

Government in the Future: An Analysis on the State, Chomsky, and the Future

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Abstract

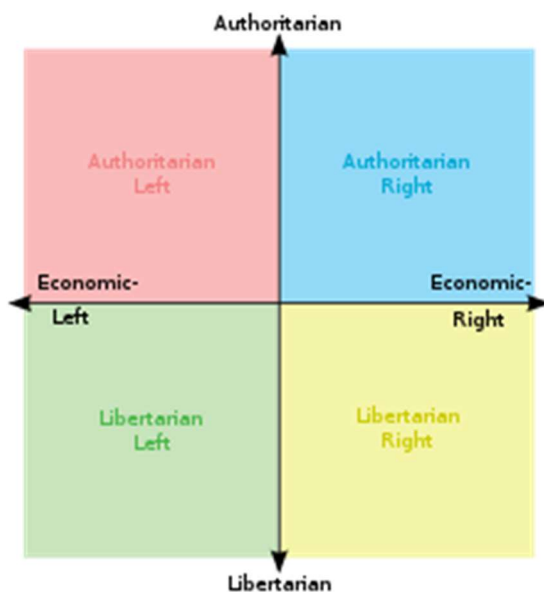
In his 1971 speech “Government in the Future,” Noam Chomsky presents a model for a future United States government in line with a Libertarian Socialist society. Chomsky debates the role of the state in a nationalized economy, as well as the presence of the state in the first place. In this essay, we analyze each philosophy Chomsky presents as a potential future for the United States - classical liberalism, libertarian socialism, state socialism, and state capitalism, relating each philosophy to a modern-day point of reference - the Political Compass.

Government in the Future: An Analysis on the State, Chomsky, and the Future

“Government in the Future” is a speech discussing his vision for a libertarian socialist society where government is replaced by decentralized decision-making processes based on voluntary association, participatory democracy, and worker control of production. Chomsky does this by comparing it to other possible next steps. These include classical liberalism, the foundational philosophical philosophy for American government, libertarian socialism, state socialism, and state capitalism. All of these philosophies maintain different levels of economic intervention and societal presence. Chomsky advocates for a libertarian socialist system as a potential next step for the United States, rejecting the idea of centralized governance and emphasizing freedom and collective ownership. However, this is not possible in our current individualist culture, in the global capitalist economy, and in application to the vast scale of the United States.

Political Compass

The Political Compass is a two-dimensional typology of political opinions. The dimensions that the graph is plotted on are ranges of economic and social positions. The top left



quadrant represents the authoritarian left, the top right quadrant represents the authoritarian right, the bottom right quadrant represents the libertarian right, and the bottom left quadrant represents the libertarian left. This contextualization of political opinions in a graph enables the viewer to more easily relate different philosophies to each other.

Classical Liberalism

Classical liberalism is a philosophy that values individualism, freedom, reason, and toleration. The details vary from philosopher to philosopher, but essentially this philosophy holds that without government, individuals exist within a state of nature. In this state, people are completely free and equal, unbound by any human law. For Hobbes, this state of nature is an often violent condition of constant competition between individuals. Life without government, he famously states in his book *Leviathan*, is “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short” (Munro, 2015). For Locke, the state of nature, characterized by the absence of government, is naturally peaceful, and individuals are born with certain unalienable rights that entitle them to life, liberty, and property. In his *Two Treatises on Government*, Locke states: “reason... teaches all mankind who will but consult it, that being all equal and independent, no one ought to harm another in his life, health, liberty or possessions” (Locke, 1794, p. 107).

This is where the role of the state comes in. In order to protect the unalienable rights of man, the individual enters into a social contract wherein he sacrifices some of his freedom for security and prosperity under the state. To Locke and many other classical liberal thinkers, in order to preserve man’s freedom as much as possible, the state should maintain a limited role in its citizens' lives. Chomsky asserts that classical liberalism is a philosophy whose position on the role of the state is limited to “all but the most restricted and minimal form of state intervention in personal and social life.” Thomas Paine, in *Common Sense*, wrote that “Society in every state is a blessing, but government, even in its best state, but a necessary evil; in its worst state, an intolerable one” (Paine, 1776). E.K. Hunt, in *Property and Prophets*, summarizes the intended functions of government in the eyes of a classical liberal; the purpose of government is to protect individual rights, maintain some method of national defense to provide security both

domestically and internationally, establish and enforce laws to protect citizens from one another including protecting private property and enforcing contracts and common law, build and maintain public institutions, and maintain a system of public works. These public works can include currency, measurement, upkeep of methods of transportation, and national communications like the postal service (Hunt, 2003).

In the context of a more modern measurement of political and economic waypointing, consider the Political Compass (“Political Compass,” 2001). Classical liberalism is a system that supports low levels of government regulation in the social lives of its citizens, placing it in the lower Libertarian half of the compass. Economically right, with the strong emphasis on the value of private property and individualism, classical liberalism would be on the right-hand side of the compass, placing it overall in the lower right quadrant. Individuals who also fall in this quadrant include Milton Friedman, Lanny Ebenstein, Benjamin R. Tucker, and F. A. Hayek (“Reading List Libertarian Right,” 2001). In any case, all these individuals value freedom, particularly economic freedom, as paramount. Freedom is the key element of classical liberalism, so much so that the quote “better that ten guilty persons escape, than that one innocent suffer” (Blackstone, 1753) is a common saying and foundational aspect of liberal justice systems. This central tenet and its consistency with practiced policies is what draws much of Chomsky’s criticism in his assessment of classical liberalism.

In his 1971 speech, Noam Chomsky offers a critique on classical liberalism in a capitalist society. The classical liberal view emphasizes the importance of freedom and creation, as well as the importance of minimal state intervention upon individual will as much as possible. This, according to Chomsky, is counterintuitive with the dominant economic system in a liberal society, capitalism:

[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. (Chomsky, 1970)

Capitalism erodes man, Chomsky claims. Life under capitalism degrades the worker into simply a tool to serve corporate ends, leaving very little left for man to pursue the free, searching, self-perfecting self that exists within a state of nature. Moreover, with the financial dependence that the wealthy impose upon the poor, capitalism has bound man in a system of wage slavery, wherein there are few chances of upward mobility, the conditions are poor, and the cost of living exceeds the minimum wage, keeping the working-class poor, subjugated, and complacent. There is something degrading to the human soul about bondage, and so the natural solution to this system of oppression is emancipation from the confines of capitalism.

The classical liberal system under capitalism is deeply flawed. In terms of the role of the state under classical liberalism, a case can be made for a larger state presence in everyday lives. That the government should provide additional services to its citizens, beyond just the protection of property and protection from each other. Economically, man is entitled not only to life but fulfillment as well, which is nigh impossible to achieve working as a member of the proletariat under a capitalist system that functions to suppress the poor and artificially inflate the rich.

Libertarian Socialism

A philosophy with a stronger sympathy to human fulfillment is libertarian socialism, a left-wing philosophy of community organization under the broader philosophy of socialism, defined by The Anarchist Library as “a social system which believes in freedom of action and thought and free will, in which the producers possess both political power and the means of producing and distributing goods” (An Anarchist FAQ, 2022). Roderick T. Long, in his essay titled “Toward A Libertarian Theory of Class” claims that libertarianism advocates “a radical redistribution of power from the coercive state to voluntary associations of free individuals.” When applied to economics, libertarian socialism rejects the state involvement in the economy that is present in other philosophies, such as state socialism. A libertarian socialist also rejects the freedoms that capitalists claim private property grants: “unlike [libertarian capitalists], [libertarian socialists] do not see the right to engage in market transactions, or to maintain exclusive control over one’s private property, as examples of freedom in need of protection” (Long, 1998). The rationale for this is that the hierarchical social dynamic that is associated with private property is entirely separate from individual liberty. Only a classless and anti-authoritarian society can effectively create a truly equal community. A system of popular self-governance is preferred to life under capitalism, channeled through networks of decentralized, local, voluntary, participatory, and cooperative organizations. This system, depending on who you ask, might work in conjunction with a state, serving as a check on its power, or as a complete substitute for it. Chomsky, in his speech “The Soviet Union Versus Socialism,” characterizes libertarian socialism as seeking to put an end to hierarchy in every facet of life, social and political.

With an emphasis on the lack of the presence of a state both economically and socially, libertarian socialism is firmly in the lower left quadrant of the Political Compass. This quadrant encompasses a wide range of political philosophies, from anarchism all the way to modern liberalism. Notable individuals in this quadrant include libertarian socialist Noam Chomsky and democratic socialist Bernie Sanders, as well as activists such as Gandhi and Nelson Mandela. All of these figures value limited state presence in the lives of the people, to different degrees. As a libertarian socialist, Chomsky's values would put him just slightly to the right of anarchism, while Gandhi is north of Chomsky, favoring a less extreme version of libertarianism.

In Chomsky's defense of libertarian socialism, he brings up two common counter criticisms of libertarian socialism that question the freedom and the efficiency that such a society would produce. The former concerns the happy slave rationale, claiming that free society is contrary to human nature. People, critics of libertarian socialists claim, don't really want the responsibility that is involved with a truly free society. It is human nature to want to be controlled or ruled over by a benevolent state or master. Chomsky rejects this line of thought, stating that true freedom is a necessary state in order for man to achieve self-realization. Not only this, but the truth in his statements are highlighted by the fact that in the course of human history, while we might condemn senseless violence, no reasonable person would speak legitimately against violence that occurs in the course of an uprising against an oppressive regime. This is especially the case when those masses endeavor to take their first steps toward liberty and social reconstruction. Human nature is to fight against an autocratic and domineering regime and to achieve true freedom, in order to attain fulfillment. Additionally, and perhaps the most significant point, the intentional promotion of the idea that true freedom is incompatible with human nature and that man is born to be ruled by benevolent autocrats, rather than born to

be free, directly serves the economic elite, and keeps potential threats to their power, the working class subdued.

The second criticism of libertarian socialism comes from a question of its efficiency, which states that complete democratic control of an industrialized system, wherein even the smallest functional unit is controlled by the community, is ultimately incompatible with the efficiency required in a globalized world. To achieve the required levels of optimization, top-down styles of management are necessary for a nation to operate effectively. To this, Chomsky's response is simple: "[m]aximization of commodities is hardly the only measure of a decent existence." Expanding upon this, technological advancements, both of our current age and those that will come in the future, have streamlined the production process, as well as enabled such a large scale of communication and organization, that the need for a centralized management structure is effectively eliminated. Moreover, even a corporation, system, or institution that seeks to prioritize the worker must function within the constraints of a capitalist system. As a result, well-meaning economic elites will always be forced to prioritize power, growth, and profit over human needs of fulfillment and self-actualization. "Capital must constantly strive to subjugate labor: labor must constantly strive to resist the powers of capital" (Williams, 1983, p. 52). These human needs can only be meaningfully expressed in collective terms. Finally, in a society that wastes resources and destroys environments with such abandon, it is difficult to maintain an argument against a socialist system's efficiency without being hypocritical.

Chomsky is right about the source of many of the issues in the way the state functions within society today - a system of power and economics that takes advantage of an alienated workforce lacking in class consciousness. The inequalities perpetuated by capitalism in our society today are visible, along with how the state only sustains and exaggerates these

conditions. However, Chomsky's ideas on how to address the problems of society are flawed. Libertarian socialism may be viable on a small scale, and may be the ideal system to exist under, however it is fundamentally incompatible with the United States because of its conflict with individualism and the scale at which the system would need to be conducted.

The United States has a long history of individual fulfillment. From Manifest Destiny, white supremacy, the American Dream, to Reagan-era bootstraps and the obsession with the self-made man, American individualism is integral to our culture. Alt-right libertarianism (not to be confused with anarcho-libertarianism) found its home in American culture *because* of how deeply our society believes in the primacy of the individual. Without a complete overhaul of existing norms and mores, not only the ruling bourgeois but also the general masses are unlikely to subscribe to means of collective action and organization. Without the support of the people, there is no foundation for a libertarian socialist system to operate upon. Moreover, the scale at which a libertarian socialist system would need to function - encompassing nearly 332 million people - is in essence impossible. No system of organization would be able to produce an effective collective nation at that scale with absolutely no hierarchy. How would policies be passed? How would decisions be made? How would we interact with the international community? A spokesperson with no meaningful power advantage over anyone else could be selected, but the inefficiency of our legislative, judicial, and diplomatic proceedings would be ludicrous. Within the context of industry, collective ownership makes a little more sense, as the scale is broken down to a much smaller level, but on a nationwide basis Chomsky's argument against inefficiency are baseless in the face of how truly inefficient our nation has the capacity to be. The elimination of hierarchy in a social and industrial capacity is a meaningful cause,

however the presence of a state - even in a limited form - is a necessary evil, despite the restrictions that it inherently imposes on mankind's free will.

State Socialism and State Capitalism

Another approach to the role of the state is the philosophy of state socialism, which has a range of interpretations. Some political theorists, especially those most closely aligned with anarchism, such as the philosophy of libertarian socialism that Chomsky subscribes to, treat state socialism as synonymous with state capitalism. Others view the two concepts as distinct philosophies, distinguishing between authoritarian state socialism and democratic state socialism. Chomsky, in his speech "Government in the Future" refers to them as one philosophy, however for the purposes of this paper, we will discuss the theoretical basis of each separately, relate each to the Political Compass, provide Chomsky's views on them as a unit, and then assess both critically.

State socialism is a philosophy that instead of worker ownership of the means of production, as seen in libertarian socialism, advocates for state ownership. The economy, in effect, is significantly or completely by the state, with industry and resources being state-owned. There is a range of views on the extent of state involvement in the economy within the philosophy of state socialism, from complete control to minimal involvement, however there is a consensus that the state must have at least a temporary part in building a socialist system, if only for logistical overseeing purposes. Gus Tyler, an American socialist activist, writes on this mixed economy approach: "the mixed economy is a recognition that ... humankind will go on for the foreseeable future trying to find the balance between id and superego, between capitalism and socialism, between the capacity to produce and the propensity to consume, between the private and the public sectors" (Tyler & Heilbroner, 2016). Under state socialism, economic state

ownership is not necessarily all-encompassing. The ideal is a state which owns the means of production, at least partially, with an internal structure of cooperative management and workplace democracy. Within the context of the Political Compass, state socialism, depending on the degree of state-imposed collectivism, can range somewhere between the upper and lower left-hand quadrants. More extreme examples can be found in the upper authoritarian left quadrant, while a mixed economy will be closer to the lower libertarian left.

State capitalism, which is a system of economics where the means of production are transferred from private to state owned organizations. Raymond Williams in *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Society* develops on this: the term state capitalism “[has] been widely used to describe forms of state ownership in which the original conditions of [capitalism] – centralized ownership of the means of production, leading to a system of wage-labour – have not really changed” (Williams, 1983, p. 52). The state, in a state capitalist economy, is an active participant in business and for-profit economics, and centralized management and wage labor are still prominent aspects of the economy. This is a dramatic contrast from the deregulated free market capitalism under a classical liberal state. The term state capitalism in its most extreme form is sometimes used interchangeably with communism, as the state maintains complete control of the economy. As a result of authoritarian government dominance but a relatively relaxed involvement in social life, state capitalism falls in the top left quadrant of the Political Compass.

Libertarian socialists view state capitalism and state socialism as interchangeable for a variety of reasons. Primarily, they view state socialism as just a shift in who controls the oppressive capitalist power - from private capitalists to the state. Economic systems, such as those in Marxist-Leninist states, cannot genuinely be called socialist, as a result of their authoritarian nature. The difference, according to the *International Encyclopedia of Political*

Science, lies within the ends that industry profit goes towards, as well as the participation of the worker in an industrial context. Under state socialism, the state works to achieve socialism, investing in society through means such as education, healthcare, and employment practices. Further, worker participation in industry is more significant than it would be under a state capitalist system. On the other hand, under state capitalism the profits from industry are put towards maximizing profits over addressing human needs. Worker influence in the management of the means of production is minimal to nonexistent. The difference can also be seen historically in the various types of socialist states. The Soviet Bloc was an example of state capitalism, while Nordic Model countries such as Sweden or Denmark are examples of state socialism, to an extent.

Chomsky's criticisms of the role of the state under state capitalism and state socialism are clear. Under these kinds of states, there are two systems of power, a political and an economic system. Within the political realm, there are elected representatives of the people who set public policy, which in principle is reflective of the public will. The economic system, on the other hand is a "a system of private power that is free from public control, except in the remote and indirect ways in which even a feudal nobility or a totalitarian dictatorship must be responsive to the public will." The consequences of this kind of organization of society, Chomsky claims, are threefold. The first is subtle, the formation of a culture that supports a norm of submission to authority as well as an adherence to 'arbitrary dictates' from above. The second consequence includes the kinds of policies that the public genuinely has an influence over. Central institutions, including 'the entire commercial, industrial, and financial system' are beyond public control, instead at the whim of the plutocratic elite. Finally, even within the narrow space where the public in theory wields political influence, private interests still play a very strong role. This can

be “through control of the media, through control of political organizations, or by supplying the top personnel for the parliamentary system itself.” Ultimately, the democratic system that functions within a state capitalist or state socialist system, is “biased by the concentrations of private power and by the authoritarian and passive modes of thinking that are induced by autocratic institutions.” These autocratic institutions are a product of participation in capitalism. If there was a norm of collective ownership of the means of production, an emphasis on human needs over endlessly increasing profit margins, and democratic organization of industrial society, then the corrupting influence of private power over democracy would not be an issue. Thus, it can be concluded that capitalism is inherently a degenerative force in democracy, as they are fundamentally incompatible.

The libertarian socialist tendency of lumping state capitalism and state socialism together as effectively the same structure disregards the significant differences between the two systems. State involvement in the economic world, or the existence of a state at all for that matter, is not an automatic path towards bureaucratic despotism. The state is a necessary evil for an organized, functioning, and effective society wherein every individual is supported enough to find some form of self-actualization. Finding the right economic mix is the most viable solution for a future wherein the worker is not completely reduced. That mix can be found in an economy that is predominately collectively owned and operated, yet with enough state influence to maintain and regulate this model. Furthermore, an extensive and effective social welfare net, state organized and subsidized, is necessary for a fulfilled and healthy population. For this reason, a form of state or democratic socialism is preferable over the stateless, utopian libertarian socialism that Chomsky advocates for. Chomsky’s assessment of state capitalism, however, is valid. Its dominance in the economic realm with minimal collective bargaining or influence is blatantly

autocratic and authoritarian, as evidenced in the Soviet Union's own version of state capitalism, Stalinism. The atrocities that the Communist Party committed, with a death toll in the tens of millions, is a clear message on the dangers of state capitalism.

The Future of Government

The risks inherent in state capitalism are showing themselves in our current U.S. societal structure. The next evolution for the American experiment hangs in question, with contradictions in policy, expanding chasms between parties, and discontent among the people. Growing support in government for alt-right policies (Rotella, 2021) is concerning, but at the same time Gen Z is more left leaning than any generation before them (Mitchell, 2023). Wealth inequality is more significant than ever before, with the top 1% owning more wealth than the entire middle class (Tanzai & Dorning, 2021). Public support for capitalism is falling, with 43% of U.S. adults claiming a negative view of capitalism as of August 2022 (Nadeem, 2022). Public faith in government is at a low, with only 2% of Americans claiming to trust the government "just about always" (Bell, 2022). On a global scale, scientists estimate that the world has less than seven years to limit global warming from hitting the point of no return (Climate Clock, 2020). It is clear something dramatic needs to change in order for a viable future fifty years from now. Noam Chomsky's solution is libertarian socialism.

Chomsky advocates that we withdraw our consent for those in power and the interests they represent to "govern and manage American society and impose their concept of world order and their criteria for legitimate political and economic development on much of the world." Following the widely adopted doctrine of popular sovereignty, states derive their legitimacy from the consent of those it governs. If this is the case, then the citizens are the ones who can revoke it. The United States government is not serving the needs of the people it claims to

represent, instead catering to corporate interests. Classical liberal ideals are achievable without a state, as expressed through a libertarian socialist system. Only through a widespread revolutionary emancipatory movement can we implement this and absolve our nation of public and private 'repressive and authoritarian institutions.' It will not be a smooth transition, for we must first be free in order to learn how to humanely and rationally manage our material wealth and power as a nation. However, the alternative of a capitalistic society wrought with bureaucratic despotism and contemporary barbarism will leave man at best a tool of production and at worst a well-trained parrot.

While I agree with Chomsky's pessimistic foretelling of U.S. society, I disagree with Chomsky's solution for a positive future for the United States. I find, for reasons already expressed, libertarian socialism is not only an unlikely next step culturally for the United States, but it is not viable at such a large scale. Moreover, the expectations and rigor of active participation in a capitalist globalized economy are not compatible with the decentralized management systems of libertarian socialism. Regardless of practical applications or cultural acceptance of Chomsky's proposed system, the most significant barrier to its implementation is that the wealthy and their positions of power are actively threatened by libertarian socialism. This is the class with the most power, and the ones, barring the event of a violent revolution, are the ones who would be tasked with its implementation. A mixed state socialist economy, as defended earlier, is a far more reasonable and likely alternative to the capitalist state that we exist under today. Regardless, all of these future projections are moot if the U.S. government and governments around the world refuse to take an aggressive stance on climate change. Without a livable environment, we will not have a future in which to make these important political and economic changes.

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