

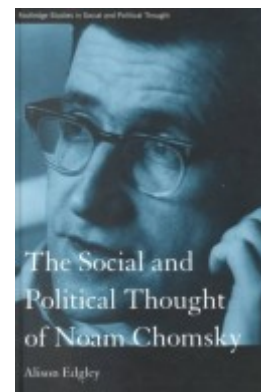
The Social and Political Thought of Noam Chomsky

By Alison Edgley

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I should declare an interest as I open this review; I met the author of this book at a recent conference and got on very well with her. In fact, she gave me the copy that now sits, heavily annotated, on my bookshelf. So, take my praise of it with that in mind.

Edgley is arguing that although

“Chomsky's work has an intended atheoretical quality to it. He wants us to concentrate on the detail, gruesome though it is. He wants us to remain in touch with the experience of those in the picture and he wants us to feel the 'reality' of those experiences.” (page 5),

if you look hard enough there are social and political theories he uses as underpinnings.

She quotes him (twice) as saying *'Is there anything in the social sciences that even merits the term 'theory'?' That is, some explanatory system involving hidden structures with non-trivial principles that provide understanding of phenomena. If so I've missed it'.*

In six chapters- entitled **political theory, the 'good society, state capitalism, state theory, nationalism and politics and the media**, she teases out his theoretical underpinnings, showing a good grasp of the literature in question and work of relevant theorists (it was nice to see Bob Jessop, an interesting theorist of nationalism, get explained sympathetically).

She gives various excellent glosses of both the changing emphases of his work-

Chomsky's early work focuses on the more obvious ways in which the state can exercise control through the military and through the judiciary. He has also always had an eye upon the way in which intellectuals are quick to accept such control as natural, thereby justifying the process. His later work advances on the analysis of control by exposing the more subtle aspects of state control, through, for example, the media.
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and concepts like Military Keynesianism.

This is the system whereby the state stimulates demand, in this case for military hardware. The need to stimulate demand arises because the economy has the tendency to spiral into recession as a result of investors withdrawing investment when the return is too low. Keynes argued that if the government stepped in and boosted demand, investors would be given the incentive to invest. Under the military form of Keynesianism, the government not only subsidises production costs but is also the consumer. Keynes' model, however, sought for governments to intervene in the arena of welfare, with housing, hospitals and social welfare generally. Keynes recognised that workers are not just workers, they are also consumers, and that demand from them, and thus consumption, would be boosted if they had a higher standard of living. Hence creating a health productive economy. However, as Chomsky points out, these forms of state expenditure, when taken too far, interfere with the class-based nature of society, by giving ordinary people security and expectations which undermine the privileges of the wealthy.

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Her treatment of one of Chomsky's key influences, Rudolph Rocker, is excellent.

Indeed, Rocker 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. As far as Rocker is concerned '[t]he rise of the nationalist states not only did not further economic evolution in any way whatever, but the endless wars of that epoch and the senseless interference of despotism in the life of industry created that condition of cultural barbarism in which many of the best achievements of industrial technique were wholly or partly lost and had to be rediscovered later on.' In a discussion of the development of European industry, Rocker talks

of 'unbridled favouritism.. convert[ing] entire industrial lines into monopolies.
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Given this, Chomsky's repeated statements that technologies are selected not merely for their profitability but also for their effects on class composition (e.g. Numerical control machine tools) are even more interesting.

Edgley's writing is rarely weighted down with jargon, though as is inevitable with any PhD thesis that becomes a book, bits of it are heavy going, especially the extended Hayek/Nozick etc section in chapter 2. These bits might usefully be skimmed over.

The only other thing I'd say is that there are some damn fine bits of Chomsky's "World Orders, Old and New" that would have illuminated some of Edgley's points to great effect. But there is only so much background reading you can do, and Chomsky seems to write a book more frequently than a normal person can read one.

If you're interested in Chomsky, and you've read a few of his books and interviews, this is a very good place to start.

Also worth reading: Milan Rai's "Chomsky's Politics", which I read when it came out, in the mid-1990s. (The other, more recent, Chomsky books may well be worth a read, I don't know. I am not so much interested in Chomsky's biography or what he thinks about specific issues as in using his example and his methods to do work of my own.)