

Chomsky and Russell Revisited

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DRAFT—Comments Welcome

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In 1916, an anonymously written leaflet entitled *Two Years Hard Labour for Not Disobeying the Dictates of Conscience* was published in the UK. The leaflet told the story of Ernest Everett, a pacifist denied exemption from military service and court-martialed for his refusal to serve. The British government arrested several people for distributing this leaflet. Soon thereafter, a letter appeared in the *London Times* entitled *Adsum qui Feci*,” which roughly translates as, “Here I am, I did it” (Perkins 2002, pp. 65-6). The letter’s author identified himself as the author of the leaflet, and in effect challenged the authorities—if you’re going after the distributors of that leaflet, come after me. The author of the letter was Bertrand Russell. For taking this courageous stand, Russell was prosecuted and fined £100.

In September 2001, Turkey’s Aram Publishing Company put out a collection of translated essays by renowned linguist and political analyst Noam Chomsky. In one of the essays, Chomsky criticized the Turkish government for its treatment of its Kurdish minority. “The Kurds,” Chomsky argued, “have been miserably oppressed throughout the whole history of the modern Turkish state,” a condition that worsened considerably in 1984, when “the Turkish government launched a major war in the Southeast against the Kurdish population” (Chomsky 2001). By November, the Turkish government had charged the Istanbul-based publishing house’s director, Fatih Tas, with publishing “propaganda

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against the indivisible unity of the country, nation, and State of the Republic of Turkey” (World Association of Newspapers and News Publishers 2002). When the publisher appeared in court the following February for his trial, he was accompanied by—Noam Chomsky. Chomsky had flown to Turkey to be present at the trial. He argued before the court that he had written the remarks that generated the criminal charges, and so if the publisher of those remarks was facing trial, then so should he. The prosecution declined to press charges against Chomsky, and was embarrassed into dropping the charges against the publisher, who had been facing a one-year prison sentence (BBC News 2002; Bowcott 2002).

Chomsky’s stance in support of Fatih Tas clearly has much in common with Russell’s earlier stance in support of the antiwar activists who distributed his leaflet. Both Russell and Chomsky are deeply committed to justice. Both men have expressed this commitment vigorously throughout their long lives. (Russell died at the age of 97; Chomsky remains active at 91.) Moreover, they are not content to express this commitment only in costless ways. In particular, they are not willing to allow others struggling for justice to pay the price for this struggle while they remain unaffected. Rather, they have done whatever they could to stand in solidarity with those paying the price for justice, and if that stand can provide some measure of protection to those less privileged than themselves, so much the better.

The connection between Chomsky and Russell, however, is much more than one of simple similarity. Chomsky has long admired Russell, both for his intellectual achievements and for his political crusading. For years, a poster of Russell hung in Chomsky’s office at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, where Chomsky spent

virtually all of his professional career (Achbar, ed. 1994, p. 17). And Chomsky's respect for Russell has not gone unnoticed; it led the Bertrand Russell Society to offer Chomsky Honorary Membership, an honor Chomsky has now held for almost 25 years.¹

In light of all this, it makes sense to compare Russell and Chomsky, in hopes that the work of each may shed light on the other. There are many angles from which one could conduct such a comparison. Both men, for example, worked on many of the same political causes. Both actively opposed the Vietnam War (Russell 1967; Chomsky 1969, 2005a). Both have also been deeply concerned about the Israeli occupation of the West Bank, a cause which exercises Chomsky to this day (Chomsky 1974, 1999).² One could therefore compare their respective contributions to these causes. One could also consider causes on which Russell and Chomsky took contrasting positions. Russell, for example, helped create the Who Killed Kennedy Committee, which questioned the Warren Commission's investigation of John F. Kennedy's assassination. Chomsky, by contrast, takes no position on the various conspiracy theories regarding the Kennedy assassination; rather, he questions the importance of such theorizing, denying that the assassination had any deep and lasting impact upon U.S. foreign or domestic policy (Chomsky 1993).³ And one could certainly consider their respective polemical contributions to various intellectual debates. One could, for example, compare Russell's critique of Nietzsche with Chomsky's critique

¹ The Bylaws of the Bertrand Russell Society state that honorary membership may be offered, among other reasons, to someone who, "has acted in support of a cause or idea that Russell championed" or "exhibited qualities of character (such as moral courage) reminiscent of Russell (Bertrand Russell Society 2019). Chomsky undoubtedly meets both criteria.

² Russell's last public statement was a condemnation of Israel's occupation of the territories it had seized during the 1967 Six-Day War. The statement was read at a conference on February 3, 1960—the day after Russell's death (Perkins, ed. 2002).

³ Chomsky denies, for example, that the Vietnam War might have ended earlier if Kennedy had lived. It is a position he tenaciously defends to this day. Witness, for example, his exchange on the subject with James K. Galbraith in the *Boston Review* (Galbraith 2003; Chomsky and Galbraith 2003).

of Foucault (Russell 1972, ch. XXV; Russell 1994; Chomsky and Foucault 2006). One could even examine the various graphic novels that have been written about both men (Cogswell 1996; Maher and Groves 1997; Robinson and Groves 1998; Doxiadis and Papadimitriou 2009; Wilson 2018).⁴

In this essay, I take a different approach. I consider the status of Russell and Chomsky as public intellectuals. This, I will argue, is a natural approach to take. Both Chomsky and Russell are leading intellectuals who earned their reputations through their work in highly technical fields. Both became radical critics of the existing social order, and made use of their professional reputations to help get their criticisms before a wider audience. But as a result, both Chomsky and Russell have had to face the accusation that they are nosing around in areas outside their areas of expertise.⁵ Why should their criticisms be regarded as anything but mere carping? Is there something more to their ideas than that? In short, Russell and Chomsky may be highly successful public intellectuals, but do they *deserve* to be? Do they offer something of deep and lasting interest to the general public? And if so, what can be said about the nature of their respective contributions?

To answer this question, I shall examine three of Chomsky's books—*Problems of Knowledge and Freedom* (2003), *Chomsky on Anarchism* (2005), and *Government in Our Future* (2005). *Problems of Knowledge and Freedom* (hereafter *PKF*) is based on the first set of Russell Lectures, which Chomsky delivered at Cambridge University a year after Russell's death. It was originally published by Pantheon Books in 1971. *Chomsky on Anarchism* (hereafter *CA*) is a collection of Chomsky's essays and interviews. The

⁴ I examine one of these graphic novels, which tells the story of Russell's co-authorship of *Principia Mathematica* (Doxiadis and Papadimitriou 2009), in Stone (2016).

⁵ See, e.g., Johnson (1988) and Posner (2003). For critiques of Johnson, see Griffin (1990-1991) and Hitchens (1993). For a critique of Posner, see Jacoby (2002).

collection was selected and edited by Barry Pateman, Associate Editor of the Emma Goldman Papers, who also introduces the work. The collection includes both well-known classic pieces by Chomsky (e.g., “Language and Freedom,” “Notes on Anarchism”) and more recent and lesser-known pieces (e.g., “Interview with Barry Pateman,” “Interview with Ziga Vodovnik”).⁶ *Government in Our Future* (hereafter *GF*) is based on a talk given at the Poetry Center in New York City on February 16, 1970. The book contains the complete transcript of the lecture.⁷ Together, these books shed a great deal of light as to how Chomsky approaches his task as public intellectual. I shall thus examine Chomsky’s approach, as illustrated in these three books, and then compare it with that of Russell.

In these three works, Chomsky displays a keen awareness of what meaningful social criticism, as opposed to mere carping, requires. “Social action,” he writes,

must be animated by a vision of a future society, and by explicit judgments of value concerning the character of this future society. These judgments must derive from some concept of the nature of man, and one may seek empirical foundations by investigating man’s nature as it is revealed by his behavior and his creations, material, intellectual, and social (*CA*, pp. 113-114).

Social criticism—or, for that matter, a defense of the status quo, or any kind of social action in between—thus rests ultimately upon some conception of human nature, a conception that “is usually tacit and inchoate, but it is always there, perhaps implicitly, whether one chooses to leave things as they are and cultivate one’s garden, or to work for small changes,

⁶ This work should not be confused with the book *On Anarchism* (2014), a different collection of Chomsky’s writings, although there is some overlap between the two works.

⁷ For many years, the lecture was offered for sale on audio cassette in the Audio-Forum series offered by Jeffrey Norton Publishers (Madison, CT). The lecture has also been published by Seven Stories Press in its Open Media Series (2005), and the text can be downloaded for free at <https://libcom.org/library/government-future-noam-chomsky>. The original lecture can be heard (audio only) at numerous places on the web, e.g., <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5uagjAtit7E>.

or for revolutionary ones” (CA, p. 190; see also pp. 5-6). It is the development of a meaningful and defensible account of human nature—and through it the development of a compelling social vision—that distinguishes positive social criticism from merely negative hectoring.⁸

In all three of the books under consideration here, Chomsky lays out his vision of a better society along with the conception of human nature that he believes underlies it. The most concise statement of both the vision and the conception appears in *Government in Our Future*. In this book, Chomsky contrasts four visions of what government in the future might look like—classical liberal, libertarian socialist, state socialist, and state capitalist. The fourth of these is represented by the American political system of the 1960s, a considerably more enlightened time in American politics. The third of these, of course, is represented by the Soviet Union and its allies and satellites. Chomsky spends little time on these two visions except as foils for the other two, which attract considerably more of his attention and provide the focus for the book.

The classical liberal vision “asserts as its major idea an opposition to all but the most restricted and minimal forms of state intervention in personal and social life.” This is essentially the well-known vision of the *laissez faire* state, widely associated today with libertarian capitalism. This vision, Chomsky notes, is “quite familiar” today, but “the reasoning that leads to it is less familiar and I think a good deal more important than the conclusion itself” (GF, p. 9). The libertarian socialist agrees with the classical liberal that

⁸ This position is accepted by many thoughtful individuals who would otherwise not agree much with either Russell or Chomsky. Consider the following quote from Jacques Derrida: “I cannot conceive of a radical critique which would not be ultimately motivated by some sort of affirmation, acknowledged or not” (Derrida 1984, p. 118). Derrida’s approach, which Chomsky has dismissed as “infantile and ridiculous,” could not be further from Chomsky’s own (quoted in Rai 1995, p. 206 n. 49).

“the functions of the state are repressive and that state action must be limited,” but goes considerably further:

The libertarian socialist goes on to insist that state power must be eliminated in favor of democratic organization of industrial society, with direct popular control over all institutions by those who participate in—as well as those who are directly affected by—the workings of these institutions. So one might imagine a system of workers’ councils, consumers’ councils, commune assemblies, regional federations, and so on, with the kind of representation that’s direct and revocable, in the sense that representatives are directly answerable to and return directly to the well-defined and integrated social group for which they speak in some higher order organization—something obviously very different than our system of representation (*ibid.*, pp. 35-36).

Such a system is socialist in its demand for democratic⁹ control of the economy, but libertarian in its refusal to entrust that control to any entity separate from those participating in that economy.¹⁰

The core of Chomsky’s argument regarding these four visions is twofold. First, the classical liberal and libertarian socialist visions share the same basic conception of human nature, with libertarian socialism doing the most justice to that conception in complex and

⁹ Elsewhere, Chomsky speaks of the need for the democratization of social relations more generally:

My feeling is that any interaction among human beings that is more than personal—meaning that takes institutional forms of one kind or another—in community, or workplace, family, larger society, whatever it may be, should be under direct control of its participants. So that would mean workers’ councils in industry, popular democracy in communities, interaction between them, free associations in larger groups, up to organization of international society (*CA*, p. 238).

¹⁰ For Chomsky, according to Joshua Cohen and Joel Rogers, “the ‘statelessness’ of society is achieved neither by the abolition of coercion (the coercion-free system), nor by the multiplication of its authoritative dispensers (the dispersed-coercion system), but by the transcendence of the traditional division of labor in governance between specialized political institutions that rule, and the rest of a society subject to their rule” (Cohen and Rogers 1991, p. 13).

technologically advanced societies such as our own. Second, the state socialist and state capitalist visions—represented by Russian revolutionary V.I. Lenin in the first case and U.S. Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara in the second—share fundamentally the same conception of human nature, a conception that is markedly inferior to, and less inspiring than, the conception underling libertarian socialism.

The conception of human nature that Chomsky sees underlying both classical liberalism and libertarian socialism is complex. Human beings have a natural need to control their own lives, an “instinct for freedom,” as Bakunin famously put it (quoted in *CA*, p. 155). This need expresses itself individually, through the need for meaningful work, and collectively, through the need for democratic association. Or, as Chomsky puts it elsewhere, there is a “fundamental human need...for spontaneous initiative, creative work, solidarity, [and] pursuit of social justice (Chomsky 1987, p. 155; see also Marshall 1990-1991, pp. 7-8). Healthy people leading healthy lives are free people, and free people both engage in creative work and relate to each other as equals. People are not free to the extent that they must obey the orders of others; when people relate to one another as master and servant, especially in the workplace, they are both alienated from their powers of creativity and denied the meaningful connection with others that democracy makes possible.

Chomsky assumes that both the individual need for meaningful work and the collective need for democratic association travel together, that both can be usefully subsumed under a single “instinct for freedom.” This claim is not obvious; one can imagine, for example, an artist who expresses herself masterfully through her work but without any meaningful connection with others. But it is certainly true that many institutions frustrate both needs at once—witness the soul-deadening jobs within many

corporate workplaces¹¹—and so it is certainly reasonable to search for institutions that can satisfy both needs at once.

Before moving on, it should be noted that Chomsky does not claim to have proof that human beings have the instinct for freedom he attributes to them. He does, as we will see, believe that human beings clearly have some creative powers, and that any satisfactory conception of human nature must be able to defend them. But a truly scientific understanding of human nature—one adequate to provide conclusive foundations for politics—is far beyond us, and may always be so. Social criticism, of course, cannot wait around for such a scientific understanding, and so all of us have to make do with the most compelling conception of human nature we can devise here and now (Cohen and Rogers 1991, p. 6). It is in that spirit that Chomsky presents to us the classical liberal/libertarian socialist instinct for freedom.

To derive a vision of modern society from this conception of human nature requires some understanding of how society works, of how people acting in accordance with the conception will be affected by different forms of social organization. Here, Chomsky argues, classical liberalism did not so much go wrong as become outdated; social conditions changed, and with them changed the nature of the fundamental threat to human freedom. In days gone by, state power could reasonably be described as the gravest threat; in the modern era, private power poses just as big a threat, if not a bigger one. The classical liberal vision is thus antiquated, and requires updating. Chomsky's argument on this point is worth quoting at some length:

¹¹ On the tyrannical nature of modern workplaces, see Anderson (2017).

To summarize, the first concept of the state that I want to establish as a point of reference is classical liberalism. Its doctrine is that state functions should be drastically limited. But this familiar characterization is a very superficial one. More deeply, the 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. At least in its ideal form, classical liberal thought is opposed to the concepts of possessive individualism, that are intrinsic to capitalist ideology. For this reason, classical liberal thought seeks to eliminate social fetters and replace them with social bonds, and not with competitive greed, predatory individualism, and not, of course, with corporate empires—state or private.

“Classical libertarian thought seems to me,” he concludes, “to lead directly to libertarian socialism, or anarchism if you like, when combined with an understanding of industrial capitalism (pp. 22-23; see also *CA*, p. 149).¹²

The collection *Chomsky on Anarchism* covers much of the same ground as *Government in the Future*. It does, however, stress two other points that are worth noting here. Both are implicit in *Government in the Future* but receive fuller expression in the later collection (alongside some of the social critique for which Chomsky is so well-known,

¹² Cf. Joshua Cohen and Joel Rogers, who take Chomsky’s social and political thought to be marked by the following two claims “(1) human beings have a ‘moral nature’ and a fundamental interest in autonomy; (2) these basic features of our nature support a libertarian socialist social ideal.” They point out that Chomsky derives the following two further claims from them: “(3) the interest in autonomy and the moral nature of human beings help to explain certain important features of actual social systems, including for example the use of deception and force to sustain unjust conditions, as well as their historical evolution; and (4) these same features of human nature provide reasons for hope that the terms of social order will improve from a moral point of view” (Cohen and Rogers 1991, p. 6).

most notably in his classic essay “Ideology and Liberal Scholarship”). First, Chomsky’s argument depends on the assumption that human nature is not a *tabula rasa*, that is has certain fixed features that it brings to the table in interacting with the world. Second, the state and capitalism are not the only threats posed today to human freedom. Indeed, it is impossible to compile a list of possible threats that will be valid and relevant for all time. Rather, the conception of human nature that he endorses prescribes a method for formulating social vision, the results of which will change as social conditions change and as social knowledge advances. Chomsky relates both points together as follows:

Looked at in this way, the empty organism view is conservative, in that it tends to legitimate structures of hierarchy and domination. At least in its Humboldtian version [Chomsky relies heavily on Wilhelm von Humboldt’s work, especially his book *The Limits of State Action* (1993)], the classical liberal view, with its strong innatist roots, is radical in that, consistently pursued, it challenges the legitimacy of established coercive institutions. Such institutions face a heavy burden of proof: it must be shown that under existing conditions, perhaps because of some overriding consideration of deprivation or threat, some form of authority, hierarchy, and domination is justified, despite the prima facie case against it—a burden that can rarely be met. One can understand why there is such a persistent attack on Enlightenment ideals, with their fundamentally subversive content (CA, p. 174; see also CA, pp. 178, 192; Cohen and Rogers 1991, p. 11).

The innatist view of human nature that Chomsky endorses has the implication that all threats of human freedom ought to be challenged and, if conditions permit, overcome.

Note that while in *Government in the Future* Chomsky more or less uses the terms “anarchism” and “libertarian socialism” interchangeably, in *Chomsky on Anarchism* he tends to restrict the latter to the specific social vision (especially the economic part) he has in mind for modern societies, while reserving the former term for the general method of challenging threats to human freedom that he recommends. Chomsky is thus both an anarchist and a libertarian socialist; the latter commitment depends heavily on his understanding of social conditions, whereas the former commitment depends only on his conception of human nature itself.

For Chomsky, then, human freedom—understood in terms of the anarchist vision of human nature—faces an open-ended list of potential threats. Different threats will prove more pressing at different times and places; indeed, at any given time and place, there will no doubt be threats that go unrecognized. In Chomsky’s words,

One might...argue...that at every stage of history our concern must be to dismantle those forms of authority and oppression that survive from an era when they might have been justified in terms of the need for security of survival or economic development, but that now contribute to—rather than alleviate—material and cultural deficit. If so, there will be no doctrine of social change fixed for the present and future, nor even, necessarily, a specific and unchanging concept of the goals towards which social change should tend (CA, pp. 118-119).

The open-ended list of potential threats to human freedom does not obviate the need for a vision of a better world to undergird social critique. Because of that need, “at a particular time there is every reason to develop, insofar as our understanding permits, a specific realization of this definite trend in the historic development of mankind, appropriate to the

tasks of the moment” (*ibid.*, p. 119)—to develop, in other words, the best picture one can of what a truly free society would look like, and to critique existing societies when they fail to realize the ideals underlying this picture.

According, to Chomsky, then, the defender of human freedom must be prepared to confront different threats at different times, all in the name of a vision of society in which those threats have been overcome. That vision is never set in stone, but evolves alongside the society which is to be judged by it. This fact has implications that Chomsky readily admits but that may seem counterintuitive from an anarchist perspective. Both the political and the economic system, for example, may pose threats to human freedom. In the present day and age, the former may represent the best way of containing the abuses of the latter. And so even an anarchist who ultimately wishes the dissolution of the state may oppose efforts to weaken the state here and now. Social welfare measures, health and safety measures, and environmental protections not only help weak and vulnerable people now; they also place those people in a stronger position to fight for a better deal in the future. Chomsky defends this position, and refers to it (borrowing a line from the Argentinian labor movement) as “expanding the floor of the cage” (Chomsky 1997; see also Mitchell and Schoeffel 2002, pp. 344-346). Only a simple-minded form of libertarianism, according to Chomsky, automatically equates less government with better government.¹³

How similar is Chomsky’s social critique to that of Russell? And to what extent do they share the same conception of human nature? The answer to both questions is complicated, as can be gleaned from studying what Chomsky has to say about Russell.

¹³ Chomsky’s low opinion of libertarian capitalism is well-known (see, e.g., Mitchell and Schoeffel, eds. 2002, p. 200). Note, however, that Chomsky’s position on “expanding the floor of the cage” far from universally held among self-professed anarchists. Indeed, his position has led some anarchists to deny that Chomsky qualifies as an anarchist (Marshall 1990-1991, p. 2). See Stone (2014) on the controversy.

Chomsky greatly admires Russell, and discusses his ideas frequently (see, e.g., *CA*, pp. 156, 194-195, 205). “To several generations, mine among them,” he writes, “Russell has been an inspiring figure, in the problems he posed and the causes he championed, in his insights as well as what is left unfinished” (*PKF*, p. x). It is his concern with what Russell has left unfinished, or unsatisfactorily resolved, that motivates what Chomsky has to say about Russell. Chomsky does not approach Russell as an intellectual historian, determined to capture precisely what Russell had in mind. Rather, he approaches Russell as a source for intellectual inspiration, for ideas that may be of use in formulating his own positions.¹⁴ Thus, the similarities between Chomsky’s and Russell’s ideas about human nature and social vision are there, but the differences are there as well.

Chomsky conducts his most systematic engagement with Russell’s thought in his book *Problems of Knowledge and Freedom*. Based on the first set of Russell Lectures, which Chomsky delivered at Cambridge University a year after Russell’s death, this book takes up the mature Russell’s views on knowledge and freedom, with an eye to their relevance to contemporary concerns. While one of the lectures was devoted to questions of knowledge, and the other was devoted to questions of freedom, Chomsky perceives in Russell’s writings on the two topics some unifying threads (*PKF*, pp. x-xi). Chomsky draws out these threads, which not coincidentally relate Russell’s conception of human nature and his social ideals to Chomsky’s own.

¹⁴ Chomsky takes this approach to the writings of others more generally. When it comes to the history of ideas, he describes himself as more of an “art lover” than an “art historian,” less concerned with purity of tradition than with intellectual fruitfulness (Marshall 1990-1991, p. 3). More than most anarchists, for example, he has been happy to borrow liberally from a number of Marxist writers, notably Rosa Luxemburg and Anton Pannekoek. An interview with him thus appears in the recent republication of Pannekoek’s *Workers Councils* (2003). Indeed, even with respect to anarchism he is content to describe himself as less of an “anarchist thinker” than a “derivative fellow traveler” (*CA*, p. 135).

Chomsky sees the mature Russell¹⁵ as recognizing that pure empiricism alone could not account for the knowledge human beings obtain. Both prescientific knowledge, the knowledge people obtain naturally without scientific reflection, and the philosophical study of the relationship between knowledge and experience, suggest that there must be specific fixed cognitive mechanisms that influence knowledge acquisition. It cannot just be bald induction from experience plus generalized reasoning capacity, not least because the principle of induction itself, which is necessary to derive *anything* from experience, seems hard to ground in reason alone. In Russell's words, "Either, therefore, we know something independently of experience, or science is moonshine" (quoted in *PKF*, p. 4). Chomsky believes that this insight suggested the existence of a human nature, with certain fixed capacities that it used to derive working knowledge from a relatively information-poor environment (although he concedes that Russell might not have agreed with him on this).¹⁶ Chomsky sees his own work on the nature of human language as providing insight into how one particular human capacity works; this insight might be used as a starting point for the study of other, less accessible human cognitive systems.

This view of human nature as having certain fixed capacities that determine how we are capable of interacting with the world has certain implications. It suggests, for example, that there might be limits to the kinds of knowledge that human beings can have. "We might say," Chomsky writes,

¹⁵ Chomsky takes Russell's *Human Knowledge: Its Scope and Limits* (1948) as representative of Russell's final position on questions of epistemology, and relies heavily on this work in describing Russell's mature position on questions of knowledge.

¹⁶ Chomsky quotes Russell as inquiring, "how comes it that human beings, whose contacts with the world are brief and personal and limited, are nevertheless able to know as much as they know" (quoted in *PKF*, p. 47). Chomsky subsequently dubs this question "Plato's problem" (Chomsky 1986).

that our mental constitution permits us to arrive at knowledge of the world insofar as our innate capacity to create theories happens to match some aspect of the structure of the world. By exploring various faculties of the mind, we might, in principle, come to understand what theories are more readily accessible to us than others, or what potential theories are accessible to us at all, what forms of scientific knowledge can be attained, if the world is kind enough to have the required properties. Where it is not, we may be able to develop a kind of “intellectual technology”—say, a technique of prediction that will, for some reason, work within limits—but not to attain what might properly be called scientific understanding or common-sense knowledge (*PKF*, p. 20).

There might, for example, be languages that from a purely logical standpoint do not seem more demanding to learn than English, but that the cognitive capacities of humans do not allow them to “pick up” as easily as virtually every American or British child learns English. Similar constraints might apply to other, nonlinguistic knowledge systems.

While there are thus many potential philosophical implications of the rejection of the *tabula rasa*,¹⁷ it is the political implications that attract Chomsky’s attention most clearly in *Problems of Knowledge and Freedom*. Chomsky sees Russell’s admission of a fixed human nature, with certain definite capacities, as supportive of Russell’s political vision. The political ideals that Russell held, according to Chomsky, cannot be sustained if

¹⁷ One further philosophical implication worth noting is the potential reformulation of philosophical terms that this position might suggest. Thus, Chomsky suggests that the principles demonstrated by human knowledge patterns “are a priori for the species—they provide the framework for the interpretation of experience and the construction of specific forms of knowledge on the basis of experience—but are not necessary or even natural properties of all imaginable systems that might serve the functions of human language” (*PKF*, pp. 44-45; see also p. 31). Needless to say, this use of the term “a priori” departs from standard philosophical usage, which employs it to distinguish knowledge immediately accessible to any rational being whatsoever.

human beings are as malleable as the *tabula rasa* conception of human nature is accurate. Why demand that the political system be molded to fit human needs, if human beings can be molded to fit the political system? The recognition that human nature is richer than that is the necessary foundation for any social vision based on human freedom, something that both Russell and Chomsky tried to construct.

As for Russell's own social vision and conception of human nature, they are remarkably similar to Chomsky's own. With regard to the latter, Russell endorses the conception of human beings as free agents, beings whose natural development requires opportunities for both individual creativity and self-expression and egalitarian and democratic relationships with others. Chomsky describes this conception as "a humanistic conception of man, with due respect for man's intrinsic nature and the admirable form it might achieve" (*PKF*, p. 54). With regard to the former, Russell endorsed in such works as *Roads to Freedom* (1996) a form of social organization very much reminiscent of those advocated by anarchists such as Mikhail Bakunin and Peter Kropotkin. These two anarchist thinkers, writes Chomsky,

had in mind a highly organized form of society, but a society that was organized on the basis of organic units, organic communities. And generally they meant by that the workplace and the neighborhood, and from those two basic units there could derive through federal arrangements a highly integrated kind of social organization, which might be national or even international in scope (*CA*, p. 133).

The social vision offered by Russell as appropriate to the modern age—grounded in Russell's "humanistic conception of man"—turns out to be strikingly similar to the

libertarian socialism advocated by Chomsky, a social vision informed by a very similar conception of human nature.

Any attempt to assimilate Russell's political vision to that of Chomsky, however, must meet with two stumbling blocks. First, there is the matter of the rationalist model of human beings, in which people are born with certain cognitive abilities that do far more than simply compile data from the environment. Chomsky endorses this model, identifies elements of it in Russell, and links it to his vision of human beings as free creatures that require both creative self-expression and egalitarian social relations. But the link is not as clear as Chomsky would have it.¹⁸ Granted, a conception of human beings as totally malleable could not support a vision of a free society, or any other social vision for that matter. But the basic insight that people have inborn capacities of one sort or another could be developed in many different directions, some humane and enlightened, some not. It could be used, for example, to justify a patriarchal society on grounds that women are "built" differently than men, or a racist society on grounds that the white race is "naturally" superior to other races. (Needless to say, these are not hypothetical scenarios.)¹⁹ Indeed, the unenlightened uses of the idea of a fixed human nature throughout history have arguably outnumbered the enlightened ones. It was recognition of this fact, I suspect, that led Russell himself to perceive a relationship between empiricism (i.e., a conception of human nature that attributed much more to social environment than to inborn capacity) and

¹⁸ Others have questioned Chomsky's effort to derive enlightened political implications from rationalism, as well as nefarious implications from empiricism (e.g., Searle 1976; Williams 1976). More recently, Chris Knight has argued, from a Marxist perspective, that Chomsky's approach to language actively obstructs meaningful political activism (Knight 2016; see also Knight 2018a,b,c; 2019). Chomsky has strongly rejected Knight's argument (Chomsky 2019). For other responses to Knight, see Barsky (2016); Golumbia (2018); Harris (2018a,b); Levidow (2018); Newmayer (2018); Sperlich (2016, 2018); and Stone (2018).

¹⁹ Curiously, Chomsky has suggested there may be a relationship between *empiricism* and racism (Chomsky 1998, p. 130; see also Marshall 1990-1991, p. 9, n. 18).

liberal democracy (Russell 1950). This fact does not demolish Chomsky’s case, but it does suggest that the link between his philosophical work on language and the mind, and the conception of human nature Chomsky needs to sustain his libertarian socialism, is even more tentative than he may be ready to admit.²⁰

Second, there is the matter of anarchism. As noted before, Chomsky’s vision of the appropriate form of social organization for a modern industrial society is very similar to that advocated by Russell. But while Chomsky employs the term “anarchism” to describe his approach to social vision, Russell’s relationship to the term is ambiguous. On the one hand, Russell once described anarchism as “the ultimate ideal to which society should approximate” (cited in *PKF*, pp. 59-60; see also *CA*, p. 156). On the other hand, he perceived the social system he advocated—a decentralized, federated system of democratically-organized communities and workplaces—as an alternative to, and not an embodiment of, anarchism. He referred to this alternative, following G.D.H. Cole, as “guild socialism,” as Chomsky acknowledges (*PKF*, p. 60).

Why might Russell take this stance regarding anarchism? Perhaps because he saw it as dispensing with the state and leaving nothing in its place—no proper “political” organization at all. He therefore perceives guild socialism—a system in which both

²⁰ Chomsky is on firmer ground to link the possibility of creativity and self-expression with a mind fixed within certain limits. “The principles of mind,” Chomsky writes, provide the scope as well as the limits of human creativity. Without such principles, scientific understanding and creative acts would not be possible. If all hypotheses are initially on a par, then no scientific understanding can possibly be achieved, since there will be no way to select among the vast array of theories compatible with our limited evidence and, by hypothesis, equally accessible to the mind. One who abandons all forms, all conditions and constraints, and merely acts in some random and entirely willful manner is surely not engaged in artistic creation, whatever else he may be doing (*PKF*, pp. 49-50; see also Cohen and Rogers 1991, p. 7). A completely unconstrained mind would have difficulty creating or learning anything. For further discussion of the link between constraints (self-imposed or otherwise) and creative expression, see Elster (2000, ch. III).

workplaces and communities are organized—as superior to anarcho-syndicalism, which sees the need only for the former type of organization. But this may not be fair to anarchism, at least as Chomsky understands it. In a classic interview entitled “The Relevance of Anarcho-Syndicalism,” for example, Chomsky describes that system as follows:

Beginning with the two modes of immediate organization and control, namely organization and control in the workplace and in the community, one can imagine a network of workers’ councils, and at a higher level, representation across the factories, or across branches of industry, or across crafts, and on to general assemblies of workers’ councils that can be regional and national and international in character. And from another point of view one can project a system of governance that involves local assemblies—again federated regionally, dealing with regional issues, crossing crafts, industries, trades and so on, and again at the level of the nation or beyond, through federation and so on (*CA*, p. 137).

It is difficult, if not impossible, to distinguish between anarcho-syndicalism, as articulated here, and guild socialism, as articulated by Russell. The difference may be more or less terminological; still, Russell’s complex relationship to the word should make one pause before equating Russell’s political position with that of an avowed anarchist like Chomsky.²¹

²¹ To some extent, the word “socialism” played a role in Russell’s thought similar to that played in Chomsky’s thought by “anarchism”—designating less a particular social ideals and more an approach to formulating social ideals, an approach that must be informed by a proper understanding of social conditions. “Russell believed,” Chomsky writes, “that ‘socialism, like everything else that is vital, is rather a tendency than a strictly definable body of doctrine.’ It should, therefore, undergo constant change as society evolves” (*PKF*, p. 58). The parallel is not perfect, but it lends further credence to the idea that Chomsky and Russell simply understood (misunderstood?) anarchism in different ways.

Neither of these stumbling blocks, however, need prove fatal to Chomsky's endeavor. His goal, after all, is less to assimilate Russell's political position to his own than to identify political ideas in Russell's writings that may be of use to social critics today. These ideas have been developed by Chomsky in ways that would seem strange to Russell, and they certainly require further development in light of the questions and difficulties posed by them. In the end, however, these three books prove very instructive, and not simply for Chomsky fans. Anyone interested in understanding Russell the social critic would do well to consult these three books. In doing so, one might learn something about the ideals underlying Russell's social criticism. One might also learn something about which elements of those ideals might be worth preserving for use by today's social critics. And more than that, one will find a forceful defense of the importance of clearly articulated ideals to meaningful social criticism. And that is a lesson of which both Russell and Chomsky would approve.

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