

The Soul of Nation: Viability of Left-Anarchist Development in the United States

Cameron Lallana

Diablo Valley College

### Abstract

In his book *Government in the Future*, Noam Chomsky argues that a future truly in line with leftist, humanistic ideas lies in the realization of a libertarian socialist society, the natural evolution of classical liberalism. In this essay, I analyze the four essential tenets of left-anarchism—the abolishment of the state, of hierarchy, and of private property, interpreted through the lens Chomsky’s belief system, anarcho-syndicalism, and determine how difficult each would be to achieve in the modern U.S., thus gauging the overall likelihood of left-anarchist revolution in America.

## Introduction

We're capitalists, and that's just the way it is.

—Nancy Pelosi, 2017

In a speech in 1970, Noam Chomsky spoke on the nature of classical liberalism, arguing that the common understanding of the philosophy needs to be turned on its head; and though additions to the ideology made it the basis for modern Capitalism, the essence of classical liberalism is “profoundly anticapitalist” (Chomsky, 1970, p.2). He went on to say that society according to classical liberalism, in pure form, would have actually developed into a libertarian-socialist one—which shall heretofore be referred to as “left-anarchism,” which is a more accurate description of Chomsky’s beliefs (See Addendum for info on Chomsky’s beliefs as they relate to this paper).

This paper shifts the focus from Chomsky’s vision of the future to a question of that vision's viability, analyzing the essential predicates of anarchist philosophy against current reality, point by point. In doing so, it finds the problem of left-anarchism in America: the peculiarities of the American ideology in conjunction with the dearth of left-anarchist thought in the modern public sphere suggests little to no potential for a shift to the aforementioned system that Chomsky describes.

### The American Peculiarity

“It will be a marvellous thing—the true personality of man,” wrote Oscar Wilde (n.d.) in *The Soul of a Man Under Socialism*, “...Its value will not be measured by material things...it will have everything, and whatever one takes from it, it will still have, so rich will it be” (p. 15). He goes on at length, describing the potential of individual development once the paradigm of property acquisition has been abolished. This is one face of the ‘Abolishment of Private

Property' predicate of left-anarchism, itself one of three primary tenets. The other two are: the abolishment of the State, and of Hierarchy. There are further sub-tenets—such as the abolishment of the Church, or of God himself as Bakunin (1970) so colorfully put it—but these are all logical extensions of the three primary tenets, and, as such, are already implied, thus not worth specific mention outside of dialogue where they have direct relevance. There is also the further, though thankfully singular, predicate upon which all other anarchist tenets are based: the requirement of change. On its face, this seems like a ridiculous statement, because all ideologies, progressive or reactionary, desire change of some sort. For left-anarchists, the difference lies in where the change must happen—not only a change of political system, but a change of heart. Voluntary change, from a genuine desire of people, is key. This is firstly because of the anarchic rejection of authority. As Bakunin (1971) wrote: “I do not believe that even under the most favourable circumstances the city workers will have sufficient power to impose communism or collectivism upon the peasants; and I have never wanted this way of realizing socialism, because I hate every system imposed by force” (as cited in Carter, p. 74). Anarchists reject Marxism—though they are undoubtedly influenced by it—as readily as they reject capitalism. statism in statism, full stop. Secondly, anarchists are well aware of the pitfalls of forcing their beliefs. In 1891, Oscar Wilde (n.d.) ridiculed the idea of a society where an “inspector [visited] each morning at each house to see that each citizen rose up and did manual labor for eight hours” (p. 10). And though this exact situation was not realized in the USSR, it only takes a look at common propaganda to see the cult of work that existed, similar to capitalist countries, that merely replaced the driving whip of wage-slavery for capital with the people's stick of patriotic obligation to the State. Bakunin (1971) called this the “dictatorship of the proletariat” (as cited in Carter, p. 74). Kropotkin (1970, p.243) went even further, saying that

even the very best, if put in charge of that “formidable machine,” where they could put their ideas into practice without public input, would be, “in a week, fit only for a gallows.” In short, revolution without the full participation of a willing populace would be engaging in the dangerous sort of acknowledgement of authority and statism that produced the repressive USSR or the terror and bloodshed of the French Revolution.

As a consequence of this, a revolutionary change in America would require non-coercive conversion of the public, a task that is especially tough given American ideology—a term which is here a shorthand for the state-capitalism that both Republicans and Democrats espouse. As left-anarchism is, by definition, the polar opposite of this, the revolutionary process would entail converting the fundamental beliefs of hundreds of millions. To better understand the monumental challenge that a Left-Anarchist movement would face, each of the three predicates will be discretely analyzed below.

### **Hierarchy**

The observation of America’s economic inequality as well as racial and class limitations has become unfortunately trite. As such, because this paper’s focus is on anarchistic system-development, the overall truth of this disparity will be assumed, and herein unproved for the sake of brevity.

Though most people are aware of the existence of wealth inequality in the US, the exact numbers are often surprising. One study conducted by Norton and Ariely (2011) showed that Americans vastly underestimate the wealth distribution, generally assuming that the “wealthiest quintile [holds] about 59% of the wealth;” in reality, the number is closer to 84%. In contrast, the bottom 40% possesses a mere 0.3% (Fitz, 2015). The same study also showed that when placed under a Rawlsian veil of ignorance and presented with unlabeled wealth distributions, 92% of

Americans preferred Sweden's, where the top quintile have a comparatively small 36% of the wealth (Norton & Ariely, 2011).

The goal of left-anarchism, of course, is not to ensure that there is class parity, but rather to smash the class system altogether, an extension of the more general abolishment of hierarchy. It must be asked, though, why Americans are not already fighting back against this inequality with greater numbers if such an overwhelming majority reject it. The answer matters because it is irrevocably intertwined with why doing away with American hierarchy would be monumentally difficult.

As capitalism necessarily requires consumerism to sustain it, a phenomenon Marx and Engels (2012, p.79) called "crises," created by over-production—supply exceeding demand—, occurs, a situation that can only be rectified by the "conquest of new markets." Originally an explanation for the imperialism of European nations, the phenomenon of crises can also be used to explain intra-market expansion. Because overt gunboat diplomacy is no longer as acceptable as it has been in the past, companies that don't have the resources or will to create an entirely new market often engage in intra-market expansionism, a broad term that could pithily be described as "creating problems to fix." This can range from planning obsolescence to making people believe that certain, expensive, styles of clothing are what will make you cool or unique. The process by which this is propagated is an adapted version of a subset of the policy of "Smart Power," a diplomatic theory proposed by Joseph S. Nye, Jr. (2011, p.11, 14), wherein a nation exercises soft power by "establishing preferences," which means that actor A "helps to create and shape [actor] B's basic beliefs, perceptions, and preferences. B is unlikely to be aware of this or to realize the effect of A's power." In short, our perceptions are created by propaganda, which, in popular parlance, is called advertising. Nye (2011, p.13) gives the example of a teen who

wears a fashionable shirt to impress a girl, unaware that the shirt is only in style because “a national retailer recently launched a major advertising campaign.”

The issue of consumerism itself is more relevant to the next section, so, for now, the focus will be on the power of corporations—or anyone with a good PR firm—to reify the current American reality. The issue for the establishment of a left-anarchist system is that the people who have the most to lose in the abolishment of capitalism are also the people who shape the collective American reality. The public at large will pay through the nose for diamonds or certain brands of clothing, even though the value is only set by artificial scarcity or effective marketing and media integration—see: product placement (Dhar, 2013). To rid the American people of these false notions of value, to throw off the illusion would mean taking on an industry that can spend literally dozens of billions to defend their stake.

More mere product advertisement, the greatest ad campaign ever conducted sold the idea of the “American Dream,” which told us that it was possible for the poor to work their way into the middle class, from where the especially bright or hardworking could climb the ladder into the ranks of the rich. Setting aside the argument of whether or not achieving the Dream is possible, the most important issue, from the left-anarchist perspective, is the the Dream is inherently oppressive. It uses a false folksiness and ingenuine emphasis on the worker to make people *believe* in wage-slavery, to accept the class hierarchy without question. This ideal of working one’s way up the ladder can be overlaid on any industry, on almost every aspect of our life. This is not to suggest that managers are fully unnecessary, a point on which Bakunin pushed back against other anarchists, but rather that this fetishization of high social standings pushes people to work, work, work, and never think about where they really stand. As a result, “no class is ever

really conscious of its own suffering. They have to be told of it by other people, and they often disbelieve them” (Wilde, n.d., p.8).

This is a problem of not only the invisible oppression of workers, but also invisible oppression by intelligentsia. This is not to suggest that professionals or intellectuals are oppressive in and of themselves, but rather that American culture has elevated them into their own class by a fetishization of esoteric knowledge. This divide has been created by the barrier of higher education, where the cost of enrollment has mostly sequestered the ability to become a professional to the middle and upper class. Education of all, according to left-anarchists, is the only way to prevent this intellectual hierarchy. Cafiero and Reclus (1970), disciples of Bakunin, saw this problem in the late 19th century, and laid out the dystopian future implied by the philosopher-king:

[C]ould [the learned man] recognize truth in its essence, he can only corrupt himself by privilege and corrupt others by power. To establish his government, he must try...to arrest the life of the masses moving below him, keep them in ignorance in order to preserve quiet, and gradually debase them that he may rule them from a loftier throne...Government by science is becoming as impossible as that of divine right, wealth, or brute force. (p.7)

Though this paper has primarily focused on anarchism clashing with Conservative America, Liberals—capital ‘L’—, who are the modern personification of Cafiero and Reclus’s (1970) “learned man”, are problematic for a multitude of reasons, and, in particular, because of the Liberal professional class (p.7). In a discussion with Cox (2017) on the podcast, *With Friends Like These*, author Tom Frank speaks on the problem of this class taking front and center in the Democratic party:



[Liberalism is] a thing of winners, of these affluent, white-collar professionals...they're the ones that make the commercials. They're the ones that decide on the policies. They're the ones that bail out the Wall Street Banks. They're the ones that convince us that that's the only possible way to go forward...that you had no choice.

Though not as powerful or systemic as economic powers, the professional class has carved out their own piece of the pie, and are as loathe as anyone to give up the privilege they have acquired over the years.

Rejection of hierarchy implies toppling monopolies of propaganda and educational gatekeeping. It does not end there. Finally, there is the matter of religion. Anarchism requires the abolishment of the Church, potentially even of the concept of Godhood itself. As organized religious structure of any sort necessitates hierarchy—of pastors, preachers, imams, rabbis, and so on, they cannot coexist in an anarchist system. Bakunin (1970) was particularly decisive on this topic, writing

All men owe [the Church] passive and unlimited obedience; for against the divine reason there is no human reason, and against the justice of God no terrestrial justice holds.

Slaves of God, men must also be slaves of the Church...The idea of God implies the abdication of human reason and justice; it is the most decisive negation of human liberty.

(p.24-25)

For many anarchists, God and religion must be overthrown, treated as antiquated means of control and subjugation. This is an especially difficult task given that, in 2014, only 23% of Americans were religiously unaffiliated (Lipka, 2015). The modern state, defined as the post-Treaty of Westphalia definition of statehood, has only existed for a few hundred years; religion, organized or otherwise, has been around since the dawn of humanity. Vocal and enthusiastic

opposition to religion would likely result in nigh-militant pushback from religious groups. There are already fringe groups claiming that Christians are in some sort of war—Fox News, Glenn Beck, Mark Levin are the most well-known peddlers of this narrative, but many more can be found in the cracks of the internet. “Christians, we are in a war,” wrote Walsh (2016) of *The Blaze*, “Maybe it’s time we accept that fact.”

It is possible to somewhat get around this problem, but it requires a divergence from anarchist philosophers into the territory of more literary left-anarchists—namely Oscar Wilde and Leo Tolstoy. Wilde (n.d.) himself was not religious, but expressed an admiration for Jesus Christ, who rejected materialism in favor of personal development—a literal version of being less Christian and more Christ-like. Then there is Tolstoy, whose ideas are, arguably, genuinely feasible in modern left-anarchist conceptions. Tolstoy, whose views were nearly identical to his contemporary, Proudhon, found “the root of social inequality in the notion of property itself—at least that property which enable[d] a class of possessors to exploit a class of non-possessors,” which violated the religious law of brotherhood; Tolstoy would further map out his beliefs in the book *The Kingdom of God is within You*, arguing for non-organized religious compatibility with anarchism (Crowder, 1991, p.90, 94). So it would be possible to make room for religion in a left-anarchist society. Crowder (1991) argues, additionally, that Proudhon—who more directly influenced anarcho-syndicalism than Bakunin did—argues against theism, specifically, and not religious belief *in toto* (p.94). This path of reformative religion would be a difficult path to walk in America, but not nearly as difficult as wiping religion out.

In many ways, getting rid of hierarchy is the deepest problem for change in America—once it is dealt with, the others would follow naturally. Accordingly, it is the most difficult.

## **The State**

Unlike from the other tenets, the abolition of the State would receive no particular pushback, in that there is nothing about the general American ideology that would be principally offended about the dissolution of the State, beyond normal opposition to the idea. Interestingly, the American character has actually taken this tenet of anarchism and morphed it into the right-anarchism that has today evolved into anarcho-capitalism, the extreme counterpart of the mainstream Libertarian Party in the US. Here, the problem for Left-Anarchist system-development lies less in opposition than it does in the danger of co-option by Right-Anarchist currents in the American sphere.

The history of this starts with Benjamin Tucker, an American anarchist, writer, and editor of the publication *Liberty*—a magazine described as “the leading anarchist journal of its day,” by Paul Avrich, a historian of the anarchist movement (cited in Shone, 2013, p. 14; Christie, 2006). Tucker, unlike his European anarchist brethren, did not believe Capitalism itself to be a problem—instead, the problem laid with a state monopoly of power over society, to which the ideal alternative was a laissez-faire system in which no state could consolidate power into a monopoly, allowing entrepreneurs, craftsmen, whoever to run their business as they please (as cited in Shone, 2013, p. 18). The only rule for the individual would be “to mind his own business, and not to meddle with that of others” (Kropotkin, 1970, p. 173). This distinct form of anarchism was formed in America, Rudolf Rocker believed, because of nativist influence—Walt Whitman and Ralph Waldo Emerson were highly praised in *Liberty*—and the ideas embodied in the Declaration of Independence (Shone, 2013, 16).

Although the direct evolution of Tucker’s beliefs, anarcho-capitalism, has not become a major force in US politics, its tendrils have gripped many groups that influence the day-to-day lives of Americans, primarily Libertarians and Republicans, who have adopted a much diluted

form of Tucker's theories. "The nine most terrifying words in the English language are: I'm from the government and I'm here to help," parrot Reaganites, while future House Speakers think about limiting federal control during keggers, and armed militia groups occupy federal land (Schulman, 2017; Bellware, 2016). Small government has become the rightist wheelhouse; conversely, "[w]ithout the belief in an ever-expanding state, there is no Left," wrote Prager (2015) in the *National Review*—no small-time rag—reflecting a broad view of the contemporary left.

The problems of the left-anarchist here are twofold. First, there is the issue of finding a seat at the table at all while also countering the idea that leftism necessarily implies government expansion—a topic which will be revisited and expanded later in this paper. Second, and more importantly for this section, left-anarchist ideas in America have been greatly overshadowed by the American anarchists who synthesized two seemingly contradictory ideologies, anarchism and Jeffersonian Enlightenment philosophy, to create this uniquely American phenomenon, laying the brickwork for the later acceptance and success of thinkers like Rand, Freedman, Hayek in America, and so on. The danger here is that if left-anarchists were to become a serious intellectual movement, there is always the possibility that history would repeat itself and the American people, steeped in their capitalist/individualist ideology, would flock to a right-anarchist system instead. As stated before, left-anarchists have to pull double-duty to grow a movement and reclaim their philosophy while small-government Republicans and Libertarians have set the stage in the collective American mind for right-anarchists to espouse ideas that are much more familiar to the public. The question then becomes: how do left-anarchists convince a nation when right-anarchism—or at least its watered-down counterpart—has already been pre-programmed into the the American psyche? Not only must people be persuaded that the current

system must be changed, but that the well-known alternative is also a faulty option. No small task.

### **Private Property**

In anarchist circles, there is a lively debate over how to distribute goods, one that has raged since the conception of the anarchist canon itself. It is perhaps one of the most divisive topics among thinkers, exacerbated by a lack of left-anarchist center of mass. The history of intra-anarchist conflict on this issue could fill a book.

Here, though, the spotlight is on Chomsky (2006), an anarcho-syndicalist, who believes that “a decent society should protect rights to private property within limits, but not concentrations of private power that infringe on the freedom and rights of others.” Reasonable enough. This argument is one that libertarians on the left and right could stand behind.

The real problem, though, does not lie in any of the individual components of Chomsky’s belief system. The specificities matter not a whit. The importance of private property in the American system is tied up in both intellectual and commercial aspects of life; any attack on the Institution of Property calls forth myriad liberal intellectuals, conservative ideologues, and corporations concerned with profits.

The right-anarchism of Benjamin Tucker must again be called to mind when considering the American relationship to property. The philosophy of the Founding Fathers, John Locke, Adam Smith are all quoted—and mixed—liberally in Conservative think pieces, reminding the reader of the importance of freedom and individualism, and, of course, why property is essential to those things. From Williamson (2016) at *The National Review*: “[W]ithout private life and private property, we are defenseless against the descent into ever deeper and unlimited étatism.” On the surface, the stance is sincere enough—the call of an individual for the government to

leave him alone so he can self-actualize on his own terms. Most anarchists could understand that. But extended explanations of this line of thought reveals the implicit oppressiveness of it. Magnet (2013), writing for *Fox News*, explains that the Founding Fathers intended—in his interpretation—for government to protect the unalienable rights of “life, liberty, and property;” furthermore, James Madison understood the dangers of democratic majority invading these rights for their own benefit, namely by “robbery of the propertied few by the unpropertied many, whether by unjust taxation, by debasement of the currency—which silently transfers wealth from creditors to debtors,” and so on, and such forth. The danger of democracy, Magnet says, is that it could rob the rich and give to the poor. In fact, he continues, “[i]n a genuinely free society, Madison observed in the *Federalist*, you will always have inequality” (Magnet, 2013).

To maintain freedom in America, he argues, the class disparity must be perpetuated; the government must be protected from the grubby “unpropertied many” taking over and enforcing a democratic dictatorship (Magnet, 2013).

This American ideology, or idolatry, of property ties into hierarchy, because it reinforces class lines. And, as mentioned earlier, there are many powerful forces who have everything to lose in an anarchic system. It is doubtful anarchists could fight that influence under normal circumstances.

### **Conclusion**

The future of the anarchist movement, today, is doubtful—not only has it never recovered from the campaign of “raids, imprisonments and deportations” against it in the early 20th century, but the political spectrum has also shifted strongly in favor of a State Capitalist system, moving left-anarchism further into a perceived extreme of political philosophy (Jacobs, 2016). The key word there, though, is ‘today.’ The United States is not the same the nation it was two

decades ago. Two decades from now, it will be as unrecognizable to us as our time would be to a pre-9/11 American. And anarchism is a flexible philosophy: it will endure. The only question is of its ability to sprout.

In the 2015 long-form documentary, *Requiem for the American Dream*, Chomsky admitted that America had gone in a very different direction from what he had hoped, but remained optimistic, saying,

[i]t's a very free society, still the freest in the world. Government has very limited ability to coerce...So there's a lot that can be done if people organize, struggle for their rights as they've done in the past...what matters is the countless, small deeds by unknown people...They're the ones who've done things in the past. They're the ones who'll have to do it in the future (Nyks, Hutchinson, & Scot).

In short, hope may indeed be for fools, but paralyzing cynicism has never gotten anything done. The future will be what we make of it.

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### Addendum

Although this paper will not delve deeply into much of the anarchist theoretical minutiae, it is worthwhile to keep in mind that Professor Chomsky (2013) is, in his own words, an anarcho-syndicalist, a sub-group that places great weight on the necessity of unions and worker organizations in a Left-Anarchist society, and is considered to be a direct descendent of Proudhon's mutualism, influenced by Bakunin's collectivism (Wilson; Carter, 1971, p.65; Afaq, 2008). In the relevant excerpt from *Government of the Future*, Chomsky makes reference to Bakunin (one of the "principal advocates" of anarcho-collectivist theory) six times, the second-most of any referenced individual in the piece; Proudhon receives four mentions (Bekken, 2012).

This addendum is not intended to imply any particular beliefs on Professor Chomsky's part, but rather to enlighten the reader that, because this is an analysis of the future described in Chomsky's work, this paper will be primarily assuming anarcho-collectivist and anarcho-syndicalist tenets, and ignoring other sub-groups—particularly anarcho-communism—when there is contradictory overlap.