

Professor Chomsky comes in from the cold

David Walsh
5 April 2004

Noam Chomsky, professor of linguistics at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) and radical critic of American foreign policy, has endorsed the presumptive Democratic Party candidate for president, John Kerry, in his race with George W. Bush. The arguments Chomsky musters in support of Kerry are banal and threadbare in the utmost. They reveal the MIT professor, an articulate observer of certain political and social phenomena, to be a vulgar defender of the two-party system.

Chomsky offers up yet another version of the “lesser-of-two-evils” argument, which for decades has helped keep American workers in thrall to the big business parties and paralyzed in the face of the ruling class assault on their social conditions and living standards.

In an interview given to Britain’s *Guardian* on March 16, Chomsky remarks that “Kerry is sometimes described as Bush-lite, which is not inaccurate, and in general the political spectrum is pretty narrow in the United States, and elections are mostly bought, as the population knows. But despite the limited differences both domestically and internationally, there are differences. And in this system of immense power, small differences can translate into large outcomes.”

Chomsky expresses admiration for Ralph Nader and Democratic Party congressman Dennis Kucinich, “insofar as they bring up issues and carry out an educational and organisational function.” He acknowledges that the election comes down to a “choice between the two factions of the business party,” but that this “does sometime...make a difference.”

In fact, although the *Guardian* interview produced headlines, Chomsky had already made his position clear more than a month earlier in an interview with the *Left Hook* web site: “The current incumbents may do severe, perhaps irreparable, damage if given another hold on power—a very slim hold, but one they will use to achieve very ugly and dangerous ends. In a very powerful state, small differences may translate into very substantial effects on the victims, at home and abroad. It is no favor to those who are suffering, and may face much worse ahead, to overlook these facts. Keeping the Bush circle out means holding one’s nose and voting for some Democrat....”

These are bankrupt arguments, which avoid the substantive political issues facing wide layers of the American population. If Chomsky admits that Kerry and Bush are merely two representatives of the same imperialist elite, how can he possibly justify support to either one? How will support for the candidacy of one or another of these reactionary figures contribute to the political clarification and long-term interests of working people in America?

The notion that the “small differences” between the two major parties can translate into “large outcomes” suggests that there is some means of ameliorating the crisis of American society other than its radical economic and social transformation, a solution that can be handed over to the other “faction” of “the business party,” the Democrats.

That there are differences between the parties is a truism. Otherwise, why would they exist as separate organizations? The two bourgeois parties in America have their own histories, they make somewhat differing appeals, they use distinct tactics in the pursuit of a common goal: the defense of American capitalist interests at home and abroad.

One of the specific aims of the Democratic Party and its supporters at

this moment in history, and the recent efforts of Howard Dean, Dennis Kucinich and Al Sharpton exemplified this, is to give the impression that a diversity of opinion, and even opposition, is possible within the current political framework. Chomsky is volunteering his “left” credentials in the perpetration of this fraud.

The conflicts that arise within the ruling elite can sometimes be quite bitter, as the Clinton impeachment scandal demonstrated. However, these differences do not provide a viable basis upon which working people can organize *their* struggle for *their own* social interests. On the contrary, subordination to the Democratic Party remains the principal mechanism by which those independent interests are stifled and suppressed.

The Bush regime is no doubt reactionary and dangerous. However, its character does not arise from the personalities of its various representatives, but from the crisis of American and world capitalism. This crisis will not go away if the Democrats are elected. On the contrary, the situation will grow sharper, no matter which of the two big business parties comes to power. Everything depends, in fact, on the working population advancing its own socialist, internationalist solution to the crisis of American society, against all the factions of the Democrats and Republicans. Kerry, a veteran bourgeois politician, who voted for the Iraq war and the Patriot Act, is also reactionary and dangerous.

Given Kerry’s insistent support for the continued colonial occupation of Iraq, Chomsky, by dint of his support for Kerry, ends up, whatever his past anti-imperialist credentials, lending aid and comfort to a brutal and criminal imperialist enterprise.

Moreover, with his endorsement of the Democratic Party candidate, with hand to nose or not, Chomsky must accept responsibility for the actions of a Kerry administration, should it come to power. When such a government launches its own colonial invasions, in the name of a “humanitarian intervention,” Chomsky will bear a share of the political responsibility.

The MIT professor already has a dubious track record in this regard. During the Clinton administration, Chomsky supported US military intervention in Haiti in 1994 to re-install President Jean-Bertrand Aristide, and again in the Balkans in late 1995, following the Dayton Accords. Chomsky claimed that American military action in Haiti would “probably cut the terror” and that the alternative to US intervention in the former Yugoslavia was for the two sides to “keep massacring one another.”

Recent events have disproved his argument in both cases. The terror in Haiti and the communalist massacres in the former Yugoslavia have not stopped. Foreign invasion and occupation have merely set the stage for more bloodshed and deepened oppression under conditions in which the populations, thanks, in part, to the illusions in imperialist “humanitarianism” sown by apologists like Chomsky, are more disoriented and politically disarmed than ever.

There is nothing original about Chomsky’s views. They have been advocated by reformists and opportunists for many years. Chomsky essentially advises the “victims,” as he describes them, of American capitalism to rely on the liberal wing of the ruling elite to prevent the worst from befalling them. This strategy has failed time and time again.

There is a certain irony in the fact that Chomsky, who has made a name

for himself as a staunch critic of predatory US foreign policy, is linking himself to a right-wing Democrat who faults George Bush for having “done too little” in the “war on terror,” and who declares that “we must...reaffirm our belief that the cause of Israel must be the cause of America.”

It is not for nothing that openly pro-war and pro-Zionist Senator Joseph Lieberman of Connecticut could recently boast, “Senator Kerry and President Bush both made speeches on foreign policy this week. If you look beyond the rhetoric and the media attempts to find differences, both of them, obviously, want to win the war on terrorism, both of them want to succeed in Iraq.”

Chomsky’s argument, in the above-mentioned interviews, that the Bush crowd, “an extremely dangerous clique,” is “particularly cruel and savage” is the stock-in-trade of every “left” protester in America. The right-wing threat is always “too grave,” the conditions “too unripe” for a break with the Democrats. We have heard this before, more than a few times. It turns out that for the Chomskys, the Michael Moores and their ilk, the time is never “right” to build a socialist alternative to the two-party system. And for them, it will never be.

Chomsky’s political abasement is part of an international trend. In the name of combating the extreme right, the entire global coterie of middle-class “radicals” (whose politics are today actually anything but radical) is being drawn into the orbit of bourgeois politics. Chomsky’s arguments bear a resemblance to the positions advanced by the French “far left” in justifying its support for President Jacques Chirac in the second round of the French presidential elections in May 2002.

Alain Krivine’s Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire (LCR), for example, urged a vote for Chirac, the corrupt representative of French capital. The LCR called on French voters “to block the [ultra-right] National Front at the ballot box as we have done in the street. On May 5, vote against [National Front candidate Jean-Marie] Le Pen.” This, in a two-man race.

While Chomsky now recommends “holding one’s nose” and voting for Kerry, two years ago LCR presidential candidate Olivier Besancenot suggested “all voters wash their hands on Sunday evening [i.e., after casting their votes for Chirac].” The parts of the anatomy are different, but the opportunist prescription—even to the fraudulently regretful tone—is the same.

It would be an oversimplification to suggest that Chomsky’s endorsement of Kerry “strips away his oppositional pretensions” or something of that sort. One has no reason to doubt the sincerity of the MIT professor’s continuing hostility to the misery and suffering inflicted by US imperialism on the world, including the American population.

However, there is a logic to politics. As Trotsky noted, “No one has yet invented a means for paralyzing the effects of the law of the class struggle.” Chomsky is being propelled by the development of a political crisis in which his outlook, no doubt influenced by his membership in the academic elite, leaves him quite vulnerable to the siren song of bourgeois liberalism.

In arguing for a strategy based on reliance on the “least evil” wing of the establishment, Chomsky rejects one of the central political lessons of modern history: that liberalism inevitably degenerates and turns to the right, despite its misgivings, in the face of the threat posed from below, by the working class.

But then, Professor Chomsky is an individual who is blind to many of the most critical lessons of the twentieth century. One might say he has made this blindness an enduring aspect of his life’s work.

Born in 1928, Chomsky was deeply affected at an early age (he wrote his first article on the subject when he was 10) by the fate of the Spanish Civil War (1936-39). He was influenced by an uncle, who “was a follower of Trotsky, then an anti-Trotskyite.” Chomsky came to espouse the anarchist hostility to Marxism and Bolshevism, views that he still holds.

Chomsky’s opposition to the October Revolution is well known. He has described it as “one of the greatest blows” against the working class and a “counterrevolutionary coup.” The latter comment jibes with the claims made by figures like the fanatical anti-communist historian Richard Pipes. Serious scholarship refutes these ignorant assertions, detailing the growth and depth of Bolshevik influence in the working class and the extent to which the most advanced workers followed the inner-party discussions in 1917 with the greatest attention.

Chomsky told an interviewer in 1995 that “Lenin was one of the greatest enemies of socialism,” who allegedly held the idea “that workers are only interested in horse-racing.” In reality, it is precisely the independent, self-conscious movement of the working class, expressed in the October 1917 revolution and the entire previous development of the socialist workers’ movement, that disturbs and enrages the petty-bourgeois professor.

(One recalls the episode in John Reed’s *Ten Days That Shook the World* [<http://www.marxists.org/archive/reed/works/1919/10days/ch7.htm>] in which a pro-Bolshevik soldier patiently withstands the verbal attacks of a “supercilious” young man, a self-proclaimed “revolutionary,” who rails against Lenin and the Bolsheviks. After each insulting volley, the soldier patiently returns to the basic question, “There are two classes, don’t you see, the proletariat and the bourgeoisie.” The argument and the audacity of the soldier in thinking for himself drives the arrogant “socialist” into a frenzy.)

Chomsky has qualified his comments on Marxism and Marx by noting that he is “far from being a Marx scholar,” that his remarks “are impressions” and so forth. He means to convey the idea that the subject is of relatively meager interest. He expresses a certain *hauteur*, a loftiness in regard to such issues. About Trotsky he has little to say, except to argue that the policies he and Lenin pursued led directly to the Stalinist tyranny.

Chomsky is generally dismissive of those who have tried to draw lessons from the difficult experiences of the twentieth century. His frequent comments about the Spanish Revolution and the role played by the anarchist movement are glib and misleading, and again rely on his listeners’ or readers’ ignorance of the actual experience.

In 1970, Chomsky wrote about the “accomplishments of the popular revolution in Spain,” based on years of work by the anarcho-syndicalist movement. He told an interviewer in 1995 that “The achievements of Spanish workers and peasants, before the revolution was crushed, were impressive in many ways.” Which accomplishments, and how and why was the revolution crushed?

Chomsky accurately ascribes a central counterrevolutionary role to Stalinism, which, through the Spanish Communist Party and the NKVD, helped subordinate the Spanish working class to the “liberal” bourgeoisie (precisely the strategy Chomsky proposes today!), resisted its seizure of the factories and sought to exterminate all left-wing opposition.

But Chomsky’s bland phrases cover over the role played by the anarchist leadership itself, which assisted the Stalinists and social democrats in chloroforming the Spanish masses. Trotskyist Felix Morrow documented this history very well in his *Revolution and Counter-Revolution in Spain* (available online: <http://www.marxists.org/archive/morrow-felix/1938/revolution-spain/>).

He explained how anarchism—in the form of the CNT-FAI (National Confederation of Labor and the Anarchist Iberian Federation) leadership of Garcia Oliver—was “tested on a grand scale” by the Spanish events, and how it failed miserably.

Morrow wrote, “Anarchism has consistently refused to recognize the distinction between a bourgeois and workers’ state. Even in the days of Lenin and Trotsky, anarchism denounced the Soviet Union as an exploiters’ regime. Precisely the failure to distinguish between a bourgeois and proletarian state had already led the CNT, in the honeymoon days of the revolution of 1931, to the same kind of opportunist errors as are always made by reformists—who also, in their

way, make no distinction between bourgeois and workers' states....

"Now, in the far more powerful fumes of 'the revolution of July 19, [1936]' when the accustomed boundary lines between bourgeoisie and proletariat were smeared over for the time being, the anarchists' traditional refusal to distinguish between a bourgeois and workers' state led them slowly, but decisively, into the ministry of a bourgeois state."

The anarchists joined the Catalanian government and the national coalition government under Largo Caballero. Indifferent to the state, they saw no reason not to join one. The anarchists in government functioned as bourgeois ministers, defending private property and the capitalist social order.

When the working class in Barcelona rose up in May 1937 in defense of its gains and set up barricades against the coalition government, the anarchist leadership of Garcia Oliver worked to put down the struggle, demanded that workers leave the streets, and helped restore "order." Left-wing opponents, including sections of anarchist youth, who rejected this betrayal were denounced as *agents-provocateurs*. The revolutionary opportunity was lost, and counter-revolution gained the upper hand. Official Spanish anarchism played an infamous role.

There is a slow but decisive logic to the anarchist Chomsky's own evolution. Indifferent to the great questions of history and principle, a vehement opponent of the first effort by the workers to organize their own society, having rejected the revolutionary role of the working class, where else is Chomsky to turn, but to one or another section of the establishment?

Harsh times have this painful but salutary effect: organizations and individuals are tested. Whatever is false, unresolved or unprincipled inevitably reveals itself. The growing political crisis in the US, which threatens to discredit both big business parties and the media, places intense pressure on all those claiming to oppose the status quo. Chomsky and others like him have responded to the first stages of this crisis by casting their lot with the powers that be. The appropriate political lessons need to be drawn.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact