



Chomsky's Political Critique: Essentialism and Political Theory

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This article challenges conventional views of Chomsky's critique of American foreign policy as political extremism. It argues that it is necessary to begin with an understanding of the theoretical and philosophical framework he employs in all of his political writings. Chomsky has a political theory. Although it is underpinned by an essentialist view of human nature, it is neither reductionist nor conservative. The core of that view is a hopeful (and unverifiable) view of human need, and celebration of freedom. In this respect, he is in the company of many of those in power, who claim to pursue policies that are consistent with these same value orientations. Chomsky's methodology does not lead him to question the authenticity of beliefs about human nature. Rather, he probes the policies, testing for consistency and with reference to what he believes is good for humans. His politically 'extreme' conclusions are derived from his use of evidence created and supplied by those in power. It is the systematic maintenance of the logical connection in his theory between his hopeful view of human need, his view of the good society, and his critique of existing social organization that accounts for Chomsky's resolutely subjective, yet consistent and assertive analysis of events. Recognition of the nature of Chomsky's thought is a proper prerequisite for the kind of discussion about the quality and value of his political analysis that the issues deserve, but at present is sadly lacking.

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Introduction

It is evidently hard to feel indifferent about Chomsky's analysis of American foreign policy. His work and views either elicit widespread and great admiration or are subject to heated attacks and searing criticism. In the face of such strong reactions, the question becomes one of how to mediate and adjudicate between such passionately polar opposites, and to differentiate between considered judgement and mere opinion. It is certainly not a case of



simple ideological differences, since by no means all of Chomsky's critics are on the Right. In the 1980s, Chomsky (1981a) found himself in a public spat with Steven Lukes (1980) over America's response to the Pol Pot regime, and more recently, Chomsky has found himself at odds with Christopher Hitchens (Billen, 2002) over the events of 9/11. On what grounds is it possible, then, to adjudicate between the kind of accusation levelled by Arthur Schlesinger, who argues that Chomsky foreswears 'reasoned analysis' and fabricates evidence, and Chomsky's accusation that Schlesinger is guilty of 'deliberate and gross misrepresentation, invention' and an 'inability to get the simplest facts straight' (Nielsen, 1973). While both men are clearly capable of wounding invective, such claims suggest a careful look at the quality of the evidence used by Schlesinger and Chomsky, a check on the handling of data in particular, and a review of argumentative competencies. Who would emerge as the more partial, and which approach would emerge as flawed and discredited?

While an examination of the evidential base may produce the possibility of adjudication, an alternative approach would be to analyse the evidence within the context of the theoretical framework that informs the interpretation. Exposing the theoretical framework can explain the extent to which two commentators talk past one another. Whatever the other merits of Chomsky's interpretation, it can be shown that Chomsky's analysis of events is systematically informed by a rigorous and (perhaps unfashionably) logical theoretical framework.

The argument presented here is, in effect, a critique of Chomsky's own claim that he does not have a political theory (Chomsky, 1981b, 236). Close attention to Chomsky's work and the accounts of his ideas leads to two important observations. Firstly, despite the massive political and economic changes that have occurred in world events over the past 40 years, his analysis over this period is remarkably consistent in its interpretation of events. His analysis seems as unshaken by geopolitical events such as the so-called end of the Cold War (Laffey, 2003) as it does by the uncertainties generated by postmodernism within the academy. The second is that most academic assessments of his contribution to debates in world affairs find his analysis wanting in various ways (Herring and Robinson, 2003). Usually his work is written off as being partial in some way, and only worthy of mention because it is representative of some unfavourably narrow and therefore faulty interpretation, which is nevertheless 'popular' with a certain (even if quite large) section of the public. Critics are liable to dismiss him for being a mere conspiracy theorist, a Marxist, an instrumentalist or, worse still, some mixture of all three (Golding and Murdock, 1991, 18).

As Chomsky (1989a) himself often observes, lively debate within permissible boundaries is encouraged but step outside those boundaries and one's interpretation is in danger of being perceived as outlandish and/or unthinkable.



Herring and Robinson (2003) demonstrate the extent to which, despite offering remarkably similar findings to many mainstream academics, Chomsky's analysis of the relationship between the media and US foreign policy is systematically ignored. Mark Laffey (2003) argues the same in his analysis of the discipline of International Relations. By association then, we are left to infer that the evidence he uses to support his interpretation of events and causes must also be suspect, as somehow selective or faulty.

It is my contention that, rather than investigating the evidential base in Chomsky's plethora of voluminous works in the hope of finding clinching discoveries², a more interesting route to understanding his interpretation of events is to consider the broader theoretical and philosophical framework employed. This is not to argue that evidence is unimportant for as Chomsky (2003) himself says we should be 'deadly serious about the use of evidence' (605). However, interpretation and analysis of social and political affairs is always, as Jaggar (1983) puts it, 'theory laden'. Thus, 'although theories are supposed to explain rather than contradict observations or descriptions, they may imply that certain observations have been misinterpreted or that the supposed data should be redescribed' (Jaggar, 1983, 268). The facts can then be used to 'furnish the test of theories' (Marx in Laffey, 2003, 602). So, while an analysis of the facts will always be crucial what is also required for any serious consideration of Chomsky's contribution to analysis is to place it within his framework, his political theory. It is when the political theory is made explicit that we see why it is possible that two commentators, apparently using the same concepts, for example, freedom, nevertheless interpret events so differently. A political theory employs the imagination in a vision of the future good society, which necessarily brings about a critique of existing society as well as offering some notion of how to get from one to the other. What all such theory must also involve is a view about human nature that necessarily underpins any assertions about human organization.

Human nature, however, is notoriously unverifiable. A large part of what goes into a political theory might accurately be described as unscientifically based. The unscientific part of a theory or an approach to politics promises to be a richer source of insight to a controversial thinker than delving into a mass of political data. Accordingly, this article focuses on Chomsky's assumptions about human nature. It looks at how these ideas inform his notion of the good society, and it considers the methodology he employs for his critique of contemporary social and political affairs. 'Human nature' and 'the good society' pose special difficulties for political scientists who are trying to adjudicate between political philosophies, because the basic criteria cannot be scientifically verified, while the methodology is grounded in these non-scientific elements. For Chomsky, this is precisely why this sort of work ought not to be called a science. He is happy, therefore, to admit that his analysis rests upon a



hope or a belief in human nature. Further, he claims that it is only intellectually honest to admit that any and all analyses of political and social affairs do exactly the same. This is the argument of the article: that it is the logic of the relationship between one's view of human nature and one's vision of the good society that is of significance when adjudicating between competing analyses, and, in this case, forming a judgement about Chomsky.

Keeping the Essentials of Essentialism

Chomsky has been a prolific writer on American foreign policy and international relations for over 30 years. What is striking about his many works, however, is his consistency of interpretation. This suggests that — despite the fact that Chomsky rarely sets out his interpretative framework in his political writings — he must employ a systematic theoretical and philosophical framework, which informs his interpretation and understanding of events. Chomsky (1969, 271 and 1988, 373) claims that he does not 'do' theory, that he does not have a theory, and that he focuses and comments on situations and policies using only the available empirical evidence. This article rejects Chomsky's claim that he does not 'do' theory. It is argued here that Chomsky's approach does amount to a theory. In conventional political theory terms, it is neither conservative, liberal, socialist, marxist nor libertarian (Edgley, 2000). Neither is he a social constructivist, a post-structuralist or indeed a postmodernist.

Nevertheless, his works rest on a theory, which logically correlates a critique of the present, a conception of the future good society, and notions of how to get there. Not only does Chomsky have a political theory, but he also openly and resolutely admits the variable of human nature, which for most social and political theorists remains only implicit. When this variable remains implicit, as it does in most analyses of social and political affairs, the difficulties in adjudicating between competing analyses are magnified. If, however, the variable of human nature becomes explicit, it is easier to comprehend the derivation of different interpretations of evidence. It also helps to establish whether the theory and thus the interpretation is coherent and based in logic. This variable needs to be foregrounded if we are to make sense of extreme variations in social and political analysis of events. This is because, as Chomsky (1988, 597) himself argues, it informs any account of human social and political organization.

How then, does a view about human nature impinge upon political analysis? Putting aside for the moment social constructivist and post-modernist analysis, accounts or critiques of human social and political organization will be underpinned explicitly or implicitly by the virtue or otherwise of a certain value or values. Much contemporary analysis has broadly revolved around the



values of freedom or equality, whereas earlier forms of social and political organization might have involved disputes around issues of duty and responsibility. The value then influences the analysis of events. The analysis is likely to involve an attempt to show how this or that value is or is not being realized. However, the value is presumably only significant to the analysis if the value is regarded as necessary to or enhancing of human life. Those who fight for freedom must have the view that freedom enhances human existence, thus satiating a human need. There is no use in trying to enhance human life by seeking to realize some abstract value such as freedom, if in fact this freedom works against our nature. Intellectually, we may like the idea of the value of freedom, but there is not much point fighting for it, if our human nature left to its own devices would ensure our lives to be nasty, brutish and short. The freedom fighter, no matter the honour of his or her values, will be fighting a losing battle. Human nature will have the last word.

For example, it is commonplace, especially within liberal thinking, for the implicit assumption to be made that our nature is predicated upon competitive self-interest.³ Despite or maybe because of this, value is placed upon the notion that we are or should be autonomous, self-determining beings. Thus, freedom is accorded value and yet the underlying assumptions about our human nature mean that much political analysis places a centrality on the requirement for a more or less limited state. Freedom then for many analysts is a core value, but given the context of our fallible natures, minimalist social structures are nevertheless required to protect one individual having his or her freedom infringed by the exercise of another's freedom. Without the state there is anarchy. The deleterious image of anarchy is predicated upon specific assumptions about human nature.

By contrast, there are those who espouse the value of equality. Those objecting to an egalitarian solution to social and political problems are also likely to do so on the grounds that such an objective would go against our nature. An egalitarian solution would demand an authoritarian state presence, putting it into conflict if not vitiating what is assumed to be a natural drive for freedom. Egalitarians, again often implicitly, overcome such a criticism by taking a view that rejects any *a priori* claims about human nature, positing instead the human being as a blank sheet onto which things can be written, suggesting that humans are malleable in convenient respects. Thus, once the state has revolutionized society and its structures, the state could wither away leaving behind socialist woman and man. So while views on human nature are generally implicit, when they are extracted and made explicit they usually involve mutually exclusive sides of a dichotomy (Mulhall and Swift, 1996). On the one hand, human beings have a fixed nature and seek self-determination and autonomy (as in the liberal picture, which leads to the view that they thereby require freedom to be fully human). Alternatively, they are capable of



change and improvement (as in some Marxist positions, so the values of equality can be inculcated fully into the human condition consistent with new relations of productions) (Forbes, 1983).

All theories, even post-modernist and/or constructivist⁴ ones, logically involve some notion of human nature, and are therefore not immune from charges of essentialism. If, as social constructivists argue, the human subject is shaped from the flux and plurality of discourses and discursive practices, then the myriad of possibilities to human identity are infinite. While such positions claim to be anti-essentialist, because the subject is supposed to be unconstrained by innate properties, the human condition is nevertheless being characterized by malleability and plasticity (Daniels, 2003). For social constructivists such a conception of the human subject logically lends itself to valuing liberty, although it is most likely to be expressed in a post-modern idiom, through values such as identity, diversity and multi-culturalism.

Thus, the most hotly contested values in mainstream 20th-century politics, liberty and equality, are predicated upon very different notions about human nature. What is interesting however, is that despite the polarization over values and human nature between liberals and egalitarians, both culminate in a view that logically gives prominence and significance to a role for the state. Such an outcome does not follow for social constructivists. Similarly, this outcome signals a clear difference between standard political arguments and the theory that emerges from Chomsky's work, where no such conclusion is deemed valid.

Ultimately, all theoretical positions can be considered essentialist, in that they imply that humans have intrinsic properties or an 'essence' (Macey, 2000). This is a controversial suggestion, since it is often the case that an analysis of human social affairs is found wanting if it can be accused of essentialism. This is due, in part, to the assertion that essentialism is dubious within political discourse because it is reductionist and only offers politically conservative options for change (Jaggar, 1983, 106). In 1971, Foucault debated issues of human nature with Chomsky on Dutch television (Elders, 1974). Foucault's criticism of Chomsky rests upon three assumptions about essentialism (Daniels, 2003). First, that essentialism is biologically reductionist and crudely so. In other words, that all forms of human motivation, behaviour and thus social organization can only ever be a reflection of certain transcendental, universal characteristics of human essence and that this essence is biologically determined. Second, that notions of human essence place emphasis on and thereby produce homogenized humans. Such homogenization is deeply flawed in the view of the social constructivist because it denies the significance of differences in human identity and cultural form. Foucault's (1981) concern with modernity and the Enlightenment project was precisely that it suppressed and undermined human complexity and diversity. Third, that essentialism cannot allow for the contingent and thus infinite possibilities for emancipation



of the human condition. Essentialism's determinism then, ultimately undermines the possibility of meaningful agency, by constraining the possibilities for emancipation.

Social constructivism by claiming to be anti-essentialist, lays claims to be a progressive approach, since it places its emphasis on human difference, thereby positing the limitless possibilities to human identity and thus social forms. Chomsky's essentialism, it shall be argued, is not reductionist, homogenizing or deterministic. Rather, his essentialism enables us to form a judgement about the relative merits of one form of social organization over another.

The Essentialism of a Libertarian Socialist

When doing social and political analysis, to admit the variable of human nature raises predictable questions. How are we to establish a picture of human nature without merely extrapolating from existing social and political organization? How are we to establish human need beyond bare necessity? And how are we to verify answers to these questions?

Chomsky (1981b, 245) describes himself as a libertarian socialist. He prefers this term to the more ambiguous term anarchism to distinguish himself from right wing and/or relativist versions (Edgley, 2000, 19, 47). For Chomsky, the classic liberal tradition, with its roots in the Enlightenment and its emphasis on freedom, is central in any definition of libertarian socialism. Indeed he argues '[i]f one were to see a single dominant idea, within the anarchist tradition, that might be defined as 'libertarian socialist,' it should... be... liberty' (Chomsky, 1973, 374). However, for Chomsky, freedom is not central because his view of human nature involves a quest for autonomy, self-ownership and atomism, so typical of liberal and much libertarian thought. For Chomsky, the fundamental characteristic of human nature is creativity. It follows, for him, that human beings require conditions of freedom in order to cultivate their naturally creative capacities. These creative capacities do not in turn manufacture a need for autonomy and self-determination, rather they foster and demand the possibility of cooperative, interdependent mutuality. In other words, if our society nurtured our creative potentials, our human nature would not quest for autonomy and self-determination, but rather cooperative interdependence. Thus for Chomsky, liberty is the means by which we can achieve a non-statist socialist end.

What is distinctive about the way that his core value underpins his political theory is that freedom does not require mediation by a more or less prominent state, even though freedom is essential for the exercise of human creative potential. Given freedom, Chomsky argues, we would seek cooperative interdependence, and this must not be distorted by the presence of a state (or for that matter capitalism). Creativity is integral to our human nature, but



it does not require the support of formal structures of political authority that is the norm for the theoretical orientations of his critics.

Chomsky explicitly identifies himself as a Cartesian rationalist, a view which 'assumes that there are certain intrinsic properties of human nature' (1988, 594). He contrasts this view with Locke's image of the mind as a *tabula rasa* and the empiricist tradition. Like social constructivism, the empiricist tradition holds the view 'that human beings are malleable, that they have no intrinsic characteristics' (1988, 594). Chomsky's opposition to empiricist assumptions about human nature is two-fold. First, '[t]he empiricist conception of human nature has essentially nothing that supports it and much that goes against it' (1988, 595). Second, if human beings are malleable then 'there is no moral barrier to interference with fundamental human rights: humans are just some collection of properties' (1988, 594). Such relativism is of considerable concern to Chomsky, whose own rationalist position is logically informed by a commitment to justice. For Foucault, by contrast, the transcendent principle of justice is just another historically contingent abstract ideal that threatens to categorize and control, rather than to emancipate (Daniels, 2003). How does Chomsky's theory address this standard post-modernist critique? The key to this is the account of creativity in humans.

While Chomsky's essentialism posits that human beings are creative, he recognizes that our creative potentials are not limitless and infinite as social constructivists would have. Rather, Chomsky claims that human beings are wired with the capacity for 'abduction' (Chomsky, 1981c). Abduction is the human predisposition to construct theories about the social and natural world and then test them against the evidence. Ironically, Chomsky self-presents as someone who does not do this as a matter of course. Perhaps it is more accurate to say that Chomsky does it, but does not spend his time writing about it. While on the one hand our capacities for abduction are hugely creative and enabling, they are also constraining. Our capacity for abduction constrains us because we will evaluate our theories both for logical consistency and then against the evidence. Our capacity for abduction means our creative capacities cannot be infinite. Chomsky argues that our abductive ability is rich but unevenly spread and so because of this we can expect to find that human beings are rich and diverse in their talents (Daniels, 2003). For Chomsky, such diversity and creativity is to be celebrated *and* our political structures should facilitate such capacity for difference. So Chomsky is arguing that there are important natural constraints to what we might become as individuals and social beings as well as to the knowledge that we can acquire. The possibilities for human emancipation are not infinite, but neither are they homogenizing or crudely biologically reductionist. As Daniels argues 'Chomsky is able to provide an account of the diversity of human practices and talents as generated from the basis of human nature that is universal' (2003, 12).



From Human Nature to Human Behaviour

Chomsky's critique of American foreign policy, then, rests upon a rationalist view of human nature and this informs his political conclusions regarding the state. If human beings are essentially creative with an 'instinct for freedom' to pursue cooperative ventures, then states and capitalism must work against human nature, because both concentrate power into the hands of a few, thereby denying the many necessary conditions for cooperative, creative humanistic productive activity. In focusing his critique upon the state, he addresses in particular its foreign policy, because it is here that the activities of state actors are most exposed as being inimical to *his* definition of human need. I say *his*, because without this contextualization of his interpretation of human need, his interpretation of events may well be open to the accusation of extremism and or falsity. There are many from all manner of political persuasions who will attack the particular action or actions of a state. Hence, Chomsky was able to share his opposition to the Vietnam war with the likes of both realist international relations scholar Hans Morgenthau and post-structuralist thinkers like Foucault.

What is distinctive about Chomsky's opposition to US foreign policy is that his concern was not with the efficiency or effectiveness of the state's action in Vietnam. Morgenthau and others for example did not question America's 'right' to intervene, but argued that it would fail in its objective which was to contain the power of China (Morgenthau, 1965a, b). Rather Chomsky's position was 'a commitment to the principle that the United States has no right to play any role in the internal affairs of Indochina' (Chomsky, 1973, xiv). Chomsky's position derives from a more general attack on the state. That is the state, by its very nature, undermines the freedom of ordinary human beings, and this was amply demonstrated by the American state's actions in Vietnam. Chomsky's critique, then, was foundational, whereas Morgenthau's was contingent on outcomes.

Foucault, like Chomsky, is critical of the state's *raison d'être*. However, for Foucault, institutional obstacles to emancipatory *difference* rest upon an anti-essentialist notion that 'all specifically human practices and institutions are contingent' (Wilkin, 1999, 183). For Chomsky, such a constructivist position lacks the logic of humanist social justice. Foucault may well be deeply critical of concentrated forms of power, but a constructivist account of human beings, 'can easily degenerate into an extreme form of epistemological scepticism or relativism' (Hammersley, 1995, 93) that defies logic and lends itself to political passivity. Chomsky's position by contrast is logically informed by an essentialist claim for humanist social justice, namely freedom for creative and cooperative interdependence.

This example shows that Chomsky's particular position on an event, while apparently shared by others within the political spectrum, can be shown to be



distinctive because of the theoretical framework within which it is working. It is necessary then to distinguish between reactions to Chomsky's assumptions as distinct from his analysis and conclusions. A disagreement with his definition of human nature entitles one to draw different conclusions about politics and the state (and its foreign policy), but it does not in itself amount to an evaluative critique of Chomsky's work. To achieve that, it is necessary to interrogate the way that Chomsky moves from assumptions to political conclusions.

It has been suggested that a vision of the good society, that correlates to human need, requires imagination. As Allott (1998) argues, it is important not to allow the past and thus our anxieties to constrain our intellect and our imagination about the future. However, in Chomsky's case it can be argued that his essentialism *is* extrapolated from existing conditions, despite present forms of social organization. Chomsky is reluctant to draw any direct connections between his work in linguistics and his work in politics, but it can be argued that there is a logic to be excavated.⁵ His work in linguistics leads him to the view that when using language human beings are creative but 'creativity means free action within the framework of rules' (Chomsky, 1988, 144). This capacity is innate (Edgley, 1970) and suggests that the notion of human creativity can be applied more generally to human behaviour. While he makes no scientific claims because there are none to be made, it is reasonable, he feels, to *believe* that this creativity is a more general feature of human nature. Given this belief, he takes a further step by arguing for 'a conception of human nature which emphasises as essential to it the need for creative work under one's own control, solidarity and cooperation with others' (Chomsky, 1989b, 31). If it could be established, or at least accepted, that creativity was indeed a feature of human nature, then such a feature ought to inform any view of the way in which society might be organised in the *future*. As Chomsky (1988) argues:

[H]aving this view of human nature and human needs, one tries to think about the modes of social organization that would permit the freest and fullest development of the individual, of each individual's potentialities in whatever direction they might take, that would permit him to be fully human in the sense of having the greatest possible scope for his freedom and initiative. (144)

Chomsky is not making any more substantive claims about the specific content of human nature, apart from claiming that we have the capacity for abduction and that we are inherently creative. Creativity can manifest itself in many different ways, both good and bad, constructive and destructive. In his view, humans do demonstrate creativity, despite the odds, and his research in linguistics provides some supporting evidence. However, to argue that human



nature involves a creative capacity does not mean that this capacity will necessarily manifest itself. For some, the very possibility that creativity *may* be directed toward 'bad' ends is justification for state regulation. Chomsky, however, explicitly rejects such a conclusion.

Another famous example illustrates this point. In 1979, Chomsky (1979) signed a petition protesting against the French state's decision to remove Robert Faurisson from his job at the University of Lyon. Faurisson's crime was to write a book denying the Nazi Holocaust against the Jews. Chomsky was then accused of supporting this revisionist account of the holocaust. Chomsky responded by writing an essay defending freedom of expression. This essay was then used as a preface to Faurisson's book, crucially, without Chomsky's knowledge or permission. Chomsky's position was neither defending Faurisson's views nor 'the state the right to determine official truth' (1988, 316). The state should never be used to constrain creative potential, good or bad. However, in Chomsky's view '[a]cting as individuals, most people are not gangsters. However, matters are often different when they subordinate themselves to institutional structures of various sorts' (Chomsky, 1988, 303). For Chomsky the oppressive character of class and statist societies works, with more or less success, to construct a subject, suppressing what may otherwise be more natural tendencies. Nevertheless, it remains the case that our capacity for abduction, our very nature, keeps us in constant dialogue with our social and environmental context. Therefore, despite or perhaps because of his essentialism, Chomsky still places importance upon social structures.

Context-Sensitive Essentialism

Chomsky's view that 'people have an instinct for freedom', driven by their creative capacities, must be placed within a context: '[h]ow the freedom works depends on what the social structures are' (Chomsky, 1988, 758). If the structures facilitate vast concentrations of property ownership, then those without property will probably 'choose' to sell their labour power, and so capitalist acts will occur between 'consenting adults'. This scenario does not facilitate the full range of human creativity, and results in much that is distinctly uncreative work. Conversely, if workers were to take control of the production process, then the structure would facilitate other possibilities. For example, Chomsky argues it might be possible to make tasks that are currently onerous and unpleasant meaningful, so that the question of compelling people to do the rotten jobs in a socialist society would not arise. Our creative capacities could be harnessed to overcoming the tedious and repetitive tasks in society.

Let's recall that science, 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, 1981b, 254)

Further, he argues that if work is organized according to the principle that it gives workers satisfaction, it will not necessarily mean that the things that are useful to people will not get produced. '[I]t's by no means clear — in fact I think it's false — that contributing to the enhancement of pleasure and satisfaction in work is inversely proportional to contributing to the value of the output'. (Chomsky, 1981b, 257). 'My feeling is that part of what makes work meaningful is that it does have use, that its products do have use'. (Chomsky, 1981b, 256). The notion that people will have to be compelled to produce certain useful products under socialism may not arise. Even were it to arise, the society, the community, has then to decide how to make compromises. Indeed, establishing human need beyond bare necessity is the responsibility of those within society at any particular point in time. What is regarded as 'necessity', just as what is regarded as poverty today, will be relative to the historically contingent environmental issues of the day.

Each individual is both a producer and a consumer, after all, and that means that each individual has to join in those socially determined compromises — if in fact there are compromises. And again I feel the nature of the compromise is much exaggerated because of the distorting prism of the really coercive and personally destructive system in which we live. (Chomsky, 1981b, 258)

The notion that compulsion would have to occur in a socialist society to ensure the production of socially useful products without capitalist acts is a notion extrapolated from observations about human behaviour within a society that is manifestly unfree.

[O]ur characteristic assumption that pleasure in work, pride in work, is either unrelated to or negatively related to the value of the output is related to a particular stage in social history, namely capitalism, in which human beings are tools of production. It is by no means necessarily true. (Chomsky, 1981b, 257)

So for Chomsky social structures trigger and facilitate or constrain and restrict human potential. The social, political and economic environment then is not a neutral category, but rather helps or hinders the fostering of human potentiality. As such, conditions most suited to human nature will ensure maximum possibility for humans to fulfil their potential. Far from implying conservative options for change and reductionism then, Chomsky's essentialism demands radical reprioritization.



The Problems of Verifying Essentialist Claims

It has been argued that Chomsky is unwilling to draw conclusions from his work in linguistics for his political analysis. While we may deduce that creative capacities in language suggest a more general capacity for creativity in human beings, Chomsky (1981b, 385–386) is clear that the evidence for such a leap of logic is not there. Indeed, Chomsky is of the view that we are a long way from, and may never have, anything like a scientifically verifiable account of human nature. However, this does not mean we should not acknowledge that *a* notion of human nature is employed within all critiques of human affairs. He cautions intellectuals to be honest and acknowledge both the inevitability of the use of a notion of human nature within an analysis of human social and political affairs, but more importantly to admit the unscientific nature of this variable.

Despite the lack of evidence for his essentialist claims, Chomsky (1973) is deeply sceptical of constructivist accounts that propose the view that humans have no intrinsic nature. For Chomsky (1988), the suggestion that we are empty vessels into which knowledge and values can be poured has deeply dubious implications:

I would like to assume on the basis of fact and hope on the basis of confidence in the human species that there are innate structures of mind. If there are not, if humans are just plastic and random organisms, then they are fit subjects for shaping behavior. If humans only become as they are by random changes, then why not control that randomness by the state authority or the behaviourist technologist or anything else? Naturally I hope that it will turn out that there are intrinsic structures determining human need and fulfilment of human need. (144)

Clearly for Chomsky, the human being is complex but it does not therefore follow that the structures of the mind are random. In addition, for Chomsky, admitting that the structures of the mind are complex does not mean we should resort to metaphysical explanations. For Chomsky (1989a,b), despite the complexity of the human brain or mind, our human nature must, in his view, have an intrinsic nature to it:

The background myth is that the human brain is radically different from any other object in the physical world: namely, it's diffuse and unstructured ... malleable and pliable and so on. Well, that just cannot be true. Everything we know is completely counter to it. Everything we know points to the fact that it's like other physical objects that develop in the natural world. And if it is, we're not going to find that one system has the same structural properties as other systems. You don't expect to find it in the other parts of the body. Why should it be true above the neck? (32–33)



Despite Chomsky's certainty that the human mind and nature can and must be studied in the same way as any other natural object, that is, naturalistically⁶, he is nevertheless sceptical about whether knowledge about the mind is in fact 'introspectible'.

[I]n fact the one fundamental mistake that I think is made by the Leibnizian theory of mind is its assumption that one could dredge out these principles, that if you really worked hard at it and introspected, you could bring to consciousness the contents of the mind. I don't see any reason to believe that the sinews and connections of thought, in Leibnitz's sense, are even in principle available to introspection. (Chomsky, 1988, 111)

Thus, Chomsky feels it is highly unlikely that we will ever be able to verify his or any account of human 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. It is for this reason that Chomsky is so critical of much that passes for social and political 'science'. 'Whether the results of a naturalistic approach merit the honorific term 'science' depends on the results it achieves' (Chomsky, 1996, 32). In his view, too much about human need and human nature remains uncertain. Despite this, it is foundational to social and political analysis. However, whether the variable of human nature remains explicit or implicit is not really the problem. Because its presence underpins any analysis of social and political affairs, the logic of its presence means claims derived from its presence can only ever be conjecture. His own ideas are no exception. The failure to acknowledge this informs his generally dim view of much that passes for social and political '*science*'.

...[S]ocial 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 the 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, 1988, 373)

Chomsky, then, is explicit in his use of an essential variable in his analysis that nevertheless remains unverifiable. This unverifiable variable explains why so many political concepts or values are, and will remain 'essentially contested' (Gallie, 1956). Their relevance and interpretation rest upon ideas and notions of human nature and need, which are beyond the reach of proofs and conclusive evidence. The impossibility of verification means Chomsky is content to restrict himself to hope. As he explains using the analogy of 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, 1992a, 355)

Chomsky's epistemology manages to reflect postmodern uncertainties regarding claims to 'truth' (resting as it does on 'hope' and 'belief'), and *because* not *despite* this is consistent with an essentialist anti-constructivist foundationalism. Wilkin (1997) locates Chomsky's work within the critical realist tradition. This tradition both asserts a rationalist epistemology yet accepts that there will always be competing interpretations about the natural and social world. Competing theories are however, to be evaluated for their logical consistency and in relation to the empirical evidence available. As Wilkin (1999) argues 'all theories are fallible, and, as Chomsky concedes readily about his own work, likely to be superseded in time by better and more penetrating accounts' (187). Chomsky's analysis then has to be judged on its own terms. One of the major elements of this evaluation must therefore focus on the congruence between its logical consistency and the empirical evidence available. Another element is his understanding of the good society and what Chomsky thinks is appropriate given his view of human nature.

The Libertarian Socialist's 'Good Society'

The very term libertarian socialism is usually regarded as a contradiction in terms. Conventional wisdom has it that the concepts and values of liberty and equality are mutually exclusive. For Chomsky, however, freedom must include the freedom of access to material resources just as equality must include equality in decision-making processes. His good society, therefore, is, and can only be libertarian socialist.

So, for Chomsky

[a] 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)

The growth of private power and the attendant economic concentration represents a major threat not just to equality but to liberty and freedom as well. Liberty and some form of material equality are treated as synonymous or



interdependent concepts. Chomsky takes the view that the equivalence of these concepts was taken for granted by the classic liberals of the enlightenment period. That classic liberal thought did not dwell too heavily upon the concerns of material inequality, is, in Chomsky's view, a result of the particular historical moment in time in which these ideas were born. Classic liberal thought was a product of an age when feudal hierarchy and monarchical despotism were being questioned and attacked. These ideals were not extended to an attack on the inegalitarian development of property relations under capitalism, which are also constraints on liberty and freedom, because they had not yet become a feature of the society which produced such ideas (Laffey, 2003, 597). As Chomsky (1973) says of Humboldt's ideas '[t]his classic of liberal thought, completed in 1792, is in its essence profoundly, though prematurely, anti-capitalist' (375). Elsewhere, again referring to Humboldt's work, he argues:

he doesn't speak at all of the need to resist private concentration of power: rather he speaks of the need to resist the encroachment of coercive State power. And that is what one finds also in the early American tradition. But the reason is that that was the only kind of power there was. I mean, Humboldt takes for granted that individuals are roughly equivalent in their private power, and that the only real imbalance of power lies in the centralized authoritarian state, and individual freedom must be sustained against its intrusion... . (Chomsky, 1981b, 248)

As such, in Chomsky's (1973) view, these liberal enlightenment 'ideas must be attenuated beyond recognition to be transmuted into an ideology of industrial capitalism' (375). So in Chomsky's vision of the good society freedom is crucial but must include access to material resources. For many, however, Chomsky's position involves a paradox.

Why Would People with Freedom Not Behave Like Capitalists?

Robert Nozick (1986) argues that liberty is an empty concept if the 'socialist society... [forbids] capitalist acts between consenting adults' (163). As far as Nozick is concerned, the consistent anarchist cannot, as Chomsky does, 'oppose private ownership of the means of production' (1986, 245 note 6). It suggests to Nozick a contradiction. Here, we have the often referred to problem that for there to be equality under socialism there would have to be coercion or compulsion.

I want to argue that Chomsky is using the word 'oppose' here in a particular way. 'Oppose' does not mean deny, but in order to be consistent *the anarchist* must 'oppose private ownership of the means of production'. In Chomsky's view, it is farcical to describe capitalist relations of production as 'free



enterprise', when what one is observing is 'a system of autocratic governance of the economy in which neither the community nor the workforce has any role — a system that we would call 'fascist' if translated to the political sphere' (1988, 204). For Chomsky what the people do with their liberty then is presumably a matter for them. It is at this point that Chomsky's views on human nature inform his claims about the cogency of a libertarian socialist position. He argues

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, 1988, 756)

In his view, *under conditions of freedom*, people would not 'choose' to engage in acts that are constitutive of capitalist economic relations. He recognizes he cannot prove this. 'It is really a hope about what human beings are like' (Chomsky, 1988, 756). Therefore, as has been argued, it is necessary to see what are only Chomsky's *hopes* about possible future forms, as well as criticisms of existing forms of human social organization, within the context of his ideas about human nature.

Libertarian Socialism: the End of History?

For many the emancipatory project associated with the Enlightenment and modernity has been tainted by the accusation that transcendent political principles of justice, involve claims to truth and certainty that risk totalitarian outcomes (Lyotard, 1992). Quests for truth, according to Foucault (1981), have the effect of ordering and controlling people, rather than emancipating them. Radical political theories that deploy teleological epistemologies are vulnerable to the accusation that the ends come to justify the means. However, Chomsky's libertarian socialism, while impeccably radical, is not teleological in this way. As we have seen, Chomsky is not making absolutist claims for truth. Chomsky's critical realism recognizes the significance of interpretation. For him there can be no *a priori* assumptions about theories. There will always be competing interpretations, but they must be evaluated in the light of their logical consistency and the empirical evidence available (Daniels, 2003). So for Chomsky, there is no end of history, and this means he looks forward to an ongoing political process conducted among maximally politically and economically free creative beings.

What I think is most important about anarchism... is its recognition that there is and will always be a need to discover and overcome structures of



hierarchy, authority and domination and constraints on freedom: slavery, wage-slavery, racism, sexism, authoritarian schools, etc., forever. If human society progresses, overcoming some of these forms of oppression, it will uncover others... (Chomsky, 1988, 395).

In other words, Chomsky is not making claims about some ideal or utopian society where such conflicts would not arise. What is important to Chomsky is the process by which, and the conditions under which people and thus the society resolve those conflicts. It is possible to envisage times where certain resources become scarce and then decisions concerning relative production versus relative consumption would have to be made. In other words, compromises would have to be made. But as has already been mentioned, Chomsky (1981b) argues '[e]ach individual is both a producer and a consumer, after all, and that means that each individual has to join in those socially determined compromises...' (258).

Therefore, in Chomsky's terms, it makes no sense to prioritise an absolute ideal or blueprint of the good. 'Anarchism does not legislate ultimate solutions to these problems' (Chomsky, 1988, 395). Indeed to consider doing so is for Chomsky highly suspect. To privilege the good over the means of acquiring it is to indulge in the presumption that we are aware of all the possible constraints on, as well as have an abundance of, resources. Rather he is of the view that priorities must and will change. The context will be one of constant flux. 'We will each commit ourselves to the problems we feel most pressing ... many of which we are in no position even to identify under the intellectual and material constraints of our present existence' (Chomsky, 1988, 395). Chomsky's critical realist position is that our knowledge and hold on truth must always be contingent. We must remain open to the possibility that new problems will present themselves that will give rise in turn to new and possibly superior knowledge (Wilkin, 1997). We must never therefore conceive of a static solution to human problems of social organization. The most we can do is give people the freedom with which to facilitate the triggering of creative solutions to the problems faced at any particular historical time. This means that Chomsky's view of freedom is not simply a permissive one, but a politically demanding one, requiring judgement and caution in our political arrangements.⁷ In this respect, this is an agonal view of politics, at some distance from the claims that he can be dismissed as an utopian thinker.

Chomsky's Methodology

To this point it has been argued that Chomsky's approach to, interpretation and analysis of events and policies is informed by his underpinning political theory, which in turn incorporates a view of human nature. Given the self-



proclaimed uncertainty and conditionalities of his approach how can we account for the assertiveness with which Chomsky makes his attack on American foreign policy? At one level, Chomsky is measuring policy outcomes against values and a vision that are dear to *him*. If this were all he was doing, then this would explain why he must remain outside the realms of 'reasonable opinion'. The radicalism in his vision for human potentiality and forms of social organization explains in part the distancing of his work from mainstream social and political thought. However, Chomsky's strategy and methodology is more than a simple comparison of outcomes against his own set of values. His strategy is to measure policy outcomes against the policy maker's rhetoric and claimed values. The interesting thing about adopting this technique is the realisation that individuals from a variety of political perspectives and institutional locations all appear to celebrate the same values. We all claim to want democratic structures, freedom, choice, fairness and ultimately the universalization of power over our own lives. What exposes policy makers, however, is the measurement of their own claims against the outcomes of their own policy. Elites who espouse humanistic values and a concern for freedom for anyone other than themselves can be exposed for their duplicity simply by comparing the claims made to justify their policies with their own claims about the outcomes of those same policies. As Chomsky (1973) argues of Vietnam:

[t]he tactic of massive bombardment must be labeled '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. (78)

As Chomsky is frequently at pains to point out, when the disparity between rhetoric and outcomes is exposed, then the typical response is to describe the policy as mistaken. The assumption made is the intentions were good, it was just that the means to achieve it were flawed (Laffey, 2003). Chomsky rejects the interpretation of policy outcomes as mistaken, arguing that if one studies policy over time, then the patterns and regularity of 'mistakes' suggests another interpretation of policy intentions. As he points out: 'In law predictable consequences of actions are considered evidence of intent' (Chomsky in Billen, 2002). Having said this, Chomsky is it seems inconsistent about the extent to which these social and political processes are evident and thus there for all to see. In some of his work he argues that these processes are obscured and hidden, and thus require exposure (Edgley, 2000, 31; Laffey, 2003, 601).

Why should we accept Chomsky's interpretation of policy outcomes? First, and contrary to Schlesinger's accusations of falsifying the facts, Chomsky is meticulous in his referencing and sourcing of information. What gives his



methodology weight is that where appropriate and possible his sources are 'official' in some way. In other words, he measures political rhetoric against official data — the official record, made by policy makers', of their own actions. What he finds is that their own interpretation of outcomes can be shown to contradict their own justificatory rhetoric. In this sense, official data becomes the most 'objective' source.

A now notorious example of this was when the United States sought to portray the USSR as having an enormous and growing nuclear might. At the same time it was claiming this, US intelligence was producing evidence to suggest that this was far from the case (Chomsky, 1992b, 11, 26). In a sense, what the real figures are in terms of numbers of warheads and other hardware is beside the point, demonstrating that the 'truth' will always be elusive. For Chomsky, what we should really be concerned with is the observed disparity between official data and official rhetoric. A similar disjunction between data and rhetoric is emerging over the existence of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq.

In Chomsky's view, the disparity between inputs and outputs (policy rhetoric/policy outcome) suggests that elites have a rather different view of human need not only from Chomsky, but more significantly from the one they profess to hold. Moreover, as Herring and Robinson (2003) argue, just as the media can be shown to be subservient to US elite perspectives on US foreign policy, so too are academics. This may go some way to explain academic critiques of Chomsky.

Comparing and contrasting policy rhetoric with official data on policy outcomes is only one method Chomsky employs to demonstrate that agendas other than those proclaimed are at work. Chomsky's other method is to draw 'historical parallels' (Chomsky, 2000), or study 'paired examples' (Chomsky, 1989a) in respect of elite responses to international events. In other words he compares American and other Western responses to similar events, thereby exposing the 'double standards' (Chomsky, 1999) at work, demonstrating that a distinction is often made between 'worthy' and 'unworthy' victims, just as there is between 'benign' and 'nefarious' dictators. In so doing, Chomsky demonstrates that proffered values are not necessarily universalizable in the minds of the elite. His comparison of media and policy maker responses to the massacres in Cambodia and East Timor is an example of just such an historical parallel. Cambodia produced a 'huge outcry of protest'; East Timor coverage by contrast was 'flat zero' (Chomsky, 1989a, 156). In his controversial work on Cambodia (Lukes, 1980), Chomsky argues that establishing the actual numbers murdered by the Pol Pot regime is not what is interesting. Chomsky wants to make clear that he is not arguing that the facts are not interesting. Nor is he arguing that the actual number of deaths are inconsequential (Chomsky, 1989a, 156). For Chomsky, what is interesting is that, despite the



variety of accounts available and therefore the obvious difficulties in establishing the 'truth', the Western media fell upon and trumpeted only those claims that put this so-called socialist regime in the worst light (Chomsky, 1979).

In our comparative study of the response to the Cambodia and Timor massacres, we drew no specific conclusions about the actual facts. As we reiterated to the point of boredom, an attempt to assess the actual facts is a different topic, not pertinent to our specific inquiry. That is a simple point of logic. The question we addressed was how the evidence available was transmuted as it passed through the filters of the ideological system. (Chomsky, 1989a, 155)

Chomsky's analysis is less concerned with seeking to persuade us of the correctness of his interpretation of the 'facts' than with exposing the 'double standards' at work in the rhetoric and actions of the elite. As has been argued, our sympathies for his interpretation of the 'facts' can be informed by an understanding of his political theory. This does not mean that Chomsky is of the view that the 'facts' do not matter, but as Chomsky argues 'to determine the actual facts is a different task' (Chomsky, 1989a, 156). This allows him also to take issue with those who do assert that whether Pol Pot murdered thousands or millions 'is of no consequence' (Chomsky, 1989a, 156). Often, it is difficult to ascertain the 'facts', but even when this is not the case, the *interpretation* of the 'facts' can be what is revealing.

The final point to make about the methodology employed by Chomsky is that he focuses his critique upon American foreign policy, sometimes broadening this to a more general critique of the west. To his critics this is evidence of a myopic approach to international relations, having the effect of overemphasizing America's power/responsibility in world affairs and a concomitant failure to be critical of the crimes of other states. What such criticism misses, however, is that Chomsky's emphasis and focus is determined by entirely political criteria. Chomsky is not attempting to provide an objective, dispassionate and/or impartial account. As has been argued, Chomsky holds the unverifiable view that human beings require certain conditions in order to realize their full potential. Any policy, practice or rhetoric inimical to the provision of these conditions is therefore worthy of target and criticism. As states and capitalism concentrate power, any policy, practice or rhetoric in their name is likely to produce effects that undermine the optimum conditions for human fulfilment, and those effects will vary. As he will readily acknowledge, America 'is a free society, much more so than any other' (Chomsky, 1993, 182). This does not mean of course that there is no urgent need for reform. However, as a citizen of American society, Chomsky is clearly more likely to have *an effect* criticizing the state of his own country,



than he is criticizing the state of another country. As a representative democracy, America is relatively susceptible to domestic public opinion (Chomsky, 1988, 134). Chomsky's focus then, does not mean he is not critical of action by other states, but it is entirely consistent with his concern with the human consequences of his action (Chomsky, 1988, 207 and Chomsky, 1969). As he argues:

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 the terrible things done by Britain, or the U.S. or Jews. What he [sic] wrote might be correct, but we would not be very much impressed. (Chomsky, 1988, 369)

Chomsky's relentless attack on American foreign policy reflects his status and animation as an American citizen, and as an intellectual with considerable privilege. As such, he takes seriously his responsibility as an intellectual to expose the lies of government, and not just any government, but the government for whose actions he feels in part culpable. His use of the official data and version of events has added potency, given that the official record is bound to be the account that is most favourable to the government. The relative freedom of information in the USA gives Chomsky the greatest scope to find evidence that supports his critical conclusions, scope that, he is the first to admit, would be systematically denied in all other political jurisdictions.

Conclusion

Chomsky's essentialism takes the view that human beings are inherently rational, creative and social. They therefore require conditions of freedom for cooperation toward humanistic endeavour. So states and capitalism work against human need because both concentrate power into the hands of a few denying the many the necessary conditions for cooperative, humanistic creativity. Having said this, Chomsky (1996) does distinguish between 'visions' and 'goals', arguing that for him these are often in conflict. So he argues that

[i]n today's world, I think, the goals of a committed anarchist should be to defend some state institutions from the attack against them, while trying at the same time to pry them open to more meaningful public participation — and ultimately, to dismantle them in a much more free society ... (75)

This article has primarily been concerned with his 'visions'. These are a left wing attack on the state, and the uncritical assumption of its benevolent, if



periodically misguided interests. His work relentlessly seeks to expose the extent to which its actions, and the actions of the state's apologists undermine the values they purport to be protecting.

Chomsky's position is not conservative, since it does not reflect a view of human beings as inherently fallible, weak and selfish, who require an enlightened few or elite to steer and direct a bewildered and potentially dangerous herd. He is not a liberal or liberal-institutionalist because, although they espouse humanistic values, their notion of human nature seems to lead to the state and capitalism as the only reasonable tools for establishing and securing such values. However, because the state and capitalism concentrate power in the hands of largely unaccountable elites, the universalization of such values becomes impossible. In Chomsky's view the liberal position is incoherent. It is interesting to note that, while Chomsky places himself politically further from the conservative than the liberal, he is of the view that conservatives are often more honest and consistent in the relationship between their rhetoric and policy.

Nor is Chomsky a Marxist. He disagrees with those post-Marxists who attack the notion of a human essence. He is closer to those who detect a capabilist human nature, but rejects the idea that the state's role is central in the redistribution of power, and resocialization of society during any transformation to socialism. Finally, Chomsky distances himself from social constructivist accounts because, despite his sensitivity to the fallibility of theory, he is opposed to their purported anti-essentialism. Chomsky remains committed to the pursuit of a logically driven rationalist position with a notion of social justice as its foundation.

Chomsky's dim view of much that passes for social 'science' does not mean that he is of the view that scientific rigour is inappropriate in the social sciences (Chomsky, 1981c). His view of human nature puts him in agreement with those who appreciate that the social sciences will never be predictive and explanatory in the same way as the natural sciences and should not attempt to be. Nevertheless, Chomsky is of the view that we must evaluate interpretations of social and political events using logic, intuition, imagination, always in the context of the available empirical evidence (Daniels, 2003).

Chomsky's libertarian socialist political philosophy, with its underlying theory of human nature, underpins his social and political analysis of American foreign policy. Whether one's tolerance for Chomsky's interrogation of American foreign policy rests upon a sympathy for his underlying political philosophy and theory of human need or not, it is certain that some disputes could be more sharply focussed if placed within their political theoretical context. The polarization between those who find his work inspired or irritating may in part be due to an unacknowledged dispute about an underlying theory of human need. Were this brought to the forefront then judgement on



the relative value of a variety of positions would be more revealing. One might not like his theory of human need, but it lends his interpretation of events a logical consistency and a basis on which to rigorously evaluate the empirical evidence available. Once the subjective basis for the political judgement of Chomsky's work is established, it calls for a much higher standard of criticism of Chomsky. A recognition of the validity of his contribution to foreign policy analysis on its own terms would follow, and may encourage more productive debates.

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Notes

- 1 I would like to thank Ian Forbes and the editorial reviewers for their very helpful comments on an earlier draft of this article.
- 2 This is not to say that Chomsky is of the view that the facts are unimportant. The way in which facts are used will be considered within the section on Chomsky's methodology.
- 3 Most liberals are not explicit. Mill uses the term 'sympathetic selfishness' (392). Rawls' (1971) theory rests upon the notion that individuals will seek to maximise their share of primary goods.
- 4 Like Hammersley (1995) I use 'social constructionism' and 'constructivism' interchangeably; "[t]he idea that social phenomena are constituted in and through the texts in which they are described." (89).
- 5 Chomsky's reluctance to draw political conclusions from his linguistic theory rests upon his view that it would be 'unscientific' to do so (1988, 385–386).
- 6 'The thesis is that all should be studied in the same way, whether we are considering the motion of the planets, fields of force, structural formulas for complex molecules, or computational properties of the language faculty. Let's call this a 'naturalistic approach to mind', meaning that we seek to investigate the mental aspects of the world by the methods of rational inquiry characteristic of the natural sciences' (Chomsky 1996, 31–32).
- 7 This raises questions about the extent to which Chomsky's politics can be said to be revolutionary.

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