

Each a Dragon: How Our Society Is Tethered to Unachievable Ideals

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Abstract

Political activist Noam Chomsky gave a talk on February 16, 1970 in New York City, *Government in the Future*, where he analyzes four distinct political positions that our society could fall in, or transition to one day. He explains how we are living in a state capitalist society when we should be living in a libertarian socialist one. In this paper, we will address each of the four positions, as well as how they relate to our society and future possibilities. We will critique each one, analyzing the ways Chomsky is correct in his belief that we can move from a state capitalist society to a libertarian socialist one. In addition, we will contrast Chomsky's beliefs with the Political Compass Model and other stories, like that of ancient myth, silent films, and George Orwell's infamous novel, *1984*.

How Our Society Is Tethered to Unachievable Ideals

Change does not happen overnight; Noam Chomsky recognized that in his 1970 talk *Government in the Future*, where he lays out a detailed plan analyzing various political positions within the United States, focusing on where we are and where we could be. It is possible that a move from our current state capitalist society to a libertarian socialist one is possible, however, that change must start from within ourselves.

We do not always know how to help when seeing all the problems in the world and it can be disheartening. Change, however, must come from within; Chomsky's talk is a reminder of that. We can learn from history instead of rewriting it; we can imagine a future and believe it is achievable. We do not have to sit here and do nothing just because we are told we cannot.

The will of the American people is often overshadowed by those few in political positions of power who use their power for their own gain, instead of representing the people who elected them there in the first place. It is us being overshadowed that creates this hopelessness. Despite the majority of the American people being in favor of abortion access, the few in politics with law changing power who are against it are setting the United States back hundreds of years for women's rights. Despite the majority of the American people wanting stricter gun control and background checks, the few in power who are funded by the NRA uphold laws that go against the will of the people. Despite the majority of the American people being in support of the indictment of former U.S. President Donald Trump, he will still be allowed to run for president in the 2024 presidential race. The will of the people will succeed, if not today, one day.

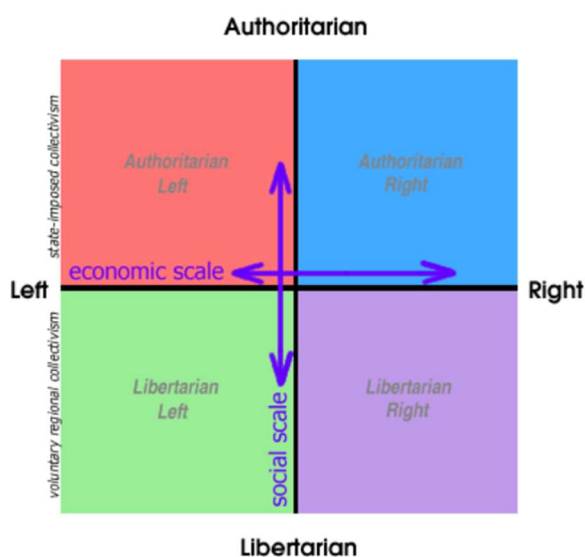
It is our belief that we cannot make a difference that makes us chained as a society, tethered to false ideals when the reality of a better future is in our grasp. Once we change our

mindsets within, we can change the world around us. A line comes to mind from Michelle Obama's memoir *Becoming*, where she quotes Barack Obama long before he was elected 44th president of the United States, it goes, "Do we settle for the world as it is, or do we work for the world as it should be?" (Obama, 2018).

Today, we will look at the political positions Chomsky discusses in his talk, explaining his ideology on each, followed by a critique. We will begin with the Political Compass Model, where much of Chomsky's arguments are based.

The Political Compass

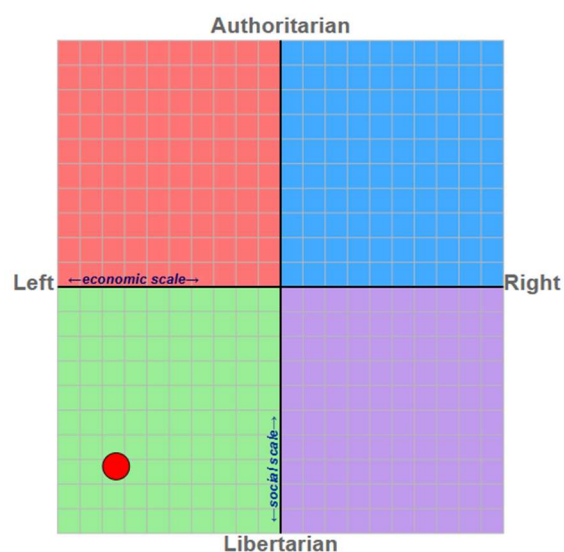
The Political Compass Model is used by Chomsky, among others to help us analyze where we each fall on a socio-economic map. The map is divided into four quadrants: authoritarian left (top left), authoritarian right (top right), libertarian left (bottom left), and libertarian right (bottom right); each quadrant is separated by a *Social Scale* y-axis and an *Economic Scale* x-axis. The Political Compass Model is as shown below.



Chomsky believes we should be in the lower left quadrant – libertarian left – but are instead in the top right – authoritarian right – quadrant. The further left a country falls on the Political Compass map, then the more liberal its views but this does not necessarily mean they aren't extremely authoritarian as well. Singapore for example, falls in the upper right – the authoritarian right quadrant. Singapore is one of the economically freest countries in the world as

noted in a study from 2021 (Compass, T. n.d.) but on the y-axis social scale, they are extremely authoritarian. LGBTQ+ people in Singapore have no legal protections and any LBGTQ+ relationship is a criminal offense under Singapore's laws (World Report, 2021). However, in the United States, same sex marriage is protected but the country still sits close to Singapore on the Political Compass Model in the upper right quadrant. Similarly, sitting president of the United States, Joe Biden also falls in the upper right quadrant, slightly below former U.S. President, Donald Trump. I, on the other hand, am plotted in the lower left – libertarian left – quadrant, close to its corner.

The model to the right is a mapping of my Political Compass. Economically left/right on the map, -7.38 and socially libertarian/authoritarian, -7.28, both of which are extremely close and average similar opinions economically and socially. It is this quadrant that Chomsky believed our country should be in, but as history unfolds, we find



ourselves in the authoritarian right. Our current position on the Political Compass model, however, should not deter us, the younger generation from fighting for social justice and human rights in every form because a future where the United States moves away from our current position into a libertarian socialist one is possible.

The Colchian Dragon

Myths are often used as warnings, allegories for future generations to dissect and find deeper meanings in their worlds, creating links between us and the past. There are many variations

of every myth, but one I would like to focus on here is the Colchian Dragon. The Colchian Dragon protected Ares' (Greek God of War) sacred grove but one day, the dragon was captured and given to King Aeetes of Colchis. This king was greedy and arrogant; he had to show off his prize and so he did. He chained the dragon and kept him on display for visitors. The Colchian Dragon wore chains for so long that when King Aeetes finally removed them, the dragon did not notice. Believing still to be chained, the dragon never tried to escape the king and his castle because he knew no other way of life, having lost the feeling of freedom in his life before capture.

We are the Colchian Dragon. Each and every one of us a dragon, unchained, yet unable to fight for freedom. Our society is becoming unchained and we can fight for a better one, where equal rights and basic human rights are recognized as the foundation for a better world, a better future. Chomsky quotes Mark Twain in his talk, "it is by the goodness of God that in our country we have those three unspeakably precious things: freedom of speech, freedom of conscience, and the prudence never to practice either of them." Our voices are unchained, our thoughts unchained, and our ability to practice both are unchained, yet we yield when we should fight.

Classical Liberalism

Classical liberalism as described by Chomsky in *Government in the Future*, focuses on the idea that state intervention should be opposed but only accepted in the most minimal of forms. The people's will and well-being are meant to be upheld by the government and the politicians the people voted in to represent them in the first place. An earlier example of this is explained in Wilhelm von Humboldt's *Limits of State Action*, which describes the ways the State uses people for their own gain, making people forget their individual purpose. "The state tends to make man an instrument to serve its arbitrary ends, overlooking his individual purposes, and

since humans are in their essence free, searching, self-perfecting beings, it follows that the state is a profoundly antihuman institution.” A similar comparison can be found in George Orwell’s novel, *1984*, which serves as a warning for the future focusing on the toxic relationship between the people and the state. In the novel, people are watched all the time, and when they are not being watched, they are being listened to. If they commit *thoughtcrime* where they question the world, the state, and the reality of their lives, they are taken in the middle of the night, either killed or reconditioned to love the state. This is the meaning behind one of the three core laws in the novel: Freedom is Slavery. It is the idea that the state decides what is important, a theme that will have a much larger role towards the end of Chomsky’s talk. There are many warnings similar to that of Orwell’s novel and Chomsky further explains that type of relationship as incompatible; we cannot live in a democratic capitalist society as the two will always cancel each other out.

Chomsky continues to build off Wilhelm von Humboldt arguing Humboldt’s ideas as an early introduction into what would later be developed as Marxist theory but right now, what Humboldt so brilliantly states is that “man never regards what he possesses as so much as his own, as what he does; and the laborer who tends a garden is perhaps in a truer sense its owner, than the listless voluptuary who enjoys its fruits.” We are the gardeners taking care of the garden, yet it is the state who owns it. However, it is when we act on our true inner impulses, that we are human, as human nature is impulsive like the wildflowers that grow within the garden. Unfortunately, the state does not want wildflowers; it wants order and efficiency, it wants machinery. When we give into these notions of the state, we become inhuman, rejecting ourselves and giving up our souls.

The 1936 silent film, *Modern Times* serves as another warning for this type of reality. It focuses on workers in the machine age of society, the cusp of the industrial revolution; they are subject to tests with an “automatic feeding machine” that feeds them while they work so they no longer need breaks (Chaplin, 1936). This tethers the workers to the machines they work on making them, symbolically, become a part of the machine. It is an extremely capitalist world and Chomsky argues Classical Liberalism to be anti-capitalist. The concepts behind films like *Modern Times* or novels like *1984* all focus on the same themes, humans becoming inhuman. They argue that the State is for machines over humans and trying to put the two together follows the same problems found in our democratic capitalist society; they are incompatible.

Classical liberalism is for human rights, for freedom, and the ability to make one’s own choices. Humboldt further argues the idea that “the isolated man is no more able to develop than the one who is fettered.” It does not matter if we are enlightened, with thoughts unfettered, unchained from the state, if we are isolated, we are no better than one who is chained to those ideas of the state. Ultimately, Chomsky’s understanding of classical liberalism’s core belief is that state functions must be limited drastically. Classical liberalism works to break social chains and instead create bonds to connect us to one another.

We are here to create, to inquire, and question, to love and be free. The state does not like this and will tell us that our worth comes externally but it is wrong; our worth comes from within and that love and freedom and questioning nature within all of us is stronger than the lies told by the state. Classical liberalism is about freedom and the state is not. It is about control; a puppet master and we are the puppets. We must cut our strings.

Critique

Chomsky's arguments regarding classical liberalism are incredibly strong and his use of Humboldt's ideas create a supportive foundation for the core beliefs found in the ideology. Classical liberalism proves to us that we are not puppets, we can make the choice to cut the strings that chain us to singular powers like the state, however, this is to argue that the state is inherently evil when it does not have to be. We the people vote politicians into those positions of power; it is us who create the state. The argument that the state is completely bad on its own accord is selfish of us because we do have power. We can educate ourselves and research and form our own opinions and then question those opinions some more because that is what human nature is about. Classical liberalism is in favor of that yet blames the state entirely for the problems we face in the world. The state does have too much power and given the nature of the political world today, the will of the people is often overlooked as noted earlier but we still have power, a voice, and a will that does not falter. Chomsky's argument on classical liberalism makes a lot of sense when limiting state power, but it leaves out the influence the people have on the state.

Libertarian Socialism

If you put classical liberalism and industrial capitalism together, you get libertarian socialism, also known as anarchism. Chomsky's arguments here are based on that of Mikhail Bakunin who explains in his anarchist manifesto from 1865, "to be an anarchist, one must first be a socialist." Similarly, in 1886, Adolph Fischer argued "every anarchist is a socialist, but every socialist is not necessarily an anarchist." A core belief explained by Chomsky in his talk, is that one must oppose private ownership, as it is seen as a form of theft. The second core argument here is that "the goal of the working class is liberation from exploitation." To reference again, George Orwell's novel, *1984*, the society in the novel are meant to follow three laws, 1)

War is Peace (which will be referenced later when discussing state socialism and state capitalism), 2) Freedom is Slavery, and 3) Ignorance is Strength which will be discussed here: “The aim of the High is to remain where they are. The aim of the Middle is to change places with the High. The aim of the Low is to abolish all distinctions and create a society in which all men shall be equal.” (Orwell, 1949). It is further argued in the novel that the Middle will use words like freedom and justice to convince the Low they are in favor of fighting for equal rights but when the Middle succeeds, they leave behind the Low and trade places with the High creating a continual cycle forever unbroken. The Middle and Low both want the same things in the end, the freedom of a better life that their socio-economic positions cannot offer them. While this cycle does not help everyone, it is a start to understanding what people want and that is opportunity. The opportunity to live a life free of exploitation.

Furthermore, Chomsky notes the parallels found between founder of the British Communist Party, William Paul’s thoughts on state socialism with that of the libertarian doctrine of anarchists. The core idea in both is that the state must disappear to be replaced with the industrial organization of society; “the natural form of revolutionary socialism is an industrial society.” Chomsky explains how this belief recognizes democracy as a lie – at least within our current society – where we are instead ruled by the autocratic elite. In this type of world, he argues, humans will lose the ability to inquire and create. Additionally, the ideas within the classical liberalist ideology cannot be recognized if we are ruled by the elite authoritarian few.

To conclude Chomsky’s position on libertarian socialism, he quotes Bakunin who famously stated in 1870, “Take the most radical of revolutionaries and place him on the throne of all the Russia or give him dictatorial powers... and before the year is out, he will be worse than the Czar himself.” Power corrupts, and it may not be power to everyone, for it may be greed,

wealth, fame or another vice. We all want something and often, under the pressure of immeasurable power, we fall to corruption, ignoring the warnings of generations.

Classical liberalism and libertarian socialism compare in the belief that both wish to limit the actions of the state. The latter, however, stands apart from the former in its argument that state power must be removed entirely in order for democracy to flourish. As Rousseau states, “the essential and defining property of human beings is their freedom.”

Critique

Chomsky builds off his prior arguments on classical liberalism as it and libertarian socialism have their similarities. However, with libertarian socialism, the idea is to completely start over and while understandable, feels unrealistic. In theory, it seems simple, but in practice, there is a reason why we have yet to live in the idyllic society libertarian socialism puts forth.

In Chomsky’s counterarguments, he explains, “Only the active participation of the masses in self-government and social reconstruction could bring about what she [Rosa Luxemburg] described as the complete spiritual transformation in the masses degraded by centuries of bourgeois class rule, just as only their creative experience and spontaneous action could solve the myriad problems of creating a libertarian socialist society.” Libertarian socialism will only work when the people are active in government. A modern example would be that of the two Tennessee lawmakers who were expelled from their house in early April of 2023 for partaking in a peaceful protest with another house member, advocating for gun reform. Their expulsion disrespected the will of the people who voted them each in and after many protests from the people outside the Tennessee house, a new vote was placed to let the members back in,

where they were successful in reclaiming their seats to stand up for their districts (Orr & Brooks, 2023).

Our voices are meant to be heard and it is through our voices, that libertarian socialism can succeed. Chomsky argues this very well in *Government in the Future*, and we should believe it to be a genuine possibility for our future.

State Socialism and State Capitalism

Chomsky compares state socialism and state capitalism in the same section of his talk, whereas his discussions on classical liberalism and libertarian socialism stood on their own. A similar framework will be adopted here where we will discuss the positions of state socialism and state capitalism together, analyzing their similarities and differences; both Chomsky's views and our own.

Similarities

Chomsky explains state socialism and state capitalism both as being Bolshevism in practice. Bolshevism is a communist form of government that was embraced after the Bolshevik revolution of 1917 in Russia. Anarchists see state socialism and state capitalism as both being incredibly oppressive forms of socioeconomic and political positions. Chomsky explains how the two positions diverge from the classical liberalist ideas and values, holding a stark contrast to the latter as well as libertarian socialism. In both, we must bend to the will of the state, giving up the freedom that is required by human nature. It removes public influence and it is this type of world that directs us into a future where *1984* is not just a book, but our reality.

Differences

State socialism is a position focusing on state ownership as means of production as their core belief. This contradicts that of the core values found in the previous positions discussed: classical liberalism and libertarian socialism. State socialism owns all means of production as well as decides what is produced and how it is distributed. State capitalism can be seen as a more extreme extension of state socialism. In the state capitalist position, the state's ownership of all economic activity – what is produced and how it is distributed – is normalized.

Chomsky's views

Chomsky argues it is the state capitalist position we currently reside. Both state socialism and state capitalism are controlling in nature, wishing us to submit to their rule on the arguments that humans need a “benevolent” ruler. The goal of these positions is for the people to live with labor as the goal in mind, and we do live that way. We are born, go to school until were 18, transfer to another school for four more years, find a job, get married, have a family, retire, finally get to live a sliver of the life we should have been living all along, and then we die. We live to work and we work to live and how we break that cycle is subject to countless political debates, philosophical perspectives, and our sheer will to live a life that does not fit the cookie cutter mold society has built for us. Chomsky emphasizes “It's a truism, but one that must be constantly stressed, that capitalism and democracy are ultimately quite incompatible.”

As explained in the classical liberalist position, we have the power to vote people in and out of office, however, in a state socialist and state capitalist societies, that may not be true given the powerful influence of the wealthy elite. “Unfortunately, you can't vote the rascals *out*, because you never voted them *in* in the first place.” How are we meant to have power when there

will always be executives and lawmakers with more power than the collective will of the people? Chomsky recognizes this and quotes Robert McNamara who states, “To undermanage reality is not to keep it free. It is simply to let some force other than reason shape reality.... If it is not reason that rules man, then man falls short of his potential.” Due to the state’s power to determine what is produced and how it is distributed, American military force has only increased, leaving behind what should be our focus: education, affordable healthcare, protecting the environment and oceans, gun reform, ending homelessness, etc. Chomsky explains “Unfortunately, there is only one category of luxury goods that can be produced endlessly, with rapid obsolescence, quickly wasting, and with no limit on how many of them you can use. We all know what category that is: military production.” This takes us back again to Orwell’s novel *1984*, which shares incredibly similar themes to that of Chomsky’s 1970 talk. We discussed already those three laws from the novel: War is Peace, Freedom is Slavery, and Ignorance is Strength; we will be discussing War is Peace here. The idea behind War is Peace is that once war becomes continuous, it will cease to be dangerous. Orwell further explains this, “The essential act of war is destruction, not necessarily of human lives, but of the products of human labor. War is a way of shattering to pieces, or pouring into the stratosphere, or sinking in the depths of the sea, materials which might otherwise be used to make the masses too comfortable, and hence, in the long run, too intelligent. Even when weapons of war are not actually destroyed their manufacture is still a convenient way of expending labor power without producing anything that can be consumed.” (Orwell, 1949).

We are told we need protection and so the state capitalist society we live in continues to manufacture endless weapons of war when we already have more than enough when regarding

military protection. What we need is social justice, change for the better so people can thrive but state capitalism does not allow that.

Critique

Chomsky argues against both state socialism and state capitalism very well, explaining both as tools of oppression. Under each of them, we lose our freedom and become dehumanized by those who are meant to uphold the will of the people. We can look back to Humboldt's *Limits of State Action* where he argues the state to be an antihuman institution, when regarding where we are now, under state capitalism, Humboldt is entirely correct in his statement. State socialism and state capitalism cannot work, and they will never work. We only believe they do because we are told what we are living in is a democracy, but it is a wolf in sheep's clothing. Chomsky is correct in his analysis of both these positions; they will never work and it is only a matter of time that will determine if we fall to our growing military capitalist society or fly towards a future where our voices are heard and we can rewrite the rules that govern our democracy.

Conclusion

In the final paragraph of Chomsky's talk, he states "the classical liberal ideals as expressed and developed in their libertarian socialist forms are achievable. But if so, only by 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." The possibility of a libertarian socialist society is achievable. One first must recognize the democracy we live in is a cage, it is not a true democracy, and we are the birds trying to sing through the bars. We must make our voices heard, because once we see our democracy for what it truly is, we become

unchained to the lies were told. Each of us a dragon, unfettered by those who rule, free to fly to a better future.

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