
Manufacturing Consistency: Social Science, Rhetoric and Chomsky's Critique

Alison Edgley

University of Nottingham, UK

Keywords: abduction, elite, essentialism, human nature, propaganda model, state capitalism

Abstract

Chomsky's critique of US foreign policy – and the media coverage it generates – has significant theoretical merit, and deserves to be of considerable interest within the social sciences. His analysis rests upon two distinctive positions. First, he claims that capitalism only survives because of the role played by the state, legislatively and administratively, controversially adding that it operates as an economic agent providing welfare for the rich. While the political and corporate elite can have varied and at times conflicting interests, the so-called common interest, operationalized via the state, excludes the mass of ordinary people from existing power and economic relations. Second, Chomsky's analysis of the state is supported by an admittedly unverifiable view of an essentialist human nature. For Chomsky, humans are creative and capable of 'abduction'. This leads him to argue for conditions of freedom, not so that humans are free to be atomistic individuals, but to allow an interdependent and creative mutuality to flourish. Ironically, the marginalization of Chomsky by social scientists and intellectual elites, especially in the US, has resulted in their own assumptions remaining unchallenged and unexamined.

For over forty years, Noam Chomsky has been writing and publishing on both the realities of US American foreign policy and the way that the media constructs and represents foreign policy events. Despite his prolific and consistently popular output, his political work remains marginal, at least within academic circles. Apart from some courses and texts in international relations or media studies (where his work may be used to illustrate – incorrectly I would argue – a Marxist position; see Golding and Murdock, 1991), his work is rarely taught or discussed within the social sciences (a notable exception would be the *Review of International Studies* 29(4) in October 2003). When his work *is* referred to, it is often subject to vitriolic attack. Such attacks do not come only from those on the right but also from commentators on the left (C. Hitchens cited in Billen, 2002; Kamm, 2005; Lukes, 1980). In the main, however, his work is ignored.

Herring and Robinson (2003) demonstrate that getting reviewers and editors to take Chomsky's work seriously is enormously difficult. They note that the excuse often given is that Chomsky's work is polemical and therefore of little academic merit. In examining this claim, however, they were unable to uncover a single academic study showing that his work is merely a polemic. Instead they suggest that particular terms such as 'the propaganda model' are taken as sufficient evidence of the polemical nature of Chomsky's work, concluding that academia has become disciplined to exclude anti-elite analysis, an indication of both the existence and operation of that very propaganda model. As such, Chomsky's work is not even read to be rejected, rather 'it is simply made incomprehensible or invisible by ideology due to their [Herman's and Chomsky's] conception of an integrated political and corporate elite' (ibid., 566). In other words, the notion that those in political and corporate power comprise a single elite capable of being researched as a social entity with shared beliefs and interests is dismissed out of hand, without recourse to any of the standard logical, theoretical or evidential tests available to the practising social scientist.

This article argues that this feature of Chomsky's work represents a distinctive contribution that is at the very least worthy of debate within the social sciences. In order to demonstrate this, two theoretical positions taken by Chomsky will be made explicit. On this basis, we can, in part at least, explain both some of the heat he evokes within his critics and the marginalization of his work that is so evident within the social sciences. These two positions are also crucial to an understanding of the 'propaganda model' articulated by Chomsky and Herman. The two positions to be discussed are Chomsky's position on the state and his account of human nature.

The Role of the State in Chomsky's Analysis

Social science offers many ways to understand social reality, each one of which invites us to adopt a set of assumptions about what counts. This is no more so than in the case of the meaning of the state. Unquestionably, there has been considerable debate about whether the state can be said to be 'real' or not. Beneath these discourses, or battles about surface reality, an implicit and untested assumption can often be found that the contemporary state, admittedly at times flawed in practice or subject to being ideologically hijacked, is fundamentally progressive and rational as a form of social organization. In its democratic form, it is assumed to be an enlightened form of social organization necessary for ensuring systems of governance that are universally and equitably applicable while at the same time representative of some estimate of majority interest. While the means and ends of the state in governance terms are vigorously debated, the state as the form by which to organize the national interest is not.

Among the harshest critics of contemporary capitalist state forms are those who draw on Marx's intellectual legacy. In *The Communist Manifesto*, Marx and Engels (1935 [1848]) make the claim that 'the executive of the modern state is but a committee for managing the common affairs of the whole bourgeoisie' (quoted in McLellan 1977, 223)). The debate between Miliband (1973) and Poulantzas (1973) concerned whether it is the logic of capital or the nature of class composition that determines the nature of, or more specifically the autonomy of the state in the first or last instance. The implication within a Marxist framework is that the state's role is at once judicial, ideological and coercive. For, as Maguire (1978) and Skillen (1972) point out, Marx assumes the capitalist economy is self-regulatory and 'autonomous'. As such, the Marxist conception of the state is one of distortion by capitalism, leaving the question of whether this is because of instrumentalism within the bourgeoisie or determination by the momentum of capitalism open to debate. So, while the state under capitalism is perceived as partisan, without capitalism an alternative version of the state becomes possible. Indeed, Marx calls for the working class to capture the state, in order that it may better reflect and act upon the true interests of the working class and thus humankind. Even within the Marxist critique, therefore, we see an account of the state as potentially progressive.

Reading Chomsky against the Marxist account and critique of the capitalist state we see his preference for an alternative and distinctive account of the modern state. For Chomsky, the state's role is to protect and expand the interests of the rich and powerful while at the same time controlling the 'rascal multitude' (a term employed by and representative of the elite's view of ordinary people; see Chomsky, 1992, 367) – always liable to offend against good order, and especially property. As Chomsky sees it, controlling the domestic population is not just *a* problem, but *the* 'central one facing any state or other system of power' (ibid., 59). 'To those in power, it seems obvious that the population must be cajoled and manipulated, frightened and kept in ignorance, so that ruling elites can operate without hindrance to the "national interest" as they choose to define it' (Chomsky, 1973, 18). For Chomsky, the rich and powerful are those with business interests as well as those in positions of political power. To demonstrate the symbiotic relationship between these elites, he regularly refers to the 'state corporate nexus' (Chomsky, 1993). Where Chomsky parts company with a Marxist interpretation of the state's role is with his assertion that free market capitalism is dead. He argues, 'take note of the broad – if tacit – understanding that the capitalist model has limited application; business leaders have long recognised it is not for them' (Chomsky, 1992, 144). Chomsky's point is that the business community is, to a large extent, dependent upon not just the legislative support of the state but also, and critically, its economic support. 'Business circles have long taken for granted that the state must play a major role in *maintaining* the system of private profit'

(*ibid.*, 108, emphasis added). Business, he argues, has to be induced to invest, and the best inducement is a guaranteed market and/or public subsidy of research and development. In respect of the US economy, Chomsky argues that the only parts that are competitive are those that depend either on a guaranteed market or public subsidy: advanced technology, capital intensive agriculture and pharmaceuticals. The military industrial complex, Eisenhower's principal concern, or 'military Keynesianism' as Chomsky calls it, keeps a form of capitalism alive, involving as it does public subsidy for private profit, which can more accurately be described as welfare for the rich. The state not only provides the legislative conditions for a capitalist economy, but it is also itself a major economic agent.

Chomsky, following Humboldt (1969 [1792]) and Rucker (1937), but in stark contrast to Marx, argues that it is not historical materialism that accounts for the development of capitalist relations of production. Rather it is the effect of centralized state power on the forces of production that accounts for the development and maintenance of capitalism. Rucker is deeply critical of the view subscribed to by the historical materialist version of history that connects the rise of the national state with necessary progress. Indeed, in a discussion of the development of European industry, Rucker talks of 'unbridled favouritism ... convert[ing] entire industrial lines into monopolies' (*ibid.*, 116). In other words, capitalism was not an outcome of the development of the productive forces but an outcome of the impact of centralized power on productive forces. Chomsky, referring to the formation of the Dutch East India Company, argues that:

... [i]n highly simplified form, we see already something of the structure of the modern political economy dominated by a network of transnational financial and industrial institutions with internally managed investment and trade, their wealth and influence *established* and maintained by the state power that they mobilize and largely control. (*ibid.*, 6, emphasis added)

According to Rucker and Chomsky, were it not for concentrated state power, capitalism would not have been possible – nor would it survive. This is to stand a Marxist adage on its head: destroy the state and it is capitalism which will 'wither away'.

The state, then, is never a more or less effective arbiter of competing interests. Nor is it merely a reflection of determining economic forces. Rather, it provides the legislative conditions and coercive authority for a capitalist economy to exist, and it is itself a significant economic actor. The 'hidden hand' exists all right, but it is attached to and manipulated by the state.

Unsurprisingly, this type of critique of the state in terms of the relationship between economic and political elites, and the structural relationship between

contemporary capitalism and the state, has attracted a great number of adherents since the collapse and bail-out of the US banking and finance sector. Moreover, the supposedly expert financial media failed to challenge and expose the activities of the finance sector and did not predict a collapse which is now seen as inevitable. The media were, instead, complicit. Evidence has come to the support of both the theory and the propaganda model, but their most consistent proponent remains unacknowledged.

The role of the state in the United States, as Chomsky understands it, is not merely a domestic matter. As business interests derive from the need capital has to invest abroad, the state will also operate to ensure that less developed countries keep their doors open to foreign investment. As such, the state is not only concerned to control its own population, but it is also concerned with controlling the populations and states of less well developed countries. This relationship between the state and business is the source of, the driving force behind, the constituent elements of American foreign policy.

The USA, Chomsky openly acknowledges, 'is a free society, much more so than any other' (1993, 182). This same state seeks, by whatever means, to secure the interests of American business to ensure secure access to markets, cheap resources, and labour and investment opportunities for US capital in all countries. The process is not always smooth and seamless, particularly in less developed countries. In some instances an unsuitable elite is democratically elected (Chile), or a nation attempts some form of independent development (Nicaragua), or a local elite begins to compromise American interests (Panama). In such cases, America has ruthlessly deployed a variety of responses: economic sanctions (Cuba); a CIA coup (e.g. Chile in 1973); clandestine and illegal funding of *contras* to terrorize and destabilize development (in Nicaragua in the 1980s); or direct invasion (Panama in 1989). Chomsky and Herman (1979), in a close analysis of US aid, even found that when the proportion of aid increases, so too does the level of human rights abuses.

On the basis of this kind of evidence, the critique of the elite-dominated state, and its relationship to capitalist development and the protection and sponsorship of its interests, animates Chomsky's analysis of the construction, purpose and use of US American foreign policy. It is the discomfort caused by his consistent use of this theoretical lens to assess and critique the state and its actions that, to my mind, accounts for many over-heated attacks on his work.

Apart from those simply making *ad hominem* attacks that he is an anti-Semitic Jew, most of his critics are US-based – they become apoplectic when Chomsky likens aspects of US state activity to that of Nazi Germany (where the link between the interests of the political and industrial elites was also evident) or terrorism (where

there are no limits to the violence that might be perpetrated against a people or a country). The idea that their own 'liberal democratic' state could possibly be described as terrorist or Nazi-like is just inconceivable. As a result, many of his critics respond by being personally offended and thus miss the challenge to their own assumptions in his criticisms. Chomsky points out that 'most people are not gangsters and agree it was wrong to steal food from starving children' (1988a, 303), even though this is what happens, sometimes on a massive scale, under the guise of American foreign policy. For most, it is unthinkable that this could be happening, whatever the evidence. For them, 'it should not be true', comes to mean that it could never be the case. They are supported in their preferred, more comforting and alternative view of a worthy, if sometimes misguided state, by the 'propaganda model', relentlessly presenting a just and law-abiding state, doing no more than protecting its legitimate interests in sometimes difficult circumstances.

Theoretically and practically, it is Chomsky's account of the state – not capitalism – with its capacity to concentrate unaccountable and exploitative economic and power relations, and bias them towards particular or general property interests, which animates and underpins the propaganda model. For this reason, Chomsky argues that the state is the root cause of social injustice. Under the propaganda model the media 'serve and propagandize on behalf of, the powerful societal interests that control and finance them' (Herman and Chomsky, 2002 [1979, 1988], xi). Those critics who cannot countenance the idea that the US state is behaving in a way that is 'reminiscent of' or 'similar to' imperial ambitions of Nazi proportions are implicitly operating from the perspective that the Western state form is democratic in nature, and therefore fundamentally well-meaning and progressive, and that the gloss it puts on its self-serving actions is truth, not propaganda.

The significance of Chomsky's emphasis not being on the forces of historical materialism but on highlighting and exploring the powers of the state signals a further important aspect of his theoretical perspective. States are consciously organized bodies of elites. In other words, it is agents, actual individuals who are in control, not social or historical forces. If *individuals* are in control (not some logic of capital, or a socially determined group, or an historical dynamic) then these individuals have choices. Conceivably, individuals with choices can behave differently, and the individuals he has in mind (American/Western) do, after all, live in a 'free society'.

Agency is crucial to Chomsky's and, I would argue, any analysis of social and political organization, making it inappropriate to reify any socio-economic processes. Where many thinkers dismiss this as a simplistic and instrumentalist view of elite power in operation, Chomsky offers a sophisticated yet clear-cut account. In so doing, he also leads us away from the attractions of conspiracy

theories, which depict agents as ‘evil bastards in a smoke-filled room’ (without denying that conspiracies do occur, *vide* Alford, 2007; Alford and Graham, 2009). These state and corporate elites cannot operate in purely instrumental terms. They coalesce and consolidate their power around national state forms, and these national state forms compete within and between each other for economic and political power. As such, they operate within a structural context of international and national competition. While on the one hand elites do their best to manipulate, entrench or expand their power, outcomes are constantly in flux, shifting both nationally and internationally.

The only instrumental certainty is the need for elites to ensure that ‘the bewildered herd’ remain no more than ‘observers’, rather than ‘participants’ (Chomsky, 1992, 370). The structure (of national states in competition) may well have a role to play in maintaining the madness, but it could be different. To explain why there is not too much cognitive dissonance between actions and beliefs among elites, so ensuring that public opinion can be appropriately managed, Chomsky with Herman developed the propaganda model. This model observes that media and academic elites also have roles in maintaining the fiction that the state is fundamentally democratic and progressive. The media consistently fails to hold the state to account for its actions, while much social science research incorporates ruling assumptions and thus fails to live up to its own claims to objectivity.

These elements of Chomsky’s way of understanding the political world he examines amount to a theory, complete with internal coherence, the capacity to formulate and test hypotheses, and the ability to interrogate evidence and reach conclusions (Edgley, 2000). It is a reflexive, rather than a closed system, and it can be and has been applied successfully across time and in respect of different polities and contingencies.

So what? My first observation is that Chomsky’s approach has two unusual features in terms of modern social science. Unlike many approaches, it has not become highly specialized, with its own arcane and self-referential language, splinter groups and a dedicated journal catering to a few thousand adherents. I take this to be a good sign. Second, Chomsky’s approach retains its connection with its subject matter, and in so doing testifies to the need for multiple, complementary and concurrent investigations into national and international actions and elite behaviour in the political, governmental, military, economic and media fields. What other forms of study are doing this in a systematic way?

This brings me back to my initial point about Chomsky’s wider contribution for the social sciences. His theoretical account claims that the way that state forms coalesce power and generate outcomes can never be fully representative of ordinary people’s interests, but rather can only serve elite interests. This powerful

claim is in contrast to much published social science – most of which happens to be funded by the state and is increasingly subject to audit and evaluation for ‘quality’ by that same state – where there is an implicit assumption that the democratic state, while periodically infected by bad apples, unfortunate events and limits to governability, is unquestionably essential to the healthy functioning of contemporary society. Consider the contemporary development: the state has become the lead champion and funder of ‘the knowledge society’. These are matters beyond the usual range of political argument, located as they so often are within the constraints of the accepted ideological positions (all of which are pro-state).

Nevertheless, political disputation sometimes brings about slippage in the boundaries of understanding. For example, Chomsky at times praises Republicans or right-wingers for at least being more honest than Democrats in their analysis of events, because they more candidly operate from the position that the ‘rabble’ require elite guidance to help them to see what is good for them. Not for them the veneer of democratic legitimation of all power.

The Role of Human Nature in Chomsky’s Analysis

The second distinctive theoretical position held by Chomsky in respect of the social sciences concerns his views on human nature. It is fair to say that much social science thinking adopts the working assumption that agency is highly influenced (but not entirely determined) by social structures. Society matters. Positions which appear to embody any form of essentialism are usually subject to the apparently damning criticism that they are deeply conservative or reactionary in the way that they are said to justify existing social relations. From another perspective entirely, the essentialism associated with some radical feminists is deemed unpalatable because they espouse views which are ahistorical, homogenizing and biologically determinist (Jagger, 1988). For those concerned with substantive social justice, there are two options. One is the view that only dramatic change at the level of economic structures could bring about any hope of positive change in key social structures, which in turn would encourage the generation of a human and social agency motivated less by autonomy and self-interest and more, but not exclusively, by collective and social concerns. The alternative is a series of incentive-shifting and behaviour-modifying legal and social changes, which, to have any purchase, must be carefully planned, sanctioned and implemented by the state. For most social scientists, then, humans cannot do it on their own. Why not? It’s human nature.

Chomsky (1988a), unlike many contemporary social and political commentators, openly states that his analysis is dependent upon an essentialist version of human nature. He is open about his beliefs and preferences on this subject, and his

argument that all social and political analysis must rest upon a version of human nature (even if its existence is denied, or treated as though it were infinitely malleable) is well-observed (Forbes, 1983).

For someone dismissed so readily as a polemicist, it is interesting to note that Chomsky makes no claim to be right about his own view, even though that view is so central to his approach. Rather, he insists that his version of human nature (like all others) is likely to remain unverifiable. This is both a logical point – we can never know what may be discovered next about our own humanity, so cannot assert that current ‘knowledge’ about human nature is true – and a social scientific one – our nature (essential or otherwise) plays itself out in complex and changing conditions not entirely of our own making and is only somewhat amenable to our understanding and codification.

Some of the disagreements between Chomsky and his critics about social and political realities, and how best to organize society, fail to resolve themselves because the different perspectives derive from very different conceptions of human nature. In other words, where the appeal to specific accounts of human nature is crucial but not made explicit, Chomsky and his critics can end up talking past one another. For this, Chomsky cannot be held responsible, and his work dismissed. At least Chomsky has demonstrated that he is aware of how fundamental a view of human nature can be to political argument and our view of what ought to happen:

Suppose you have an opinion about what ought to be done. We think there has to be some revolutionary change. Anyone that advocates that kind of position at the root is basing the advocacy on some assumption about human nature. Maybe the assumption is not explicit, in fact, it almost never is explicit. But the fact is that if there is any moral character to what we advocate, it is because we believe or are hoping that this change we are proposing is better for humans because of the way humans are. There is something about the way humans fundamentally are, about their fundamental nature, which requires that this change we are advocating take place. (1988a, 597)

If Chomsky were the only critic, the only social scientist employing assumptions about human nature as a key element in his work, then his critics, and the social scientists who dismiss him out of hand would have a strong case. The way that Chomsky makes his assumptions clear, and at the same time accepts the unverifiability of *any* assumptions about human nature, requires that his critics reveal their founding assumptions and explain why and how they trump Chomsky’s.

This exploration of some of the theoretical aspects of his work establishes a strong case for rejecting the claims that Chomsky is merely a polemicist, and not

deserving of attention by the serious academic community (none of whom, presumably, could ever be faulted for any lapse in ‘objectivity’). However, there is more to Chomsky’s approach than a strong and coherent theoretical base. Chomsky himself prefers to be judged by what he does, that is, the products of his practical methods of investigation.

In this respect, Chomsky’s method is deceptively and, it turns out, devastatingly simple. His preferred method for illuminating and analysing social and political affairs is to look at claimed policy intentions – as published by the state – and compare them with policy outcomes – also published by the state. This ‘knowledge’ or data is not mediated through any other agency. It is a direct comparison between what the state claimed it was going to achieve, and the state’s version of what it did achieve. It is important to note that, in general, there is a significant time lapse between the publication of policy intentions and policy outcomes. The media responds in the moment, and will discuss at length policy intentions, but rarely revisits those opinions in the light of subsequent evidence.

This approach reflects the practice of a critical audit, and is conducted so as to interrogate the truth of intentions and against the truth of outcomes. Chomsky is not to be criticized if his examination exposes contradictions within the elite’s own account of itself. He observes closely the strategy that elites employ. He notes that they often couch their policy initiatives in terms of some sort of moral framework, suggesting or privileging a particular account of human nature. Chomsky then sets out to demonstrate the disparity between their purported morality and the outcome of policies. Chomsky used this strategy to good effect on a number of occasions in relation to the Vietnam War, contrasting for example the noble, humanitarian intention of protecting a population with the actual practice of massive bombardment, which could only jeopardize human life and contradict the apparent humanitarian intent.

The tactic of massive bombardment must be labelled ‘counterproductive’ in Pentagonese, and can be attributed only to advanced cretinism, *if* the United States goal had been to restrict American casualties or to win popular support for the Saigon government or to ‘protect the population.’ But it is quite rational as a device for demolishing the society in which a rebellion is rooted and takes refuge. (Chomsky, 1973, 78)

The above quotation shows that Chomsky does not criticize the capacity or intelligence of the individuals making these policy choices and pronouncements. Rather, he assumes that there must be some use or reason, and that what the policy outcome actually achieved was in the context of an aim which could not be stated in public. In this way, Chomsky does two things. First, he makes it possible to ask questions about the relationship between policy pronouncements and policy

outcomes, and excavates the play of an alternative set of moral values, values that are rational within an elitist version of human wants.

This approach may also contribute to an understanding of the fury that Chomsky arouses. After all, his method is sound but not unique. It is the same method used by the many historians and social scientists doing archive research, for example. They also routinely reveal the hypocrisy and expose the perfidy of states, governments and political actors. To live in a polity is to accept that there is no perfect government, so what makes Chomsky's work annoying to so many (US) defenders of the US state and its constituent elites? Chomsky does more than present a different version of the truth. His is a more chastening, a more embarrassing insight, namely, that the defenders of US foreign policy have time and time again apparently been duped into believing the polemical and misleading statements and policy justifications that have so regularly and consistently come from US state departments, and time and time again subsequent developments have shown how wrong they were to accept them at face value.

As Nietzsche so aptly remarked: 'I have done that', says my memory. 'I cannot have done that,' says my pride, and remains inexorable. Eventually – memory yields. (1968 [1886], 68)

Another criticism levelled at Chomsky is that he is unconstructively critical, that he has no valid way of improving upon the best and most free society in the world that is the United States. This brings us to the positive aspects of Chomsky's theoretical position. Although a powerful view, rigorously constructed, it reflects intellectually both humility and modesty.

Consistent with the features of his theory outlined above, Chomsky's view of the good society is rooted in his assumptions about human nature. For him, our human nature involves a quest for liberty, not in the liberal sense of individuals being autonomous and atomistic, but rather because the fundamental characteristic of human nature is one of creativity. However, our creative capacities not only demand liberty, but also the possibility of cooperative, interdependent mutuality (Edgley, 2000). In other words, for the full expression of human creativity we need freedom and community.

I would like to believe that people have an instinct for freedom, that they really want to control their own affairs. They don't want to be pushed around, ordered, oppressed, etc., and they want a chance to do things that make sense, like constructive work in a way that they control, or maybe control together with others. (Chomsky, 1988a, 756)

Note here his words: 'I would like to believe'. This is Chomsky the man, not Chomsky the social critic, not Chomsky as linguist, or whatever categorizing label might be put upon him. Chomsky would argue that any and all analyses of social and political institutions involve elements of 'rhetoric', because implicit in all accounts are *opinions* about the links between human social organization and human nature which are, by definition, unverifiable. He doubts that there could ever be clinching scientific evidence to settle all the arguments we have about our humanness. He is also sceptical that we will ever have the capacity to introspect to the extent that we can fully comprehend our nature. Just as the rat in the maze is only wired to achieve a certain level of knowledge, humans are likely to remain a mystery to themselves, at least in some respects. Without the assurances of a verifiable account of human nature, Chomsky resorts to hope and refers to Pascal's wager:

Pascal raised the question: How do you know whether God exists? He said, if I assume that he exists and he does, I'll make out OK. If he doesn't, I won't lose anything. If he does exist and I assume he doesn't I may be in trouble. That's basically the logic. On this issue of human freedom, if you assume that there's no hope, you guarantee that there will be no hope. If you assume that there is an instinct for freedom, there are opportunities to change things, etc., there's a chance you may contribute to making a better world. That's your choice. (Chomsky and Barsamian, 1992, 355)

In the absence of definitive evidence, what does Chomsky do? He makes and stands by his own moral choice. He chooses to be optimistic, to see humans as having a naturally creative urge and therefore a need to control their life and labour. Cautiously and modestly, he concedes only a loose connection between his political work and his work in linguistics. Just as humans are wired for rule-bound but creative linguistic activity, so Chomsky prefers to believe that we have an instinct for liberty and creativity. On the basis of his choice of assumptions, it follows for him that humans need to work productively under conditions of their own choosing and in voluntary association with others.

My own hopes and intuitions are that self-fulfilling and creative work is a fundamental human need, and that the pleasures of a challenge met, a work well done, the exercise of skill and craftsmanship, are real and significant, and are an essential part of a full and meaningful life. The same is true of opportunity to understand and enjoy the achievements of others, which often go beyond what we ourselves can do, and to work constructively in cooperation with others. (Chomsky, 1988a, 394)

From this view of a universal human nature, Chomsky argues for a society that promotes *diversity* (not homogeneity). And although he is clearly emphasizing the importance of agency in social and political processes, he is nevertheless clear that

social structures are influential in the ways in which human nature manifests itself. However, while social structures shape and constrain human social and political behaviour, human nature is not infinitely malleable, nor are social structures static or law-like entities. In other words, as Wilkin argues: ‘Chomsky’s work provides good grounds for rejecting the dualism of either strong essentialism or anti-essentialism’ (1999, 177). This reflects his humility. Although Chomsky is a self-confessed essentialist, he does not mistakenly convert this into a deterministic account of human behaviour.

Human nature has lots of ways of realizing itself, humans have lots of capacities and options. Which ones reveal themselves depends to a large extent on the institutional structures. If we had institutions which permitted pathological killers free rein, they’d be running the place. The only way to survive would be to let those elements of your nature manifest themselves. If we have institutions which make greed the sole property of human beings and encourage pure greed at the expense of other human emotions and commitments, we’re going to have a society based on greed, with all that follows. A different society might be organized in such a way that human feelings and emotions of other sorts, say solidarity, support, sympathy become dominant. Then you’ll have different aspects of human nature and personality revealing themselves. (Chomsky, 1988a, 773)

Chomsky’s view that human beings may never be able to introspect about their true natures does not mean that he is a relativist and that all knowledge must necessarily elude us because ultimately it is socially constructed. As Wilkin argues:

Chomsky’s *Post-cartesianism* leads him to recognize that, as there are no absolute certainties or truths in science or knowledge generally, such a position is not open to us. However, this does not mean that we are forced to adopt the position of ... scepticism. (1995, 54)

In Chomsky’s view: ‘[t]he lack of indubitable foundations need not lead us to reject the working assumption that there is an objective reality to be discovered, of which we have at best a partial grasp’ (in Wilkin, 1995, 57). He is however, extremely critical of the scientific pretensions of much social science.

... [I]n fact, social and political issues in general seem to me fairly simple; the effort to obfuscate them in esoteric and generally vacuous theory is one of the contributions of intelligentsia to enhancing their power and the power of those they serve, as is the mindless ‘empiricism’ conducted in the name of ‘science’ but in fact in sharp contradiction to the methods of the sciences, which often succeeds in concealing major operative factors in policy and history in a maze of unanalyzed facts. (Chomsky, 1988a, 373).

Here is another source of discontent with Chomsky among the academic community. Having pointed out how so many apparently enlightened citizens are regularly subject to the influence of the propaganda model, which disguises the real intentions and outcomes of American foreign policy, he now accuses members of the intelligentsia of standing in the way of better understanding of arrangements and events in the world it has been their professional choice to explore and explain. Wilkin argues that, for Chomsky: 'the science in social science is invariably used as a mechanism for excluding the general populace from debate about issues such as social policy and foreign policy' (1999, 14). Indeed, the propaganda model makes a second-order prediction that it will be ignored. Journalists compound the exclusion of ordinary people from meaningful comprehension of policy by applying 'codes and conventions' that ignore the study of institutions and how they function, preferring a focus on events that can unfold and acquire meaning quickly, apparently to ensure accessibility (Galtung and Ruge, 1970). Chomsky is on the side of the average citizen, and questions the presumption that ordinary people cannot digest the assumed complexities of social and foreign policy:

... [w]hen I'm driving, I sometimes turn on the radio and I find very often that what I'm listening to is a discussion of sports. These are telephone conversations. People call in and have long and intricate discussion, and it's plain that quite a high degree of thought and analysis is going into that. People know a tremendous amount. They know all sorts of complicated details and enter into far reaching discussion about whether the coach made the right decision yesterday and so on. These are ordinary people, not professionals, who are applying intelligence and analytic skills in these areas and accumulating quite a lot of knowledge and, for all I know, understanding. (Chomsky, 1988b, 33)

Such scepticism about the ideologically laden nature of much that passes for social science (the very thing of which he stands accused) does not mean we cannot expect scientific rigour in both the natural and social sciences. It will mean, given his account of human nature, that social science is unlikely to be as predictive and explanatory as physics, because there will remain important differences between the natural and social worlds. And here Chomsky posits a further essentialist element to our human natures, because he argues we are hard-wired with a capacity for 'abduction' (Chomsky, 1981b). 'Abduction' refers to the human predisposition to construct theories about the social and natural world, theories for which we can devise tests, both for logical consistency and in relation to evidence (Edgley, 2005). It is 'a process in which the mind forms hypotheses according to some rules and selects among them with reference to evidence, and presumably, other factors' (Chomsky, 1981b, 136). Wilkin argues that Chomsky shares with scientific realists (an approach that methodologically brings together the natural and social sciences) a concern with 'locating the structures and mechanisms that help to generate concrete outcomes or events; understanding

what must exist in order for a particular event/phenomenon to have occurred' (1999, 14). This process requires logic, intuition and imagination to interpret the available empirical evidence and provide explanations for the problems facing us. With this foundation, we strive for the best interpretations and explanations of social and political events we can.

Wilkin (1997, 1999) argues that Chomsky's work sits within the critical realist tradition. For Chomsky, it is the responsibility of intellectuals to root out injustice, 'expose lies' and to consider the purposes as well the judiciousness of their study (Chomsky, 1969, 257). But on no account must the state assume responsibility for determining what is and what is not acceptable knowledge. The practical meaning of his stand became clear in 1979, when Chomsky became renowned for his opposition to censorship and his defence of freedom of expression. He signed a petition objecting to a decision which deprived Robert Faurisson of his job at the University of Lyon, and convicted him of being an irresponsible historian. Faurisson's crime was to write a book denying the Nazi Holocaust against the Jews. Chomsky then wrote an essay defending freedom of expression, which subsequently became a preface to Faurisson's book, without Chomsky's knowledge or permission. Chomsky's critics fell into two camps: those who held that he was an apologist for Faurisson's views and those who thought he should have denounced Faurisson's conclusions. Of the former, Chomsky argued that they confused a defence of civil rights with a defence of the views expressed by Faurisson. Of the latter, Chomsky said this would:

... require a careful analysis of his documentation ... [t]he demand that defence of civil rights requires an analysis and commentary on the views expressed would simply eliminate the defence of the rights of those who express unpopular or horrendous views. (1988a, 316)

An indication of how that analysis might have turned out is revealed by his remarks about 'scientific' attempts to link race with intelligence. For Chomsky, it is 'possible that there is some correlation between race and intelligence. But *in a non-racist society*, these differences – if shown to exist – would be of no significance' (in Rai, 1995, 190).

Libertarian Socialism

The account of human nature which drives Chomsky's critique of the state under state capitalism can fairly be categorized as libertarian socialist or anarchist. This perspective, as a means of analysing and understanding social and political events, occupies only a tiny fragment of academic research, despite the popularity and resonance such views have in society as a whole. Chomsky's numerous works sell in large numbers and he is perpetually in demand from a range of different and

world-wide audiences (Laffey, 2003). For many, the claim that social justice should rest upon both liberty and equality is a contradiction in terms. Nozick, for example, argues that liberty is an empty concept if a 'socialist society ... forbids capitalist acts between consenting adults' (1986, 163). Nozick is of the view that a consistent anarchist cannot oppose private ownership of the means of production. The assumption is that for an egalitarian socialist society, compulsion and coercion and a denial of freedom is required. Chomsky counters with the argument that:

... the consistent anarchist must oppose private ownership of the means of production and the wage slavery which is a component of this system, as incompatible with the principle that labor must be freely undertaken and under the control of the producer. (1973, 376)

There is no contradiction with any principle of liberty, since for Chomsky it is always *the anarchist* who must oppose these things, not the state or any other structure. He believes that because people have an instinct for freedom, derived from their naturally creative natures, they would not 'choose' to engage in capitalist acts of buying and selling labour power. He concedes that, if existing social structures facilitate large concentrations of property ownership, then those without property are very likely to 'choose' to sell their labour power (although many do not). Where capitalist ownership does not exist, other possibilities would arise. Indeed he imagines it would not be necessary to compel people, using the threat of destitution, to do the rotten jobs in a socialist society.

Let's recall that science and technology and intellect have not been devoted to examining that question or to overcoming the onerous and self-destructive character of the necessary work of society. The reason is that it has always been assumed that there is a substantial body of wage slaves who will do it simply because otherwise they'll starve. (Chomsky, 1981a, 254)

Anti-Americanism and the Responsibility of Intellectuals

Apart from attacking Chomsky's notion that those with political power and those with economic power are *one* elite, Chomsky's critics also accuse him of anti-Americanism. For many, his critique of US policy means he is an apologist for the atrocities committed by those officially labelled rogue states, or just nefarious. A person in Chomsky's position, and with his viewpoint, could certainly become a critic of many other regimes and activities. However, he has chosen to focus upon the reprehensible activities for which the US is responsible. His explanation has three elements. First:

I find it [US foreign policy] in general horrifying, and ... I think that it is possible for me to do something to modify it, at least to mitigate some of its most dangerous and destructive aspects. In the concrete circumstances of my

own society, where I live and work, there are various ways to do this: speaking, writing, organizing, demonstrating, resisting and others. (Chomsky, 1988a, 369)

Second:

In part it [a focus on US foreign policy] reflects a judgement as to relative importance: the impact of US foreign policy on millions of people throughout the world is enormous, and furthermore these policies substantially increase the probability of superpower conflict and global catastrophe. (ibid., 371)

And third:

In part, it [a focus on US foreign policy] reflects my feeling that while many people here do excellent and important work concerning crucial domestic issues, very few concerned themselves in the same way and with the same depth of commitment to foreign policy issues. (ibid., 371)

Chomsky's decision therefore is political. As an American citizen he feels it is most appropriate to criticize his own government and state. This does not mean that he is unaware of or condones the atrocities of other state or corporate elites. Rather, he believes that as an American citizen he has some responsibility to question the actions and rhetoric of his own government, and that, as a citizen of the United States of America he may just be able to have an effect on the actions of his own government.

It is, for example, easy enough for an American intellectual to write critical analyses of the behaviour of the Soviet Union in Afghanistan and Eastern Europe (or in supporting the Argentine generals), but such efforts have little if any effect in modifying or reversing the actions of the U.S.S.R.... Suppose, for example, that some German intellectual chose in 1943 to write articles on terrible things done by Britain, or the U.S., or Jews. What he write [sic] might be correct, but we would not be very much impressed. (Chomsky, ibid., 369)

The Libertarian Socialism that Underpins the Propaganda Model

Chomsky's distinctive contribution as a social scientist is that his analysis of social and political realities rests upon an essentialist (yet unverifiable, so open to amendment) account of human nature. This approach underpins his propaganda model. Chomsky's account sees humans as having the capacity for creativity which thrives best *without* the constraints placed upon it by elitist organizations – the state, capitalism and the media in their current form. For Chomsky the human drive for autonomy and freedom exists so that we can express our creative potential. This means that a society which places such concentrations of power in the form of the contemporary state is ultimately inimical to full human expression. The contemporary state breathes life into the ailing capitalist economy in an effort

to keep it alive. It coalesces power around the nation state, giving rise to nationalisms, where the corporate elites themselves seek access to markets and labour beyond national boundaries (Edgley, 2000). The political elite thereby ensures the continued existence of our corporate elites, who are not interested in challenging existing economic and power relations, nationally or internationally. Chomsky's version of human nature drives his analysis of the state, which in turn operates as the foundation for his analysis of US foreign policy as well as the propaganda model, with its critique of the media's version of associated events.

So, to conclude, there is, in my view, much that is distinctive in Chomsky's theoretical position, and which underpins his propaganda model. It is made up of a view of human nature for which liberty, creativity and abduction are fundamental, giving rise to humans with agency. It recognizes that we live our lives within a political and social reality composed of structures that are made and remade. It insists that these fundamentals give rise to power and responsibility in and for all of us.

What of his wider contribution to the social sciences? It consists generally in his theory and method, which can be applied so successfully and consistently to the use of power, and particularly state power, but also to media power and how it is used. Specifically, his contribution rests in the admonition to consider the claim that it is the national state – even in its apparently democratic form – which holds together the unjust social and economic conditions we still see today. Finally, he shows how belief, and particularly the belief in the humanity of human nature, can properly be a crucial part of the repertoire and the motivation of the responsible social scientist. In the end, however, as Herring and Robinson argue:

... this is not about Chomsky, but about the overall marginalization of the perspective which he represents. Analysis of Chomsky's marginalization by academia is worthwhile only to the extent that it contributes to academia facing up to its responsibility to acknowledge and end its active and passive participation in supporting elite interests. (2003, 568)

For me, ultimately, it is Chomsky's optimism about us as humans which is most inspiring, along with his dedication to help us step beyond the propaganda and out of 'the bewildered herd' into an autonomous and creative existence.

References

- Alford, M. (2007) *A propaganda model for Hollywood? Representations of American foreign policy in contemporary films*, Ph.D. thesis, University of Bath, UK.
- Alford, M. and R. Graham (2009) 'In the parents' best interest: the deep politics of Hollywood', *Information Clearing House*, available at

- <http://informationclearinghouse.info/article21981.htm> (accessed 26 February 2009).
- Billen, A. (2002) 'Interview with Chomsky', *The Times* 19 August.
- Chomsky, N. (1969) *American Power and the New Mandarins*, Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Chomsky, N. (1973) *For Reasons of State*, New York: Vintage.
- Chomsky, N. (1981a) *Noam Chomsky: Radical Priorities*, edited by C.P. Otero, Montreal: Black Rose Books.
- Chomsky, N. (1981b) *Rules and Representations*, Oxford: Blackwell
- Chomsky, N. (1988a) *Noam Chomsky: Language and Politics*, edited by C.P. Otero, Montreal: Black Rose Books.
- Chomsky, N. (1988b) *The Chomsky Reader*, edited by J. Peck, London: Serpent's Tail.
- Chomsky, N. (1992) *Deterring Democracy*, London: Vintage.
- Chomsky, N. (1993) *Year 501: The Conquest Continues*, London: Verso.
- Chomsky, N. and D. Barsamian (1992b) *Noam Chomsky: Chronicles of Dissent*, Stirling: AK Press.
- Chomsky, N. and E.S. Herman (1979) *The Political Economy of Human Rights*, vols 1 and 2, Nottingham: Spokesman.
- Edgley, A. (2000) *The Social and Political Thought of Noam Chomsky*, London: Routledge.
- Edgley, A. (2005) 'Chomsky's political critique: essentialism and political theory', *Contemporary Political Theory* 4: 129–53.
- Forbes, I. (1983) 'Conclusion', in I. Forbes and S. Smith (eds.) *Politics and Human Nature*, London: Frances Pinter.
- Galtung, J. and M.H. Ruge (1970) 'The structure of foreign news', in J. Tunstall (ed.) *Media Sociology*, London: Constable.
- Golding, P. and G. Murdock (1991) 'Culture, communications and political economy', in J. Curran and M. Gurevitch (eds.) *Mass Media and Society*, London: Edward Arnold.
- Herman, E.S. and N. Chomsky (2002 [1979, 1988]) *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media*, New York: Pantheon.
- Herring, E. and P. Robinson (2003) 'Too polemical or too critical? Chomsky on the study of the news media and US foreign policy', *Review of International Studies* 29(4), 553-568.
- Humboldt, Wilhelm von (1969 [1792]) *The Limits of State Action*, edited by J.W. Burrow, Cambridge Studies in the History and Theory of Politics, London: Cambridge University Press.
- Jagger, A. (1988) *Feminist Politics and Human Nature*, New Jersey: Rowman and Littlefield.
- Kamm, O. (2005) 'For and against Chomsky', available at http://www.prospect-magazine.co.uk/article_details.php?id=7110 (accessed 20 November 2008).

- Laffey, M. (2003) 'Chomsky and IR theory after the Cold War', *Review of International Studies* 29(4): 587–604.
- Lukes, S. (1980) 'Chomsky's betrayal of truths', *Times Higher Education Supplement* 7 November.
- Maguire, J.M. (1978) *Marx's Theory of Politics*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Marx, K. and F. Engels (1935 [1848]) *The Communist Manifesto*, Moscow: Lawrence and Wishart.
- McLellan, D. (1977) *Karl Marx: Selected Writings* Oxford: Oxford University Press
- Miliband, R. (1973) 'Poulantzas and the capitalist state', *New Left Review* 82(Nov.–Dec.): 83-92.
- Nietzsche, F. (1968 [1886]) *Beyond Good and Evil*, in *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, trans. and ed. W. Kaufman, New York: Modern Library.
- Nozick, R. (1986) *Anarchy, State and Utopia*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- Poulantzas, N. (1973) *Political Power and Social Class*, London: New Left Books.
- Rai, M. (1995) *Chomsky's Politics*, London: Verso.
- Rocker, R. (1937) *Nationalism and Culture*, Los Angeles: Rocker Publications Committee.
- Skillen, T. (1972) 'The statist conception of politics', *Radical Philosophy* 2(summer).
- Wilkin, P. (1995) *Noam Chomsky: on knowledge, human nature and freedom*, Ph.D. thesis, University of Southampton, UK.
- Wilkin, P. (1997) *Noam Chomsky: On Knowledge, Human Nature and Freedom*, London: Macmillan.
- Wilkin, P. (1999) Foucault and Chomsky on human nature and politics: an essential difference? *Social Theory & Practice* 25(2): 177–210.