

Chomsky on Governments

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Four Positions On the Role of Government

1. *Classical Liberalism*

Opposition to all (but the most minimal and restricted) forms of state intervention in personal and social life.

2. *Libertarian Socialism*

Agrees with the Classical Liberal that the functions of the state are repressive and that it, consequently, should be limited. State power should be eliminated in favor of *the democratic organization of industrial society*. The People should directly control the means of production, and all related institutions.

3. *State Socialism*

The command and control of the State over production, management, and other related institutions. The State owns the means of production.

4. *State Capitalism*

Politically, public policy should be constructed by democratically elected representatives. Economically, individuals and private institutions should be free from public control.

Chomsky believes that the *Libertarian Socialists* are fundamentally correct. In part, this is because he believes that they are "the proper and natural extensions of *Classical Liberalism* into the current era of advanced industrial society."

The Connection Between Classical Liberalism and Libertarian Socialism

Chomsky argues that the philosophical views underpinning Classical Liberalism actually support Libertarian Socialism:

[T]he classical liberal view develops from a certain concept of human nature, one that stresses the importance of diversity and free creation, and therefore this view is in fundamental opposition to industrial capitalism with its wage slavery, its alienated labor, and its hierarchic and authoritarian principles of social and economic organization. (pg 22)

He draws on the Wilhelm von Humboldt's view of human nature:

To inquire and to create — these are the centres around which all human pursuits more less directly revolve.

Humboldt's view of human nature inspired him to advocate for the limiting of State power. Chomsky argues, however, that Humboldt's worry about the influence of the State equally well applies to the influence of *Private* power in the era of corporate capitalism.

"...one must say that classical liberal ideas in their essence, though not in the way they developed, are profoundly anticapitalist." (pg 15)

"Humboldt did not foresee that in a predatory capitalistic economy, state intervention would be an absolute necessity to preserve human existence and prevent the destruction of the physical environment." (pg 16)

Capitalism is a threat to individuals, in part, because of (1) The Commodification of Labor and (2) the Alienation which results.

Objections to Libertarian Socialism?

The Libertarian Socialist advocates for the democratically controlled organization of industry by the working class. Chomsky considers two popular objections.

1. **It is Contrary to Human Nature.**

- *Objection:* A free society is contrary to human nature. "If people really want freedom, do they want the responsibility that goes with it, or would they prefer to be ruled by a benevolent master?"
- *Response:* The essential and defining property of human beings is their freedom. The correctness of this view is not "for the moment susceptible to scientific proof. One can only evaluate it in terms of experience and intuition." (pg 43)

2. **It is Inefficient.**

- *Objection:* Democratic control of the industrial system down to its smallest component is problematically inefficient.
- *Response:* First, it's not obvious that this is true. Second, Chomsky thinks that "the very concept of efficiency is dripping with ideology." If efficiency = maximizing the production of commodities, why should we necessarily worry about *inefficiency*?

"The very same technology that brings relevant information to the board of managers can bring it at the time that it is needed to everyone in the workforce." And it is conceivable that the collective will be able to make economic decisions "as well as those made by various soulful elites."

The Problems with State Capitalism

What are the affects of organizing society around State Capitalism?

1. An authoritarian cast of mind is induced among a large class of the populace.
2. Narrow range of decisions are under public democratic control.
3. The centers of private power exert heavy influence on the democratic process (via the media, political organizations, lobbying, funding, etc.)

Chomsky concludes from these consequences the following:

The democratic system at best functions within a narrow range in capitalist democracy, and even within this narrow range its functioning is enormously biased by the concentrations of private power and by the authoritarian and passive modes of thinking that are induced by autocratic institutions such as industries. (pg 48)

Strikingly (and *pace* Friedman), Chomsky concludes:

Capitalism and Democracy are ultimately incompatible.

Why does Chomsky think this? Here's why:

- State Capitalism invariably leads to a concentration of economic power.
- There's a strong link between economic power and political power — if economic power is concentrated in the hands of the few, then *political* power will become concentrated in the hands of the few.
- But such an imbalance in political power undermines democracy.

What's To Be Done?

In order to achieve the ideals of the Classical Liberal, Chomsky calls for "*a popular revolutionary movement, rooted in a wide strata of the population and committed to the elimination of repressive and authoritarian institutions, state and private.*"

Recall Friedman's position on the relationship between capitalism and democracy: *Economic freedom is necessary, but not sufficient, for political freedom.* Chomsky vehemently disagrees (at least if 'economic freedom' means *capitalism*, and 'political freedom' means *democracy*.)

Chomsky thinks the following is implicit in the system of corporate capitalism: (1) "[A] corporate elite of managers and owners governs the economy and the political system as well"; and (2) these individuals "[E]xpress a narrow conservative ideology, basically the interests of one or another sector of the corporate elite, with some modifications."