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Noam Chomsky

THE COMMON GOOD

World renowned linguist and philosopher Noam Chomsky has for some forty years been battling to expose the lack of "independence of mind and real freedom of discussion" that troubled Tocqueville in the early 1830s in the previous article. This interview with journalist David Barsamian was conducted after Chomsky had delivered an address at a 1997 conference sponsored by the Congressional Progressive Caucus. Chomsky offers a powerful indictment of the narrow range of debate allowed within public discourse in the U.S.. He explores such "radical" notions as Aristotle's support for a true democracy without extremes of great wealth and poverty—democracy devoted to nurturing pursuit of the "common good" over material self-interest. He also explores such cherished ideals as freedom and equality, and he sheds light on how the assumed benefits of "free market" capitalism and "free trade" actually serve to enhance the concentration of corporate power and control. The resulting "private tyrannies" of global corporations undermine the ideals American society purports to foster. This antidemocratic trend of growing corporate power has been aided by the concomitant demonization of governmental power that has intensified among economic and political elites, and within the mass media over the past half-century. Thus according to Chomsky, in a nation whose constitutional Framers warned against threats to liberty stemming from public political power, the most pressing dangers in fact emanate from unchecked private economic power, a point rendered largely invisible within public discourse. After surveying these trends, Chomsky makes some hopeful observations for those who want to resist the onslaught of unaccountable private power. Students of American politics, accustomed to a Republican-Democratic range of debate, no doubt will find Chomsky's analysis challenging, since nothing in our corporate, media-driven culture prepares them for such a basic critique. But learning to "hear" such a critique is one of the necessary first steps toward understanding how the world really works.

[David Barsamian:] Your talk was entitled *The Common Good.*

[Noam Chomsky:] That title was given to me, and since I'm a nice, obedient type, that's what I talked about. I started from the beginning, with Aristotle's *Politics*, which is the foundation of most subsequent political theory.

Source: Noam Chomsky, *The Common Good,* Monroe, ME: Odonian Press/Common Courage Press, 1998, pp. 5–23 and 157–158.

Aristotle took it for granted that a democracy should be fully participatory (with some notable exceptions, like women and slaves) and that it should aim for the common good. In order to achieve that, it has to ensure relative equality, "moderate and sufficient property" and "lasting prosperity" for everyone.

In other words, Aristotle felt that if you have extremes of poor and rich, you can't talk seriously about democracy. Any true democracy has to be what we call today a welfare state—actually, an extreme form of one, far beyond anything envisioned in this century.

(When I pointed this out at a press conference in Majorca, the headlines in the Spanish papers read something like, *If Aristotle were alive today, he'd be denounced as a dangerous radical.* That's probably true.)

The idea that great wealth and democracy can't exist side by side runs right up through the Enlightenment and classical liberalism, including major figured like de Tocqueville, Adam Smith, Jefferson and others. It was more or less assumed.

Aristotle also made the point that if you have, in a perfect democracy, a small number of very rich people and a large number of very poor people, the poor will use their democratic rights to take property away from the rich. Aristotle regarded that as unjust, and proposed two possible solutions: reducing poverty (which is what he recommended) or reducing democracy.

James Madison, who was no fool, noted the same problem, but unlike Aristotle, he aimed to reduce democracy rather than poverty. He believed that the primary goal of government is "to protect the minority of the opulent against the majority." As his colleague John Jay was fond of putting it, "The people who own the country ought to govern it."

Madison feared that a growing part of the population, suffering from the serious inequities of the society, would "secretly sigh for a more equal distribution of [life's] blessings." If they had democratic power, there'd be a danger they'd do something more than sigh. He discussed this quite explicitly at the Constitutional Convention, expressing his concern that the poor majority would use its power to bring about what we would now call land reform.

So he designed a system that made sure democracy couldn't function. He placed power in the hands of the "more capable set of men," those who hold "the wealth of the nation." Other citizens were to be marginalized and factionalized in various ways, which have taken a variety of forms over the years: fractured political constituencies, barriers against unified working-class action and cooperation, exploitation of ethnic and racial conflicts, etc.

(To be fair, Madison was *pre*capitalist and his "more capable set of men" were supposed to be "enlightened statesmen" and "benevolent philosophers," not investors and corporate executives trying to maximize their own wealth regardless of the effect that has on other people. When Alexander Hamilton and his followers began to turn the U.S. into a capitalist state, Madison was pretty appalled. In my opinion, he'd be an anti-capitalist if he were alive today—as would Jefferson and Adam Smith.)

It's extremely unlikely that what are now called "inevitable results of the market" would ever be tolerated in a truly de-

mocratic society. You can take Aristotle's path and make sure that almost everyone has "moderate and sufficient property"—in other words, is what he called "middle-class." Or you can take Madison's path and limit the functioning of democracy.

Throughout our history, political power has been, by and large, in the hands of those who own the country. There have been some limited variations on that theme, like the New Deal. FDR had to respond to the fact that the public was not going to tolerate the existing situation. He left power in the hands of the rich, but bound them to a kind of social contract. That was nothing new, and it will happen again.

EQUALITY

[DB:] Should we strive merely for equality of opportunity, or for equality of outcome, where everyone ends up in more or less the same economic condition?

[NC:] Many thinkers, beginning with Aristotle, have held that equality of outcome should be a major goal of any just and free society. (They didn't mean identical outcomes, but at least relatively equal conditions.)

Acceptance of radical inequality of outcome is a sharp departure from the core of the humane liberal tradition as far back as it goes. In fact, Adam Smith's advocacy of markets was based on the assumption that under conditions of perfect liberty, free markets would lead to perfect equality of outcome, which he believed was a good thing.

Another grand figure of the pantheon, de Tocqueville, admired the relative equality he thought he saw in American society. (He exaggerated it considerably, but let's put aside the question of whether his perceptions were accurate.) He pointed out quite explitcitly that if a "permanent inequality of conditions" ever developed, that would be the death of democracy.

Incidentally, in other parts of his work that aren't widely quoted, de Tocqueville condemned the "manufacturing aristocracy" that was growing up under his eyes in the U.S., which he called "one of the harshest" in history. He said that if it ever got power, we'd be in deep trouble. Jefferson and other Enlightenment figures had the same fear. Unfortunately, it happened far beyond their worst nightmares.

[DB:] Ron Daniels, who's director of the Center for Constitutional Rights in New York, uses the metaphor of two runners in a race: One begins at the starting line and the other begins five feet from the finish line.

[NC:] That's a good analogy, but I don't think it gets to the main point. It's true that there's nothing remotely like equality of opportunity in this country, but even if there were, the system would *still* be intolerable.

Suppose you have two runners who start at exactly the same point, have the same sneakers, and so on. One finishes first and gets everything he wants; the other finishes second and starves to death.

[DB:] One of the mechanisms to address inequality is affirmative action. What do you think of it?

[NC:] Many societies just take it for granted. In India, for example, a sort of affirmative action system called *reservations* was instituted back in the late 1940s, at the time of independence, in an effort to try to overcome very long-

standing and deep-seated caste and gender differences.

Any such system is going to impose hardships on some people, in order (one hopes) to develop a more equitable and just society for the future. How it works as a practical matter can be tricky. I don't think there are any simple mechanical rules for it.

The attack on affirmative action is, to a large extent, an attempt to justify the oppressive, discriminatory patterns that existed in the past. On the other hand, affirmative action should certainly be designed so that it doesn't harm poor people who don't happen to be in the categories designated for support.

That can be done. There have been very effective applications of affirmative action—in the universities, the construction industry, the public service field and elsewhere. If you look in detail, you find plenty of things to criticize, but the main thrust of the program is humane and appropriate.

LIBRARIES

[DB:] Libraries were very important to your intellectual development when you were a kid, weren't they?

[NC:] I used to haunt the main public library in downtown Philadelphia, which was extremely good. That's where I read all the offbeat anarchist and left-Marxist literature I'm always quoting. Those were days when people read, and used the libraries very extensively. Public services were richer in many ways back in the late '30s and early '40s.

I think that's one of the reasons why poor, even unemployed people living in slums seemed more hopeful back then. Maybe this is sentimentality, and it involves comparing a child's perceptions and an adult's, but I think it's true.

Libraries were one of the factors. They weren't just for educated people—a lot of people used them. That's much less true now.

[DB:] I'll tell you why I asked. Recently I went back to visit the public library I used when I was a kid, on 78th and York in New York. I hadn't been there in thirty-five years, and it's now in one of the richest districts in the country.

I discovered they had very few political books. When the librarian explained that branch libraries carry mostly bestsellers, I told him I'd be happy to donate some of our books.

He expressed mild interest and suggested I fill out a form. When I went over to the desk to get one, I found out that it costs 30¢ to recommend a book you think the library should purchase!

[NC:] It sounds similar to what you find in the publications industry in general, including bookstores. I travel a lot and often get stuck in some airport or other... because it's snowing in Chicago, say. I used to be able to find something I wanted to read in the airport bookstore—maybe a classic, maybe something current. Now it's almost impossible. (It's not just in the U.S., by the way. I was stuck at the airport in Naples not long ago and the bookstore there was awful too.)

I think it's mostly just plain market pressures. Bestsellers move fast, and it cost money to keep books around that don't sell very quickly. Changes in the tax laws have exacerbated the problem, by making it more

expensive for publishers to hold inventory, so books tend to get remaindered [sold off at cost and put out-of-print] much sooner.

I think political books are being harmed by this—if you go into the big chains, which pretty much dominate bookselling now, you certainly don't find many of them—but the same thing is true of most books. I don't think it's political censorship.

[DB:] The right wing is promoting the idea of charging people to use the library.

[NC:] That's part of the whole idea of redesigning society so that it just benefits the wealthy. Notice that they aren't calling for terminating the Pentagon. They're not crazy enough to believe it's defending us from the Martians or somebody, but they understand very clearly that it's a subsidy for the rich. So the Pentagon is fine, but libraries aren't.

Lexington, the Boston suburb where I live, is an upper-middle-class, professional town where people are willing and able to contribute to the library. I give money to it and use it, and benefit from the fact that it's quite good.

But I don't like the fact that zoning laws and inadequate public transportation virtually guarantee that only rich people can live in Lexington. In poorer neighborhoods, few people have enough money to contribute to the library, or time to use it, or knowledge of what to look for once they're there.

Let me tell you a dismal story. One of my daughters lived in a declining old mill town. It's not a horrible slum, but it's fading away. The town happens to have a rather nice public library—not a wonderful collection, but good things for children. It's nicely laid out, imaginatively designed, staffed by a couple of librarians.

I went with her kids on a Saturday afternoon, and nobody was there except a few children of local professional families. Where are the kids who ought to be there? I don't know, probably watching television, but going to the library just isn't the kind of thing they do.

It *was* the kind of thing you did if you were a working-class person fifty or sixty years ago. Emptying people's minds of the ability, or even the desire, to gain access to cultural resources—that's a tremendous victory for the system.

Freedom

[DB:] The word *freedom* has become virtually synonymous with *capitalism,* as in the title of Milton Friedman's book, *Capitalism and Freedom.*

[NC:] It's an old scam. Milton Friedman is smart enough to know that there's never been anything remotely resembling capitalism, and that if there were, it wouldn't survive for three seconds—mostly because business wouldn't let it. Corporations insist on powerful governments to protect them from market discipline, and their very existence is an attack on markets.

All this talk about capitalism and freedom has got to be a conscious fraud. As soon as you move into the real world, you see that nobody could actually believe that nonsense.

[DB:] Dwayne Andreas, CEO of ADM [Archer Daniels Midland, a major NPR and PBS sponsor that calls itself "Supermarket to the World"] was quoted as saying,

"There's not one grain of anything in the world that is sold in the free market. Not one! The only place you see a free market is in the speeches of politicians."

[NC:] It must have been an internal memo or talk—that's not the kind of thing you tell the public. But in general it's true. As the United Nations Development Program put it, "survival in agricultural markets depends less on comparative advantage than on comparative access to subsidies."

Two technical economists in Holland found that *every single one* of the hundred largest transnational corporations on *Fortune* magazine's list has benefited from the industrial policy of its home country, and that at least twenty of them wouldn't have even survived if their governments hadn't taken them over or given them large subsidies when they were in trouble.

There was a front-page article in the *Boston Globe* that talked about our passing Japan in semiconductor production. It said that we've just seen "one of the great role reversals of the modern era—the transformation of Japan from behemoth to bungler.... Japan's government-guided effort to dominate the chip industry, for example, was turned back. The U.S. share of global chip production, which sank below Japan's in 1985, jumped back ahead of it in 1993 and has remained there." The article quoted Edward Lincoln, economic advisor to former U.S. Ambassador to Japan Walter Mondale, as saying, "The lesson of the 1990s is that all nations obey the same economic laws."

What actually happened? During the 1980s, the Reagan-Bush administrations forced Japan to raise prices for chips and to guarantee U.S. producers a share in Japanese markets. They also poured a lot of money into our own industry, through the military system and through Sematech, a government-industry consortium that was restricted to U.S. companies. Because of this large-scale state intervention, the U.S. did indeed regain control of the more sophisticated end of the microprocessor market.

Japan then announced it was starting up a new government-industry consortium for semiconductors in an effort to compete. (Some U.S. corporations are to participate in Japan's projects in the new age that some business economists call "alliance capitalism.") Obviously, neither action had anything to do with the laws of the market.

The Mexican bailout is another example. The big investment firms in New York could have taken a beating if Mexico defaulted on its loans, or paid short-term loans in devalued pesos, as it was legally entitled to do. But they got the American public to guarantee their losses—as usual.

You can make as much money as you want, but if you get into trouble, it's the taxpayers' responsibility to fix things. Under capitalism, investment is supposed to be as risk-free as possible. No corporation wants free markets—what they want is power.

Another of the many areas where freedom and capitalism collide is what's laughably called *free trade.* About 40 percent of U.S. trade is estimated to be internal to individual corporations. If a U.S. auto manufacturer ships a part from Indiana to Illinois, that isn't called trade; if it ships the same part from Illinois to northern Mexico, it *is* called trade—it's considered an export when it leaves and an import when it comes back.

But that's nothing more than exploiting cheaper labor, avoiding environ-

mental regulations and playing games about where you pay your taxes. This sort of activity also accounts for similar or even higher proportions of trade in other industrial countries. Furthermore, strategic alliances among firms play an increasing role in administration of the global economy.

So talk about "the growth in world trade" is largely a joke. What's growing is complicated interactions among transnational corporations—centrally managed institutions that really amount to private command economies.

The hypocrisy is pervasive. For example, free-trade boosters also demand intellectual property rights [copyrights, patents, etc.] that are highly protectionist. The World Trade Organization's version of patents (which today's rich countries would never have accepted while they were gaining their place in the sun) is not only extremely harmful to developing countries economically, but also undermines innovation—in fact, that's what they're *designed* to do. They call it "free trade," but what it really does is concentrate power.

The big transnationals want to reduce freedom by undermining the democratic functioning of the states in which they're based, while at the same time ensuring the government will be powerful enough to protect and support them. That's the essence of what I sometimes call "really existing market theory."

If you look through the whole history of modern economic development, you find that—virtually without exception—advocates of "free markets" want them applied to the poor and the middle-class but not to themselves. The government subsidizes corporations' costs, protects them from market risks and lets them keep the profits.

DB:] Can I smoke here in your office? If you deny me that, are you limiting my freedom?

[NC:] I'm limiting your freedom but I'm increasing my rights. If you smoke in my office, it increases my chances of dying. Any effort to create a more human existence is going to inhibit somebody's freedom. If a kid crosses the street in front of me when I have a red light, that inhibits my freedom to run him over and get to work faster.

Public schools are another example. People who don't have children still have to pay school taxes, because we have a common feeling that it's good for our society if children are educated. Whether we personally have kids isn't relevant.

The most fanatic advocates of private despotism (who actually want to undermine freedom and democracy) naturally use nice words like *freedom.* What they really mean is that we have to have tyranny and a powerful state to ensure it. Just look at what they propose.

The Heritage Foundation, for instance, is full of talk about big philosophical issues, minimizing the state and so on, but they want to raise the Pentagon budget, because it's the major pipeline for public subsidy to high-tech industries. That's a hard line to defend, but as long as there isn't much in the way of intelligent public debate, they can get away with it.

The most extreme types, like Murray Rothbard, are at least honest. They'd like to eliminate highway taxes because they force you to pay for a road you may never drive on. As an alternative, they suggest that if you and I want

to get somewhere, we should build a road there and then charge people tolls to go on it.

Just try generalizing that. Such a society couldn't survive, and even if it could, it would be so full of terror and hate that any human being would prefer to live in hell.

In any case, it's ridiculous to talk about freedom in a society dominated by huge corporations. What kind of freedom is there inside a corporation? They're totalitarian institutions—you take orders from above and maybe give them to people below you. There's about as much freedom as under Stalinism. Whatever rights workers have are guaranteed by the limited public authority that still exists.

When enormous, private, tyrannical institutions are granted the same rights as—or more rights than—human beings, freedom becomes something of a joke. The solution isn't to undermine freedom—it's to undermine the private tyrannies.

[DB:] In Boulder [Colorado], where I live, an ordinance banning smoking in restaurants was put on the ballot. There was an enormous, well-funded campaign against it. Some city council members were threatened, and their actions were described as "fascist" and "Nazi-like." All in the name of freedom.

[NC:] There's nothing new about that. In the past, the line was that Philip Morris has to be free to get twelve-year-old kids to smoke, and the kids' mothers are free to prevent them from smoking. Of course, Philip Morris has greater resources, and therefore more persuasive power, than thousands of parents and hundreds of city councils, but that was supposed to be irrelevant.

There was a funny coincidence a while back. The *New York Times* ran an op-ed by a senior fellow of the Hoover Institute about the "profound philosophical differences" that separate liberals and conservatives. The liberals want to see social policy administered at the federal level, while "conservatives prefer to transfer power to the states, in the belief that policies should be made closer to the people."

The same day, the *Wall Street Journal* ran a story headlined "What Fidelity Wants It Usually Gets, And It Wants Massachusetts Tax Cut." It opened by stating that "when Fidelity Investments talks, Massachusetts listens"—or else.

Massachusetts listens, the article explains, because Fidelity is one of the biggest firms in the state and can easily shift operations across the border to Rhode Island. That was exactly what it was threatening to do unless Massachusetts granted it "tax relief"—a subsidy, in effect, since "the people" pay more taxes to compensate for it. (New York recently had to do the same, when major financial firms threatened to move to New Jersey.) Massachusetts granted Fidelity the "relief".

A few months earlier, Raytheon had demanded tax and utility rate relief, perhaps to compensate for the fact that its shares had only about tripled in value in the past four years, while dividends per share rose 25 percent as well. The report on the business pages raised the (rhetorical) question whether Raytheon "is asking for tax dollars with one hand while passing money to shareholders with the other."

Again, Massachusetts listened to the threat to transfer out of state. Legislators had planned a big tax break for

Massachusetts businesses generally, but restricted it to Raytheon and other "defense contractors."

It's an old story. Until the late nineteenth century, corporations were limited to functions explicitly determined by the state charters. That requirement effectively disappeared when New Jersey offered to drop it. Corporations began incorporating in New Jersey instead of New York, thus forcing New York to also drop the requirement and setting off a "race to the bottom."

The result was a substantial increase in the power of private tyrannies, providing them with new weapons to undermine liberty and human rights, and to administer markets in their own interest. The logic is the same when GM decides to invest in Poland, or when Daimler-Benz transfers production from Germany, where labor is highly paid, to Alabama, where it isn't.

By playing Alabama off against another competitor, North Carolina, Daimler-Benz received subsidies, protected markets and risk protection from "the people." (Smaller corporations can get into the act too, when states are forced to compete to bribe the powerful.)

Of course, it's far easier to play this game with states than countries. For Fidelity to move to Rhode Island, and for Raytheon to move to Tennessee, is no major problem—and Massachusetts knows it. Transferring operations overseas would be rather more difficult.

"Conservatives" are surely intelligent enough to understand that shifting decisions to the state level does not transfer power to "the people" but to those powerful enough to ask for subsidies with one hand and pocket them with the other. That's the "profound philosophical principle" that underlies the efforts of "conservatives" to shift power to the states.

There are still some defenses at the federal level, which is why it's been made the enemy (but not, of course, the parts that funnel money to large corporations—like the Pentagon, whose budget is going up, over the objections of more than 80% of the people).

According to a poll reported in the *Washington Post,* an enormous number of people think anything the federal government does is bad—except for the military, which we need (of course) to counter grave threats to U.S. security. (Even so, people didn't want the military budget increased, as Clinton, Gingrich and the others proceeded to do.) *What could explain this?* the *Post* wondered.

Could it be fifty years of intense corporate propaganda, in the media and elsewhere, that have been trying to direct people's fear, anger and hatred against the government and make *private* power invisible to them? That isn't suggested as a reason. It's just a mystery why people have these strange ideas.

But there's no question they have them. When somebody wants to vent his anger at the fact that his life is falling apart, he's more likely to put a bomb in a federal building than in a corporate headquarters.

There are plenty of things wrong with government, but this propaganda opposes what's *right* with it—namely, that it's the one defense people have against private tyrannies.

[DB:] To come back to the Boulder situation, is it an example of what you call "anti-politics"?

[NC:] It's an example of opposition to democracy. It means that people shouldn't have a right to get together and democratically decide how they want to live.

[DB:] You've frequently made the point that while corporate executives are getting everything they want on a silver platter, they're very leery of the far right, because they want to make sure their daughters continue to have access to abortion. But their daughters had access to abortions before Roe vs. Wade.

[NC:] The executives don't want to have to do it secretly, and get involved in criminal activity. They want their wives and daughters to have normal freedoms and they want to live in a civilized society, not one in the grips of religious fundamentalism, where people around them think the world was created a couple of thousand years ago.

Another thing that worries them about this ultra-right tendency is that there's a populist streak in it. There's a lot of opposition to "bigness"—not just big government but big business too. The right wing doesn't see the point of things like funding for science, but business does, because it creates the technology and knowledge they'll exploit in the future.

Corporate executives also don't particularly like the idea of dismantling international institutions like the United Nations, or eliminating what's called foreign aid. They need those institutions, and they want them around. The jingoist, narrow-minded fanaticism that gave them deregulation, tort reform and the cutback of social services has another side to it, and they're definitely concerned about it.

. . .

[DB:] You're often introduced as someone who speaks truth to power, but I believe you take issue with that Quaker slogan.

[NC:] The Quakers you're referring to are very honest and decent, and some of the most courageous people I've ever known. We've been through a lot together, gone to jail together, and we're friends. But—as I've told them plenty of times—I don't like that slogan.

Speaking truth to power makes no sense. There's no point in speaking the truth to Henry Kissinger—he knows it already. Instead, speak truth to the *powerless*—or, better *with* the powerless. Then they'll *act* to dismantle illegitimate power.

[DB:] A Canadian journal called *Outlook* ran an article on the talk you gave in Vancouver. It concluded with quotes from people leaving the hall: *Well, he certainly left me depressed.* And: *I'm more upset than I was before I came.* And on and on. Is there any way to change that?

[NC:] I've heard that a lot, and I understand why. I feel that it's none of my business to tell people what they ought to do—that's for them to figure out. I don't even know what *I* ought to do.

So I just try to describe as best I can what I think is happening. When you look at that, it's not very pretty, and if you extrapolate it into the future, it's very ugly.

But the point is—and it's my fault if I don't make this clear—*it's not inevitable.* The future can be changed. But we can't change things unless we at least begin to understand them.

We've had plenty of successes; they're cumulative, and they lead us to new peaks to climb. We've also had plenty of failures. Nobody ever said it was going to be easy.