

Chomsky on Anarchism

by Noam Chomsky

Answers from Chomsky to eight questions on anarchism

General comment on all the questions:

No one owns the term "anarchism." It is used for a wide range of different currents of thought and action, varying widely. There are many self-styled anarchists who insist, often with great passion, that theirs is the only right way, and that others do not merit the term (and maybe are criminals of one or another sort). A look at the contemporary anarchist literature, particularly in the West and in intellectual circles (they may not like the term), will quickly show that a large part of it is denunciation of others for their deviations, rather as in the Marxist-Leninist sectarian literature. The ratio of such material to constructive work is depressingly high.

Personally, I have no confidence in my own views about the "right way," and am unimpressed with the confident pronouncements of others, including good friends. I feel that far too little is understood to be able to say very much with any confidence. We can try to formulate our long-term visions, our goals, our ideals; and we can (and should) dedicate ourselves to working on issues of human significance. But the gap between the two is often considerable, and I rarely see any way to bridge it except at a very vague and general level. These qualities of mine (perhaps defects, perhaps not) will show up in the (very brief) responses I will make to your questions.

1. What are the intellectual roots of anarchist thought, and what movements have developed and animated it throughout history?

The currents of anarchist thought that interest me (there are many) have their roots, I think, in the Enlightenment and classical liberalism, and even trace back in interesting ways to the scientific revolution of the 17th century, including aspects that are often considered reactionary, like Cartesian rationalism. There's literature on the topic (historian of ideas Harry Bracken, for one; I've written about it too). Won't try to recapitulate here, except to say that I tend to agree with the important anarchosyndicalist writer and activist Rudolf Rocker that classical liberal ideas were wrecked on the shoals of industrial capitalism, never to recover (I'm referring to Rocker in the 1930s; decades later, he thought differently). The ideas have been reinvented continually; in my opinion, because they reflect real human needs and perceptions. The Spanish Civil War is perhaps the most important case, though we should recall that the anarchist revolution that swept over a good part of Spain in 1936, taking various forms, was not a spontaneous upsurge, but had been prepared in many decades of education, organization, struggle, defeat, and sometimes victories. It was very significant. Sufficiently so as to call down the wrath of every major power system: Stalinism, fascism, western liberalism, most intellectual currents and their doctrinal institutions -- all combined to condemn and destroy the anarchist revolution, as they did; a sign of its significance, in my opinion.

2. Critics complain that anarchism is "formless, utopian." You counter that each stage of history has its own forms of authority and oppression which must be challenged, therefore no fixed doctrine can apply. In your opinion, what specific realization of anarchism is appropriate in this epoch?

I tend to agree that anarchism is formless and utopian, though hardly more so than the inane doctrines of neoliberalism, Marxism-Leninism, and other ideologies that have appealed to the powerful and their intellectual servants over the years, for reasons that are all too easy to explain. The reason for the general formlessness and intellectual vacuity (often disguised in big words, but that is again in the self-interest of intellectuals) is that we do not understand very much about complex systems, such as human societies; and have only intuitions of limited validity as to the ways they should be reshaped and constructed.

Anarchism, in my view, is an expression of the idea that the burden of proof is always on those who argue that authority and domination are necessary. They have to demonstrate, with powerful argument, that that conclusion is correct. If they cannot, then the institutions they defend should be considered illegitimate. How one should react to illegitimate authority depends on circumstances and conditions: there are no formulas.

In the present period, the issues arise across the board, as they commonly do: from personal relations in the family and elsewhere, to the international political/economic order. And anarchist ideas -- challenging authority and insisting that it justify itself -- are appropriate at all levels.

3. What sort of conception of human nature is anarchism predicated on? Would people have less incentive to work in an egalitarian society? Would an absence of government allow the strong to dominate the weak? Would democratic decision-making result in excessive conflict, indecision and "mob rule"?

As I understand the term "anarchism," it is based on the hope (in our state of ignorance, we cannot go beyond that) that core elements of human nature include sentiments of solidarity, mutual support, sympathy, concern for others, and so on.

Would people work less in an egalitarian society? Yes, insofar as they are driven to work by the need for survival; or by material reward, a kind of pathology, I believe, like the kind of pathology that leads some to take pleasure from torturing others. Those who find reasonable the classical liberal doctrine that the impulse to engage in creative work is at the core of human nature -- something we see constantly, I think, from children to the elderly, when circumstances allow -- will be very suspicious of these doctrines, which are highly serviceable to power and authority, but seem to have no other merits.

Would an absence of government allow the strong to dominate the weak? We don't know. If so, then forms of social organization would have to be constructed -- there are many possibilities -- to overcome this crime.

What would be the consequences of democratic decision-making? The answers are unknown. We would have to learn by trial. Let's try it and find out.

4. Anarchism is sometimes called libertarian socialism -- How does it differ from other ideologies that are often associated with socialism, such as Leninism?

Leninist doctrine holds that a vanguard Party should assume state power and drive the population to economic development, and, by some miracle that is unexplained, to freedom and justice. It is an ideology that naturally appeals greatly to the radical intelligentsia, to whom it affords a justification for their role as state managers. I can't see any reason -- either in logic or history -- to take it seriously. Libertarian socialism (including a substantial mainstream of Marxism) dismissed all of this with contempt, quite rightly.

5. Many "anarcho-capitalists" claim that anarchism means the freedom to do what you want with your property and engage in free contract with others. Is capitalism in any way compatible with anarchism as you see it?

Anarcho-capitalism, in my opinion, is a doctrinal system which, if ever implemented, would lead to forms of tyranny and oppression that have few counterparts in human history. There isn't the slightest possibility that its (in my view, horrendous) ideas would be implemented, because they would quickly destroy any society that made this colossal error. The idea of "free contract" between the potentate and his starving subject is a sick joke, perhaps worth some moments in an academic seminar exploring the consequences of (in my view, absurd) ideas, but nowhere else.

I should add, however, that I find myself in substantial agreement with people who consider themselves anarcho-capitalists on a whole range of issues; and for some years, was able to write only in their journals. And I also admire their commitment to rationality -- which is rare -- though I do not think they see the consequences of the doctrines they espouse, or their profound moral failings.

6. How do anarchist principles apply to education? Are grades, requirements and exams good things? What sort of environment is most conducive to free thought and intellectual development?

My feeling, based in part on personal experience in this case, is that a decent education should seek to provide a thread along which a person will travel in his or her own way; good teaching is more a matter of providing water for a plant, to enable it to grow under its own powers, than of filling a vessel with water (highly unoriginal thoughts I should add, paraphrased from writings of the Enlightenment and classical liberalism). These are general principles, which I think are generally valid. How they apply in particular circumstances has to be evaluated case by case, with due humility, and recognition of how little we really understand.

7. Depict, if you can, how an ideal anarchist society would function day-to-day. What sorts of economic and political institutions would exist, and how would they function? Would we have money? Would we shop in stores? Would we own our own homes? Would we have laws? How would we prevent crime?

I wouldn't dream of trying to do this. These are matters about which we have

to learn, by struggle and experiment.

8. What are the prospects for realizing anarchism in our society? What steps should we take?

Prospects for freedom and justice are limitless. The steps we should take depend on what we are trying to achieve. There are, and can be, no general answers. The questions are wrongly put. I am reminded of a nice slogan of the rural workers' movement in Brazil (from which I have just returned): they say that they must expand the floor of the cage, until the point when they can break the bars. At times, that even requires defense of the cage against even worse predators outside: defense of illegitimate state power against predatory private tyranny in the United States today, for example, a point that should be obvious to any person committed to justice and freedom -- anyone, for example, who thinks that children should have food to eat -- but that seems difficult for many people who regard themselves as libertarians and anarchists to comprehend. That is one of the self-destructive and irrational impulses of decent people who consider themselves to be on the left, in my opinion, separating them in practice from the lives and legitimate aspirations of suffering people.

So it seems to me. I'm happy to discuss the point, and listen to counter-argument, but only in a context that allows us to go beyond shouting of slogans -- which, I'm afraid, excludes a good deal of what passes for debate on the left, more's the pity.

Noam

In another letter, Chomsky offered this expansion on his thoughts regarding a future society:

About a future society, I...may be repeating, but it's something I've been concerned with every since I was a kid. I recall, about 1940, reading Diego Abad de Santillan's interesting book *After the Revolution*, criticizing his anarchist comrades and sketching in some detail how an anarchosyndicalist Spain would work (these are >50 year old memories, so don't take it too literally). My feeling then was that it looked good, but do we understand enough to answer questions about a society in such detail? Over the years, naturally I've learned more, but it has only deepened my skepticism about whether we understand enough. In recent years, I've discussed this a good deal with Mike Albert, who has been encouraging me to spell out in detail how I think society should work, or at least react to his "participatory democracy" conception. I've backed off, in both cases, for the same reasons. It seems to me that answers to most such questions have to be learned by experiment. Take markets (to the extent that they could function in any viable society -- limited, if the historical record is any guide, not to speak of logic). I understand well enough what's wrong with them, but that's not sufficient to demonstrate that a system that eliminates market operations is preferable; simply a point of logic, and I don't think we know the answer. Same with everything else.