

Analysis and Considerations on Chomsky's Ideas

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Abstract

Noam Chomsky evaluates and entertains possible political socio-economic methodologies that could effectively be applied to an advanced industrial society in his talk given at the Poetry Center in 1970. This talk is the base in which I summarize the four positions he believes are possible platforms for societies to function by. Namely, these positions are classical liberal, libertarian socialist, state socialist and state capitalist. The dynamic of all four of these positions present different challenges in regards to political theory. Proponents of each view are scattered through history and their thoughts are used to aid Chomsky's rationale on what he believes is the most viable option to make possible the humane and rational use of our material wealth and power. Chomsky comes to the conclusion that he believes libertarian socialism to be the best ideal. As a result, I analyze whether the United States could make its way to the libertarian socialist method and whether or not that transition would be a good revolution for this country.

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Many politicians and people throughout the course of history in all different kinds of countries tried to best predict what the most effective role is the state could take in a society. Noam Chomsky is no exception (1970). Chomsky gave a talk at the Poetry Center, New York City on February 16, 1970 expressing his view on what possible socio-economic roles the state could possibly undertake and what role the state should actually take. He believes there are four positions that could be taken: classical liberal, libertarian socialist, state socialist and state capitalist. He discusses the benefits and downfalls to each one but ultimately arrives at the conclusion that libertarian socialism would provide the people of the state the best opportunity to thrive as a society and as individuals. Analysis on Chomsky's view of each position is necessary in order to decide whether or not libertarian socialism is the best method for the United States to adopt if at all possible.

Classical Liberalism

Classical liberalism is the first ideology that Chomsky discusses in his talk. This position demands for the minimal amount of government intervention as possible. It is incessant on that fact that the less man is regulated and told by the government what to do the better. Ralph Raico in an article entitled, *What is Classical Liberalism?*, states classical liberalism is a term used to designate, "the ideology advocating private property, an unhampered market economy, the rule of law, constitutional guarantees of freedom of religion and of the press, and international peace based on free trade" (Raico, 2010, p. 1). This means that the free market determines what is needed in terms of cost of goods, labor, labor wages etc. Adam Smith called this the "invisible hand". He believed that as

long as supply, demand, prices and competition had no government intervention then, by necessity, the free market and the nature of humans to be naturally self-interested would drive the economy and maximize the wealth within a society (Smith, 1776). The invisible hand is an ideology that could potentially be adopted to maximize economic success in a society but the limitation of government under the view of classical liberalism also aids in human happiness.

The root of this idea that humans (and the society in which the humans live) will be happier with less government is based on the thought that freedom is the ultimate force in happiness. Chomsky states that Humboldt (a classical liberal) believes when a man, woman or child decides to create something by his or her own free will he or she is no longer a tool of production for the state or government. That alone gives self worth to that individual that cannot be obtained in a society where the government takes what you produce.

Chomsky goes on to attack classical liberalism by explaining while this position attempts to limit the state's power, it does not attempt to limit private power. Chomsky stresses that private power is worse than state power because of the lack of regulation and classical liberalism would never last in an advanced society like we see today.

Libertarian Socialism

The second ideal that Chomsky examines is libertarian socialism. This is the position that Chomsky favors to be the best method societies should practice. It is closely tied to anarchism in the sense that libertarian socialism opposes the organization of production by the government. Anarchists believe the people can run all societies and living in such a society is in fact more desirable that way. One of an anarchist's main

aspirations is to have the working class liberate from exploitation. Either the government or a group of citizens, such as an aristocracy, can bring about this exploitation to the working class. This is where libertarian socialism and anarchists have much in common. The libertarian socialist as explained by Chomsky believes the workers should be the rulers over themselves. The workers would make their conditions favorable to work in, everybody would have equal pay because every worker's voice would be equally heard and they could be run by some form of workers' council. To elaborate further, there would be no officer suite or shareholders that only focus on profits while not considering fair conditions for workers. In theory, the workers themselves would ultimately control the humane treatment of their fellow workers.

Similar to classical liberalism, the idea to make the work place most effective is also what will make the members of the society the happiest. Under libertarian socialism, someone "higher" than them would no longer oppress members of the society and result in satisfaction with the work they do.

Chomsky mentions two counter arguments to the libertarian socialism ideal. The first is "that a free society is contrary to human nature". He asks the question of whether or not humans would be better off with a ruling power telling them what to do. He states that some who use this idea as a counter argument suggest that select people simply can't handle the responsibility of freedom and would function much more efficiently and happily under a sort of ruling power. Chomsky quickly dismisses this idea that it is ridiculous and freedom of oppression is obviously much better. Anyone who believes otherwise has been misled in his or her understanding of human nature. The second counter argument that Chomsky addresses is the thought that democratic control of the

industrial system down to its smallest level would not be efficient in accomplishing anything useful. Chomsky explains that this perhaps could have been true many years ago due to the lack of technology but in modern times, a society or a group of people can frequently communicate efficiently with ease whenever needed. Therefore, Chomsky doesn't believe that either of the counterarguments is valid and libertarian socialism is still the best option of society.

State Socialism and State Capitalism

State socialism and state capitalism are the last two components on the list for the examination of Chomsky. These two ideals are substantially different than the first two forms of libertarianism. First, let us delve into the main similarity between state socialism and state capitalism, namely the authoritarian aspect of both. The common term in both ideals is "state". This implies the state has a large influence or control on the socio-economic aspect of a society. It is easy to see either of these two ideals is opposite to any form of libertarianism in its purest form. Both state socialism and state capitalism, as Chomsky describes, lead indirectly to feudal nobility or a totalitarian dictatorship. He worries that the political or business leaders will have too much power and the workers will have no voice to speak up against any oppression. Similarly, either method undermines the power of democratic decision-making due to the underrepresentation of the worker, which is the majority of people in a society. Although there are important similarities in both state socialism and state capitalism, Chomsky explains what he thinks to be main differences between the two.

State socialism aims to ensure limits on what an individual can have and, in turn, redistributing any imbalance in order to care for all members of a society. Victor Nee in

the *American Sociological Review* sufficiently describes state socialism from an economic standpoint, "State socialist redistributive economies are characterized by the allocation and distribution of goods through central planning" (Nee, 1989, p. 663). The key phrase is "through central planning" and is where Chomsky has issues with state socialism as an option. The central planning leads to grounds for corruption and underrepresentation of works that will then be oppressed.

Chomsky also very much dislikes state capitalism but happens to be what methodology the United States is largely utilizing at this moment. State capitalism mainly differs from state socialism in that wealth, power and resources are redistributed amongst the society. Private business (with restrictions) or state owned business could flourish and grow while keeping profits or using those profits to do other things of their choosing. On the other hand, struggling smaller businesses are frequently crushed due to powerful opposition. This doesn't sit well with Chomsky because it is much too authoritarian for him.

Could the U.S. Adopt the Libertarian Socialist Position?

Many scholars believe that the system the United States is currently under (state capitalism) does not function effectively and should be replaced by a better system as soon as possible. Everyone thinks they have the answer with their ideal that is better than the rest and Chomsky is no exception. Chomsky mentions in the second sentence of his talk that each one of the positions he will be discussing is "idealized". He fully understands that each position is its own extreme end of the spectrum. Therefore he can think all of his dreams will come a reality and everything will go swimmingly if and only

if a society adapts to his ideal of libertarian socialism. It would be wise to be skeptical in this situation.

It is not likely the United States will embrace the libertarian socialism position. The first reason is citizens of the United States are steadfastly opposed to any idea that impedes on their freedom. The freedom that is in jeopardy under the libertarian socialist view as described by Chomsky is the freedom to earn your own capital and do with it what you please. The United States takes pride in having a foundation built on entrepreneurship and getting what one earns. Any type of socialism threatens the American way of life because it takes away the American's liberty to do what they want. Is this the most effective way to function as a society? Chomsky would say it most certainly is not but at the same time, should one have their freedoms infringed upon or have the potential of a more prosperous society. Based on the importance of freedom to American, it is safe to say many would prefer to keep their freedom.

The second reason is Chomsky's vision for perfectly equal democratic leadership among industrial society partnered with no repressive state action is simply unreachable. Chomsky wishes to have equal worker representation as the leaders over any institution. He hopes for, "workers themselves being master over production, by some form or workers' councils." Many unknown factors arise when beginning to image how these institutions will function. How will these workers be elected? How do they stay in power? Are they full time workers and full time representatives? Do they get the same pay? How many will be corrupt? All of these questions would get answered if the United States changed to a libertarian socialist society and if history is bound to repeat itself then it isn't difficult to predict Chomsky wouldn't be happy with the result.

The last main reason libertarian socialism as described by Chomsky won't work is because the United States is too large and rooted in tradition. If one takes a look at some of the most socialist countries in the world right now: Sweden, Norway, Denmark, Canada and Finland they are all extremely small in population and GDP compared to the United States. It is much easier to have socialistic values in a small country. The United States simply couldn't impose as high of a tax that Denmark does due to backlash by its citizens and it seems likely many businesses on the bubble now would go under. As stated previously, Americans are proud of their country and their ways as confirmed by the University of Chicago's Nation Opinion Research Center (Drezner, 2006). Radical change from state capitalism to libertarian socialism isn't at the forefront of American minds.

Should the U.S. Adopt the Libertarian Socialist Position?

The United States should not adopt the libertarian social position, nor should the United States adopt a full-blown state capitalist position. With extreme positions come extreme pitfalls. There are so many unknown factors involved with such a radical political, social and economic change not even the most intelligent person could determine what the outcome would be like. Chomsky thinks there is one way to function as a society but perhaps in reality, different times dictate different socio-economic methodologies. At this time, it does not look promising for the United States to rush into a radically different system. History always shows the strong adapt and overcome. If the current global and domestic situation calls upon the United States to take the libertarian socialist position then it will but if not then it will adopt a more effective position.

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