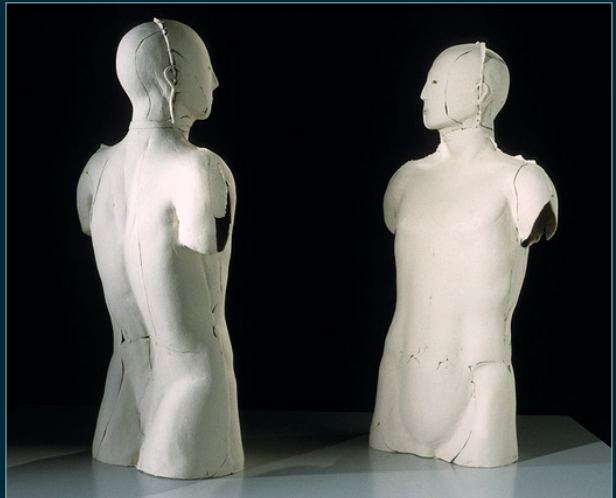


Günther Grewendorf [ed.]

Chomsky on State and Democracy

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Günther Grewendorf [ed.]

Chomsky on State and Democracy



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Editorial

Das Staatsverständnis hat sich im Laufe der Jahrhunderte immer wieder grundlegend gewandelt. Wir sind Zeugen einer Entwicklung, an deren Ende die Auflösung der uns bekannten Form des territorial definierten Nationalstaates zu stehen scheint. Denn die Globalisierung führt nicht nur zu ökonomischen und technischen Veränderungen, sondern sie hat vor allem auch Auswirkungen auf die Staatlichkeit. Ob die „Entgrenzung der Staatenwelt“ jemals zu einem Weltstaat führen wird, ist allerdings zweifelhaft. Umso interessanter sind die Theorien früherer und heutiger Staatsdenker, deren Modelle und Theorien, aber auch Utopien, uns Einblick in den Prozess der Entstehung und des Wandels von Staatsverständnissen geben.

Auf die Staatsideen von Platon und Aristoteles, auf denen alle Überlegungen über den Staat basieren, wird unter dem Leitthema „Wiederaneignung der Klassiker“ immer wieder zurückzukommen sein. Der Schwerpunkt der in der Reihe *Staatsverständnisse* veröffentlichten Arbeiten liegt allerdings auf den neuzeitlichen Ideen vom Staat. Dieses Spektrum reicht von dem Altmeister *Niccolò Machiavelli*, der wie kein Anderer den engen Zusammenhang zwischen Staatstheorie und Staatspraxis verkörpert, über *Thomas Hobbes*, den Vater des Leviathan, bis hin zu *Karl Marx*, den sicher einflussreichsten Staatsdenker der Neuzeit, und schließlich zu den zeitgenössischen Staatstheoretikern.

Nicht nur die Verfälschung der Marxschen Ideen zu einer marxistischen Ideologie, die einen repressiven Staatsapparat rechtfertigen sollte, macht deutlich, dass Theorie und Praxis des Staates nicht auf Dauer voneinander zu trennen sind. Auch die Verstrickung Carl Schmitts in die nationalsozialistischen Machenschaften, die heute sein Bild als führender Staatsdenker seiner Epoche trüben, weisen in diese Richtung. Auf eine Analyse moderner Staatspraxis kann daher in diesem Zusammenhang nicht verzichtet werden.

Was ergibt sich daraus für ein zeitgemäßes Verständnis des Staates im Sinne einer modernen Staatswissenschaft? Die Reihe *Staatsverständnisse* richtet sich mit dieser Fragestellung nicht nur an (politische) Philosophen und Philosophinnen, sondern auch an Geistes- und Sozialwissenschaftler bzw. -wissenschaftlerinnen. In den Beiträgen wird daher zum einen der Anschluss an den allgemeinen Diskurs hergestellt, zum anderen werden die wissenschaftlichen Erkenntnisse in klarer und aussagekräftiger Sprache – mit dem Mut zur Pointierung – vorgetragen. Auf diese Weise wird der Leser/die Leserin direkt mit dem Problem konfrontiert, den Staat zu verstehen.

Prof. Dr. Rüdiger Voigt

Editorial – Understanding the State

Throughout the course of history, our understanding of the state has fundamentally changed time and again. It appears as though we are witnessing a development which will culminate in the dissolution of the territorially defined nation state as we know it, for globalisation is not only leading to changes in the economy and technology, but also, and above all, affects statehood. It is doubtful, however, whether the erosion of borders worldwide will lead to a global state, but what is perhaps of greater interest are the ideas of state theorists, whose models, theories and utopias offer us an insight into how different understandings of the state have emerged and changed, processes which neither began with globalisation, nor will end with it.

When researchers concentrate on reappropriating traditional ideas about the state, it is inevitable that they will continuously return to those of Plato and Aristotle, upon which all reflections on the state are based. However, the works published in this series focus on more contemporary ideas about the state, whose spectrum ranges from those of the doyen *Niccolò Machiavelli*, who embodies the close connection between the theory and practice of the state more than any other thinker, to those of *Thomas Hobbes*, the creator of *Leviathan*, those of *Karl Marx*, who is without doubt the most influential modern state theorist, those of the Weimar state theorists *Carl Schmitt*, *Hans Kelsen* and *Hermann Heller*, and finally to those of contemporary theorists.

Not only does the corruption of Marx's ideas into a Marxist ideology intended to justify a repressive state underline the fact that state theory and practice cannot be permanently regarded as two separate entities, but so does Carl Schmitt's involvement in the manipulation conducted by the National Socialists, which today tarnishes his image as the leading state theorist of his era. Therefore, we cannot forego analysing modern state practice.

How does all this enable modern political science to develop a contemporary understanding of the state? This series of publications does not only address this question to (political) philosophers, but also, and above all, students of humanities and social sciences. The works it contains therefore acquaint the reader with the general debate, on the one hand, and present their research findings clearly and informatively, not to mention incisively and bluntly, on the other. In this way, the reader is ushered directly into the problem of understanding the state.

Prof. Dr. Rüdiger Voigt

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Introduction

Günther Grewendorf

Interview with Noam Chomsky on State and Democracy

(1)

Günther Grewendorf:

Your linguistic research led to revolutionary views on the nature of language, the properties of the human mind, and the uniqueness of human nature. Although you are rather cautious when it comes to the question of whether there is a connection between your linguistic studies and your political analyses, you do not completely deny that your political views on the notion of freedom, the role of the state and the function of democracy are closely related to your insights into the essence of human nature. In what way is your notion of state and democracy inspired by your linguistic ideas?

Noam Chomsky:

It's hard to disentangle. My general ideas on socioeconomic issues trace back to early childhood. I didn't start thinking seriously about linguistics until college, and soon began to regard my own developing ideas as a kind of private hobby. After a few years I began to find the hobby more interesting than prevailing conceptions. It's hard to miss the fact that ordinary language use is fundamentally creative in ways that go far beyond the standard notions of habit and analogy that were prevalent among linguists, let alone the behaviorist doctrines that were virtual dogma in the Cambridge environment that I entered in 1951. At that point the two domains – socioeconomic-political, linguistic-philosophical – began to intermingle, but I had no conscious awareness of interaction beyond that. Connections became more salient as I began to learn more about the history of these ideas, also a private hobby.

(2)

Günther Grewendorf:

In one of the “Barsamian Interviews” of 1988 (edited by Carlos Otero) you describe the state system as a “very artificial system” imposed on societies by force and economic and hegemonial interests and being unrelated to human needs. But you add that we “shouldn't expect it to be permanent”. As an alternative you advocate an anarchistic concept of the state in the sense of Bakunin's theory of state. Do you see

any tendency in the history of the world that artificial and autocratic states come to an end and are replaced by egalitarian social organisations of free human beings which allow the individuals to develop their creative potentials?

Noam Chomsky:

Seems to me a matter of more or less, not yes or no. It goes too far to say that states are “unrelated to human needs.” There has been a slow and uneven transition over time, not without regression, to social and political systems more influenced by popular pressures for more freedom and democracy. The ideal that you describe is approached in some social arrangements, but sporadically.

(3)

Günther Grewendorf:

Turning to the current situation and the role of the state in times of a worldwide catastrophe like the corona crisis. Despite numerous warnings the majority of states were not prepared for a pandemic like this. Instead of guaranteeing the health of the citizens by increasing the capacities of hospitals and intensive care units, providing medical infrastructure and health care systems, the state has strengthened the economy, supported the needs of corporations, lowered the costs of labor, encouraged globalized outsourcing of essential medical products like medicine, masks, respirators and protective suits. Now we find ourselves in the middle of an overwhelming catastrophe and have to face the failure of the state to take care of the health of the citizens instead of the profit of corporations. But given this situation it emerges that only the state is capable of handling and overcoming a crisis of such a scale. Do you think that on the basis of the conception of state that you propagate it will be possible for the state to take the measures required to manage (and to avoid) crises of this kind?

Noam Chomsky:

In state capitalist societies like ours, we cannot expect private powers to undertake the task of serving the public interest, surely not in the neoliberal period governed by the dictum that it is the duty of the corporation to maximize the wealth of (overwhelmingly rich) shareholders and management. With occasional exceptions, mostly for reputational reasons, they seek profit and market share. The only other institution with resources and large-scale planning options is the state. And states reacted differently to the information provided by China, where scientists within weeks of appearance of clusters of symptoms had identified the virus, sequenced the genome, and provided the information to the world. States in Asia and Oceania reacted quickly and have the situation pretty much under control. Others varied. The US has been a catastrophe.

What would happen in differently organized societies with informed publics and more direct popular participation in decision-making and regional and global integration? We cannot speak with confidence, but I don't see any reason why performance should not be superior, certainly superior to the states with the worst records.

(4)

Günther Grewendorf:

It is certainly true that without health there will be no economy. But it is also true that without the economy there will be no health. Accordingly we can observe that among the free human beings living in Western democracies, there seem to be two interest groups: people who defend their right not to lose their job, and people who defend their right not to lose their life. Do you think that without the regulating power of an “artificial” state system, solidarity between those who are resilient and those who are vulnerable is possible and can make this choice obsolete?

Noam Chomsky:

I'd prefer to put the point a little differently. I suppose that everyone would like to keep their jobs and to stay alive, and there are differing individual assessments as to how to deal with the quandary. The state system that has been constructed over the years affects this choice in many ways. To take a current case, the US government provides some unemployment insurance, limited by the standards of comparable countries, but some. That provides a measure of support for a decision not to risk life by returning to work under unsafe conditions. Employers prefer to have control over this decision, so generally oppose extending the insurance, which is running out. Working people prefer to have enough support to make the decision themselves. Accordingly, Republicans, which are by now hardly more than an agency of great wealth and business power, want to kill the support system. One of their most influential figures – by their standards, one of the more – is Senator Lindsay Graham, who has just said that it will be extended over his dead body. The Democrats, particularly under the impact of the popular movements inspired in large part by Bernie Sanders, are more committed to the rights of working people.

The issue doesn't seem to me a matter of the regulating power of the state, but rather whose interests are deemed worthy of protection by state authorities: business profits or people's lives. Class war, to put it in classic terms. This is of course simplification, overlooking many important qualifications, but it seems to me an appropriate way to look at the matter.

This discussion presupposes that state capitalist institutions remain intact, even if not in their brutal neoliberal form. Under different socioeconomic arrangements the questions would be posed in very different ways.

(5)

Günther Grewendorf:

When society is threatened by economic or medical crises the citizens call for help from the state because in such situations they no longer rely on the market, they rely on the state. But catastrophes have often been exploited as opportunities for the state to suspend democratic principles and basic civil rights. As we can see from many crises in the past, the citizens are used to accepting the protective measures of the state as the justification for restrictions of their democratic rights. In the corona crisis the majority of the people approve the suspension of specific civil rights and accept measures such as confinement, social distancing and tracking systems, provided that the decisions made by the state are necessary to guarantee their health and are only valid for a limited period. In the interview mentioned above you call the view that “the state is your master” “a fascist conception of the state”. Would you allow the state the temporary suspension of certain civil rights in a situation like the corona crisis?

Noam Chomsky:

I'm a little uncomfortable about the way the question is framed. We do not, of course, live in Tudor England or Stalinist Russia. In state capitalist democracies the state is not an independent entity hovering over us. It is an arena of contending forces. To first approximation, sufficient for the specific question at hand, we can think of the main contending forces as capital and labour. The high tech quasi-monopolies, the huge financial sector, and other major segments of capitalist autocracy would like to maximize their control over the population. The state they largely dominate has similar interests. The working population – almost everyone – is rightly suspicious of according them such control. The process has been underway for some time – what Shoshana Zuboff has called “surveillance capitalism,” which seeks to extend capitalist control beyond land, resources, labour to life quite generally. The coming “internet of things” provides means to extend the process. Just about everything we do send huge amounts of data to high tech, car manufacturers, state authorities, and far more. There are already experiments with implanting chips in workers in order to control them in ways that go far beyond Taylorism. Without chips, such practices already are implemented in fiercely controlled work environments like Amazon warehouses. Some sectors of power are surely entranced by the Chinese social credit system of surveillance and control. Tech companies are already proposing means for exploiting the pandemic controls to the post-virus world. Capital is relentless in pursuit of power, profit, domination, and the state authorities that are closely linked to private capital have similar ends.

But there are contending forces, as throughout modern history. Take the United States. The country was founded in a ferment of contending forces. The major schol-

arly work on the Constitutional Convention is entitled “The Framers’ Coup” (Michael Klarman), namely the elite coup against the democratic aspirations of the mass of the population. But popular struggle went on, with many successes and intermittent regression. And does right now, including on the critical issues you raise.

Chomsky's Concept of Human Nature and the Role of the State System

Noam Chomsky's linguistic research has led to revolutionary insights into the nature of language, the nature of the human mind and thus into the uniqueness of human nature. Nevertheless, it is not his achievements in cognitive science that has made him known to the public but rather his political analyses and activities. Although Chomsky himself is rather cautious on the question of whether there is a connection between his linguistic research and his political analyses, it is undeniable that his concept of human nature and his view on the innate creativity of language and mind has an influence on his political opinions. Although there is no necessary connection between his linguistic research and his political commitments, the connections are nevertheless salient and derive from the freedom-centered view of human nature.

“a social theory should be grounded on some concept of human needs and human rights, and in turn, on the human nature that must be presupposed in any serious account of the origin and character of these needs and rights.” (Chomsky 1976: 195)

Since human beings can only develop their creative potentials if they can have a life without coercion and repressive authority, a “need for freedom is at the core of human nature” (Chomsky 1988: 386). This freedom-centered concept of human nature is at the root of Chomsky's political views on the notion of freedom, the role of the state and the function of democracy. So it is the essence of human nature which is incompatible with structures of power and domination. This Cartesian idea correlates with the vision of man in nature defended by Jean Jacques Rousseau, according to which the principles of natural law can be derived from the properties of human nature.

A similar implication, which is crucial for Chomsky's view on the state, can be found in the work of Wilhelm von Humboldt, one of the founders of classical liberalism. Chomsky points out that Humboldt's notion of human nature is essential for his ideas about the role of the state. Like Chomsky, Humboldt derives his critique of the authoritarian state from a specific concept of human nature:

“I have felt myself animated throughout with a sense of the deepest respect for the inherent dignity of human nature, and for freedom, which alone befits that dignity.” (quoted from Chomsky 1970: 148)

“Whatever does not spring from a man's free choice, or is only the result of instruction and guidance, does not enter into his very being, but remains alien to his true nature” (ibid. pl. 150)

These are the ideas on which Humboldt grounds his view of the role of the state, which tends to “make man an instrument to serve its arbitrary ends, overlooking his individual purposes” but which should only be allowed “the most minimal forms of state intervention in personal or social life” and “is not to meddle in anything which does not refer exclusively to security”.

So Chomsky takes Humboldt to be a “forceful advocate of libertarian values” (ibid. p.148) who considers the state as a social organization for free individuals in which the latter can develop their potentials, interests and energies in a free and creative way. Nevertheless Humboldt agrees that state intervention in social life is legitimate if “freedom would destroy the very conditions without which not only freedom but even existence itself would be inconceivable” (ibid. p. 151). According to Chomsky, Humboldt expresses a classical liberal doctrine and is no primitive individualist in the style of Rousseau, but “looks forward to a community of free association without coercion by the state or other authoritarian institutions”. Chomsky takes Humboldt's idea of a society in which freely constituted bonds replace the fetters of autocratic institutions as an “anarchist vision that is appropriate, perhaps, to the next stage of industrial society” and thus makes Humboldt a predecessor of libertarian socialism.

Chomsky has called himself “some kind of anarchist” (1988: 744): “My personal visions are fairly traditional anarchist ones, with origins in the Enlightenment and classical liberalism.” (Chomsky 1996: 71). When he speaks of “classical liberalism” he means the ideas that were swept away by state capitalist autocracy but

“survived (or were re-invented) in various forms in the culture of resistance to the new forms of oppression, serving as an animating vision for popular struggles that have considerably expanded the scope of freedom, justice, and rights.” (ibid. p.73)

Neil Smith (1999: 186f) points out that Chomsky is not an anarchist in the sense that he favors a state of lawlessness and disorder: “Anarchy as a social philosophy has never meant 'chaos' - in fact, anarchists have typically believed in a highly organized society, just one that's organized democratically from below.” (Chomsky 2003: 199)

Chomsky is an anarchist in the tradition of Humboldt, Bakunin and Rudolf Rocker and his anarchism is to be understood as a system of political ideas that is characterized by a vision of human society free of coercion, oppression and concentration of power. Anarchism in this sense basically means democratic control of one's “productive life” (McGilvray 1999: 197):

“According to this anarchist vision, any structure of hierarchy and authority carries a heavy burden of justification, whether it involves personal relations or a larger social or-

der. If it cannot bear that burden - sometimes it can - then it is illegitimate and should be dismantled.” (Chomsky 1996: 73)

For Chomsky, the state system is a very “artificial system” that represents a transitory historical phase:

“In its modern form it developed in Europe, and you can see how artificial it is by just looking at European history for the last hundreds of years, a history of massacre, violence, terror, destruction, most of which has to do with trying to impose a state system on a society to which it has very little relation.” (Chomsky 1988: 745)

The formation of states outside of Europe (Africa, India, Asia etc.) is basically a result of colonialization. Their boundaries

“cut across all kinds of communities and interests and they bring people together who have nothing to do with each other. The result is constant warfare and struggle and oppression and so on. Furthermore, within each of these artificial systems, imposed usually by force, you have some kind of usually very sharply skewed distribution of power internally. The concentration of power inside usually takes over the state for its own good. It suppresses other people, suppresses people outside, etc. So we're stuck with this state system, for a while, at least. But we shouldn't expect it to be permanent.” (ibid.)

On the contrary, Chomsky considers the state system as a “lethal system” and claims that the only reason why stability in Europe was established after the world wars was “because the next step was going to destroy everything, given the level of weaponry”:

“That's the nature of the state system. It's going to lead to more and more destruction. Maybe there will be a way to abort it now, because the next step is to kill everything, but maybe not, in which case we will kill everything. From every point of view that state system looks artificial in the sense that it's unrelated to human needs and imposed by certain interests and power distribution.” (ibid.)

Nevertheless, Chomsky accepts state power as a transitory phenomenon if it serves to provide welfare, health care, and security and protects the citizens from illegitimate private structures of coercion such as domination by business for private profit as well as private control of banking, land and industry:

“My short-term goals are to defend and even strengthen elements of state authority which, though illegitimate in fundamental ways, are critically necessary right now to impede the dedicated efforts to 'roll back' the progress that has been achieved in extending democracy and human rights.” (Chomsky 1996: 73; see also Chomsky 2003: 344)

Although anarchist ideas have not led to a worldwide political movement, they have not been without any influence on political thinking. They continue to be effective in populist protests against abuse of state power and the excesses of the new “predatory capitalism” of modern globalization. Since “free enterprise” only exists in close co-

operation with that “archaic structure called the state” (Otero 1994: 356), for Chomsky a true libertarian is an adversary of state power.

From this brief survey of the main characteristics of Chomsky's social theory, the main topics of this volume can be derived:

- Human nature and the emergence of social institutions
- The relation of the individual to the state and the gist of anarchism
- Human rights and the notion of freedom
- Power and resistance

In what follows I will assign the contributions to these topics and give a brief summary of their content.

Human Nature and the Emergence of Social Institutions

Using evidence from language acquisition Roeper's paper *Connecting Cognitive Science, Species Self-Knowledge, and Maladaptive Institutions* advocates the view that children show a universalist perspective on the world and thus have a notion of community that is associated with conceptions of equality and rudiments of other political categories such as the notion of cooperation. Roeper shows that the child acquires such notions without any explicit instruction and at a surprisingly young age. He then concludes that these notions have innate psychological roots.

The view that the ingredients for social relations are innate is at variance with the Piagetian claim that children are “egocentric” and self-interested and only see things from their own point of view. The inevitability of institutional failures is due to the fact that every social system or action has unintended and unanticipated consequences. These consequences should not lead us to deny the necessity of social organization but, Roeper argues, the creativity of social self-knowledge will help us to keep those consequences under control. However, the creativity of social self-knowledge, as every kind of creativity, needs freedom to evolve.

The Relation of the Individual to the State and the Gist of Anarchism

Rai's contribution *Anarchism, Government and the State* proceeds from Chomsky's claim that the need for freedom is rooted in the properties of human nature. Any form of authority or domination is therefore essentially illegitimate unless it is justified on independent grounds. In the first part of his contribution Rai describes communal forms of self-organization and self-government such as the *zanjera* irrigation communities of the Philippines, the socialization of factories in the Italian *biennio*

rosso period of 1919-1920 and the collectivization of industry and commerce in Barcelona in the thirties. He takes these movements as an example of the grassroots democratic institutions that Chomsky has in mind when he favors an anarchist model of the state.

In the second part of his paper Rai deals with Chomsky's view that in capitalist societies of the western world representative democracy is limited to the political sphere and does not affect the economic sphere, where private power exerts an enormous influence on the state without being subject to public democratic control.

Rai then discusses the distinction between state and democracy and shows that Chomsky uses at least three definitions of the concept of 'the state'. According to his preferred definition in the sense of his 'state-corporate nexus', the state and the major capitalist corporates are part of the same system of decision-making power in which state power is invoked to protect the corporations from destructive developments of the market, to secure resources and to guarantee private privilege and profit. Political decisions are thus influenced by investment decisions, and those who hold the wealth of society (the capital and its distribution) determine the conditions of life for everyone in society. Chomsky considers that kind of concentration of power as deeply undemocratic and advocates the view that state institutions should first be reformed in order to provide concrete solutions to the fundamental problems of our society (environment, welfare, education, quality of life, peace etc.) and should ultimately be replaced with a 'libertarian socialist' system.

According to Bošković' paper *On the (Im)practicality of the State: Why do I have to have a Country?* Chomsky favors a stateless society but emphasizes in many places that this situation can only be considered a long-term goal. Bošković argues that citizens are in many ways owned by the state, as can be seen from eminent domain and military draft, and describes the individual's servitude to the state as the inclination to belong to a larger group and to measure themselves by the achievements of that larger group. Although it is in the long-term interest of anarchism to undermine this phenomenon of belonging to a state, anarchists like Chomsky still advocate a pragmatically-motivated anarchism in the sense that they recommend supporting the state in a transitional period in order to achieve a freer and more just society that comes closer to anarchist ideals.

Schiffmann in his paper *The Soft-Spoken Anarchist: Chomsky, Populism, and the Question of "From Here to There"* analyzes the specific nature of Chomsky's notion of anarchism in the sense of a struggle for a free and just society and the liberation of people from oppression, the goal of anarchist principles being the development of autonomous individuals and collective self-determination. Schiffmann relates Chomsky's variant of anarchism to other crucial topics of his political work such as the manipulating role of the media ("manufacturing consent"), creativity as a crucial trait of human nature and the responsibility of intellectuals.