vis-à-vis anarchism and statism is somewhat "problematic." Can he really somehow be both a socialist and an anarchist — or does logic force him off the fence? In *Class Warfare* (1996, pp. 122–3), he declares, "[R]ight now I'd like to strengthen the federal government. The reason is . . . in this world there happen to be huge concentrations of private power [i.e., business corporations] which are as close to tyranny and as close to totalitarian as anything humans have devised . . . [s]o you end up supporting centralized state power" to fight that "private power." This is a wholly unremarkable statement: socialism, the suppression of private enterprise, operatively requires "centralized state power." Who, from Lenin to Rothbard, would object? Even more along these lines, he (in a September 1999 interview with *The Progressive*) decries privatization as a crusade to destroy "every aspect of human life and attitudes and thought that involve social solidarity." What kind of libertarian, let alone anarchist, considers *state*

coercion, not mutual consent, the foundation (indeed, the whole) of "social solidarity"? Worse yet, our New Left radical is parroting "corporate liberal" Robert Kuttner, who too uses "social solidarity" to label the meta-value supposedly evinced by welfare state programs (*The Life of the Party: Democratic Prospects in 1988 and Beyond*, 1987, pp. 16–7). But compare all this with the fact that Chomsky regularly identifies himself as a "classical liberal" and earnestly bemoans how *liberalism*, a term that once stood for opposition to (or at least limitations on) state power, has been "perverted" to mean "a commitment to the use of state power for welfare purposes." He even fancies himself a kind of "[Old Right] conservative, like [Sen. Robert] Taft, [who] wants to cut back state power, cut back state intervention in the economy — the same as someone like [Sen.] Mark Hatfield — to preserve the Enlightenment ideals of freedom of expression, freedom from state violence, of law-abiding states, etc." (quoted in Milan Rai, *Chomsky's Politics*, 1995, p. 188 n. 24). Now compare that with his conviction that "New Deal liberalism . . . [and] its achievements, which are the result of a lot of popular struggle, are worth defending and expanding" (*The Common Good*, 1998, p. 5). If this is still not enough, I give you the *lagnappe* of a "socialist" who worries about the danger that corporations — social bodies — pose to individualism, since "[t]here's nothing individualistic about corporations" (*Keeping the Rabble in Line*, 1994, p. 280). Though if that's true, then wouldn't these corporations be veritable fonts of "social solidarity" — not "private power" — which would consequently obviate the need for their suppression by "centralized state power"?

My "conclusion" is that Chomsky's political vocabulary, like Skinner's techno-cant, is a dialect of Newspeak that I'll "happily leave to others to decode."

6. Skinner seems to anticipate this when he writes, "What the layman calls a reward is a 'positive reinforcer'" (p. 31).

7. The term "wage slavery" is generally associated with Marx's prediction that wages under capitalism would eventually fall to rock bottom, so that the worker, much like a slave, would be laboring for subsistence — hence, "wage slavery."

But near the end of his essay, Chomsky writes, "An increase in wages, in Marx's phrase, 'would be nothing more than a better remuneration of slaves, and would not restore, either to the worker or to the work, their human significance and worth'" (original emphasis). So, whereas subsistence wages drive the worker into "misery, agony of toil, slavery, ignorance, brutality [and] mental degradation" (again, Marx), even ever-increasing wages deny him his "human significance and worth," the absence of which we evidently must acknowledge like the presence of the emperor's nouveau apparel. Wages plummet, wages soar, wages *stagnate* — it's all the same "slavery."

8. Elsewhere (p. 390), Chomsky reveals that he (like Marx in "On the Jewish Question") agrees when "Rousseau argues that civil society is hardly more than a conspiracy by the rich to guarantee their plunder."

Letters, from page 6

said to have "bought the farm."

W. T. Furgerson
Louisville, Tenn.

The Editor responds: There is considerable scholarly literature on the origin of the phrase "bought the farm." Several hypotheses are advanced, but no con-

clusive evidence. One fact is well-established: the earliest recorded usage was in 1955. This eliminates Heinlein's *Starship Troopers*, published 1959, as a source. Kelly's explanation that it came into use during the barnstorming days immediately after World War I is not

very plausible either: It's unlikely that the expression was in common usage for more than 30 years without being recorded. If Furgerson's memory is correct, the expression was widely used for more than a decade without being recorded; this too seems unlikely.