

Freedom and power

Peter Hallward I'd like to start by asking you about some of your basic philosophical principles, starting with your understanding of human freedom and creativity. In the modern European tradition I'm most familiar with, freedom is a dominant philosophical theme from Descartes through Rousseau to Kant. With Kant we have an affirmation of absolute freedom from all external causation, but it remains a relatively abstract affair, a matter of 'pure practical reason'. This sets a post-Kantian agenda: from Hegel and Marx through to the Frankfurt School and their existentialist contemporaries, the question becomes one of trying to think freedom or rather the process of emancipation in a way that has more concrete socio-historical determination or 'actuality'. Through to the 1930s, at least, for many of the thinkers in this tradition the role of mediating agent was played, one way or another, by the proletariat conceived as a tendentially universal class.

I know you've approached these issues from a different perspective, but like a lot of your readers I'm curious to know more about how you see these two aspects of your work: the libertarian aspect, oriented by an uncompromising affirmation of freedom, and the social/historical aspect, oriented by an equally uncompromising critique of capitalism, imperialism, propaganda and forms of domination more generally.

On the face of it, many of your long-standing priorities and principles – the accounts of freedom you find in Descartes, von Humboldt and some of the classical liberals, your critique of behaviourism, your allegiance to aspects of the anarchist and libertarian socialist traditions, and so on – seem to form an internally coherent group, one that's consistent across the whole sweep of your work. Is that how you yourself see it? Did your main ideas fall gradually into place over time, or were there quite specific debates or encounters that served to crystallize things?

Noam Chomsky Well, I was interested in anarchist ideas right back through my childhood, but I only learned about the deeper Romantic and rationalist tradition in the 1960s, after I'd pretty much settled most of my own ideas on the topic. I'd always been interested in the anarchist tradition itself, I'd investigated it, I'd thought it had been somewhat misinterpreted, but I can't say that what lay behind the anarchist tradition in many ways was a direct influence – it was more like a discovery of historical origins for ideas I'd already been defending for some time.

The critique of behaviourism began very early, as soon as I found out about it. I was a graduate student at Harvard in the early 1950s, and radical behaviourism was orthodox and ubiquitous. There were a couple of us, graduate students, who just didn't believe any of it. We were very critical of behaviourism, particularly with respect to the way it was used in the study of language, of course, but also in psychology and the social sciences, and in American philosophy more generally.

PH Partly as a critique of social engineering?

NC That too, but it was mainly a critique of its scientific pretensions. It was worthless as an explanation of language acquisition, for instance, and it missed some of the more important work that was happening in biology at the time. So we looked at materials that not many people were reading in those years – European work in ethology, comparative

psychology, people like Nikolaas Tinbergen and Konrad Lorenz, who offered a very different way of understanding behaviour and the cognitive systems at work in behaviour. Later I wrote criticisms of the social and political implications of behaviourism, and right around that time, say around 1960, I was beginning to learn about the earlier tradition in the philosophy of language and mind, the tradition that includes Descartes and von Humboldt. It was almost totally ignored here: when I started working on it I couldn't even get hold of the basic documents in the United States; I had to go to the British Museum to find things like translations of the Port Royal grammar, and I found that standard translations, like of Leibniz, say, were sometimes very inaccurate.

PH One of the more striking things about your approach, at least for a non-specialist like me, is how you embraced Descartes's affirmation of a spiritual or thinking substance (entirely distinct from extended or bodily substance and thus free from the sort of mechanical causality that seemed to govern the bodily domain) not just as a metaphysical principle but as a fertile *scientific* hypothesis.

NC It was a very reasonable scientific move. Descartes postulated a second substance, a *res cogitans*, and the reasons for his postulating it still remain cogent.¹ This was later ridiculed by modern philosophers – you know, 'the ghost in the machine', the ghost that needs to be exorcised in order to resolve the 'mind-body' problem. But I think that's a misunderstanding. The mind-body problem, Cartesian dual-substance theory, did collapse, with Newton – because the *body* collapsed. Newton showed, to his own dismay, that we have no clear concept of body or matter, that physics is obliged to recognize apparently mysterious immaterial forces of attraction and repulsion, action at a distance, and so on. The common-sense notion of body collapsed, along with the theory of mechanical causality that underlay much of the early modern scientific world-view.

The body was 'exorcised,' but nothing ever happened to the ghost, the *mind*. What actually happened, in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, is that there was considerable exploration of what's called, in the history of philosophy, 'Locke's suggestion' – namely, that just as matter has properties we cannot comprehend, there's no reason to doubt that God might have super-added to matter the capacity for thought, just as he added its incomprehensible capacities for attraction and repulsion. The theological framework is of course dispensable, and in Locke's own private correspondence it's sometimes not even there. Leaving that aside, it led to a theory of 'thinking matter', whereby thought is just a property of certain kinds of organized matter much as attraction and repulsion are. It's in Hume, it's developed particularly by Joseph Priestley, the chemist-philosopher, and it goes on right into the nineteenth century.² It should have incorporated Descartes's observations about thought, language, perception and so on, but it didn't; it eventually ran out of steam and was then forgotten.

Today, this older picture, this conception of thinking matter, is being revived as if it were new. So if you read biologists concerned with neuroscience, for instance Francis Crick, you find the 'astonishing idea' that our mental capacities, consciousness in particular, are properties of the brain. Well, that was a standard view in the eighteenth century. What else could they be? Since there's no matter in the sense of the old mechanical philosophy, of pushes and pulls and so on, you're left with the fact that there are organic systems that have the capacity for thought. We can do our best to try to figure out how they do it. Descartes had some good arguments and they remain good arguments.

PH What about Spinoza's alternative to Descartes's approach, which would cast a long shadow over later European rationalisms? Spinoza conceives of thought as an attribute of a single all-embracing substance or nature, one that is parallel to but entirely distinct from extension or matter. As far as you're concerned, does such a point of departure effectively block in advance the more productive way of approaching the problem, one framed in terms of a 'thinking matter'?

NC Putting aside consideration of Spinoza's subtle ideas, after Newton's demolition of the prevailing concept of matter (body, physical, etc.) we cannot really discuss something 'entirely distinct from extension or matter' until we are given some coherent account of the nature of 'matter'. And there is none, apart from the best theory that scientists can come up with at particular stages of the development of science. It seems to me that we cannot go beyond some notion of 'thinking matter', where 'matter' is understood to be a loose cover term for the best guess as to what there is; maybe even bits of information responding to our queries to nature, as the eminent physicist John Wheeler suggested. For thought, we can narrow the quest, on the internalist assumption (often rejected in contemporary philosophy) that thinking is a property of the individual (mostly the brain).

Biology

PH If now we recognize a capacity for thought and in particular for free or creative thought as a capacity of an organic system, why then, in principle, should this capacity be any more resistant to analysis than any other capacity of such a system? In the past you've emphasized the 'creative urge of human nature' (in your debate with Foucault), our 'instinct for freedom' (after Bakunin), while insisting that our ability to act and speak creatively – that is, in ways that are appropriate but not externally caused – remains essentially mysterious. You've suggested 'it's a total mystery, and it's a mystery why it's a mystery.'³

NC That's right.

PH The old problem of free will, then, would seem to be inaccessible to scientific investigation. You've said it's probable that our 'science-forming capacities simply do not extend to ... any domain involving the exercise of will',⁴ and speculated that 'the answer to the riddle of free will lies in the domain of potential science that the human mind can never master because of the limitations of its genetic structure.'⁵

On the face of it, this seems to imply that we can have some understanding of the structuring mechanism (the genetic or biological dimension of things) but not of the capacity it structures. But if freedom can be understood in terms of a nature, instinct or organism, why in principle should it remain mysterious? Why couldn't some sort of evolutionary approach account for it?

NC I looked at some of these questions in a recent article on 'the mysteries of nature'.⁶ It starts off with a quote from Hume, from his *History of England* – a book which not a lot of philosophers read. Hume has a chapter on Newton, of course, our 'greatest and rarest genius', and so on, and he says that one of Newton's great achievements was to lift the veil from *some* of the mysteries of nature, while showing that there are mysteries that we will never comprehend – those aren't his exact words, but that's the basic idea.⁷ His point was, to rephrase in current terms, that our minds are essentially biological organisms, and like other organisms they have a certain scope, certain limits, and some questions may simply be beyond our cognitive limits.

We can reformulate this idea today, knowing a lot more about the biology, but it strikes me as a very sensible thesis, in part almost a tautology. You look say at rats; you try to train them to run a prime number maze; well, they can't do it, they don't have those concepts. You can train them to do a lot of things, but not to make sense of mathematical ideas they don't have. And if we're organic creatures, then we're in the same sort of position: we have cognitive capacities, they have a certain scope, and almost by logical necessity they have certain limits. We don't know what those limits are, but we can think of science as the area of intersection between whatever the world is and our cognitive capacities. There's no reason to assume that they're identical. Hume may well be right. And, if you think about it, Newton's discovery, the idea that there could be 'occult' forces of attraction and repulsion, remains a mystery to this day. Newton himself never accepted it; he regarded postulation

of such forces as an absurdity that no sensible person with any scientific training could accept, and he spent much of the rest of his life trying to disprove it. More recently we've abandoned consideration of the problem, and today we essentially take the existence of such forces for granted, without asking for an explanation in the terms the founders of modern science would have demanded.

To put it differently, the goals of scientific inquiry have been lowered. For the great figures who led the modern scientific revolution, the goal was to understand the world, which meant to give an account of the world that would render it intelligible to common-sense understanding – as a complex machine, which could in principle be constructed by a master artisan, like the intricate clocks and other devices that stimulated the scientific imagination much as computers do today. As Newton's discoveries were absorbed into scientific common sense, the goals of science were implicitly lowered: to intelligibility of theories about the world, while the world itself remains beyond our intuitive grasp. That is an important shift in intellectual history, often not sufficiently appreciated, I think.

PH In the case of human freedom per se, however, do the problems associated with knowledge of mind-independent realities apply in the same way? Isn't there a reflexive dimension to self-awareness that gives it a sort of *practical* autonomy, at least, one that helps defend it against the sort of sceptical questions Hume liked to ask? Already in Descartes, isn't access to thinking substance proofed against sceptical doubt by the practice of thinking itself, by the *cogito*?



NC Few believe that now, and it's not even clear that Descartes himself believed it. That's in the *Meditations*, mainly. Today this is what philosophers tend to read, but the *Meditations* were apologia; Descartes wrote to his friend Marin Mersenne that the purpose of the *Meditations* is to try to convince the Jesuits that his physics, which is what he really cared about, is not heretical. Remember he was very worried by the fate of Galileo. In fact, he was supposed to have written a volume on the mind (which he may have destroyed), in which he was supposed to have developed

the foundations for his theory. In any case, by the middle of the seventeenth century, Gassendi, Mersenne and others made it clearly understood that the idea of foundationalism was finished, indefensible.

PH A version of Descartes's *cogito* remains important in Kant, however, and for many of the post-Kantians (from Fichte through to Husserl and Sartre). Kant's transcendental approach is one way of taking the apparent limits of our cognitive capacities seriously, in fact as absolutely binding constraints – but without compromising the practical autonomy of reason. Given the way our minds work, Kant argues, there are theoretical constraints on how we can understand objects of possible experience (for instance the fact that they must appear in time and space, must appear as subject to causality, and so on), but these constraints don't apply to what we can think and do in the domain of *practice* – that is, in the exercise of our own freedom. I think Kant would argue that it's a transcendental condition of the exercise of freedom that it be fully self-determining; that is, that it remain free from any further determination, whether this be biological, social, conventional, and so on. Theoretical ignorance of what freedom 'is' might be a virtual condition, then, of its practical exercise. Later you find similar arguments in Sartre and Fanon, and in a certain way in people like Lacan, Badiou and Žižek. I assume you're not sympathetic to this sort of approach, which in

a sense affirms the absolute ‘mystery’ of freedom but severs the link between freedom and biology?

NC You’re right, I’m not sympathetic, in particular to the contemporary version of such ideas (to the extent that I even understand them). I tend to see the issues more as a biological problem. From a strictly phenomenological point of view, freedom of the will is about as obvious to us as anything is. As human beings we’re absolutely confident that we have freedom of will. That could be an illusion, we can investigate this; if it’s not an illusion then we can look for an explanation, though it doesn’t follow that we have the cognitive capacities required to find it. But I don’t think there’s a contradiction in supposing that we might be able to find it – or, for that matter, to discover that the question is beyond the bounded (though infinite) scope of our cognitive capacities, or even why that might be so.

Let’s put it a different way. Suppose we want to ask whether dogs have free will. We don’t know if they do or don’t, and if they do we don’t yet have any understanding of it. But there’s no conceptual barrier of the Kantian kind to discovering it: maybe we can; maybe we can’t.

PH There does seem to be a conceptual difference, though, between the dog’s ‘understanding’ of its own will, so to speak, and the biological account we might eventually be able to propose in order to explain it. Presumably the dog isn’t in a position to understand any of its instincts, to reconstruct (in however incomplete a fashion) the process of its biological evolution, and so on. And if we have a capacity to understand some of the biological processes at issue here, why in principle shouldn’t they be adequate, sooner or later, to explain this freedom too?

NC There is no impossibility ‘in principle’ – that is, abstracting from our biological capacities. But given these capacities, there is a question of fact. Currently – and maybe forever – we don’t understand these matters. We don’t understand them for dogs, let alone for ourselves. We don’t understand them for insects.

PH What about an explanation that would try to locate some sort of adaptive advantage or ‘fitness’, however indirect its emergence? There’s an advantage in having multi-purpose hands that can use different sorts of tools, for instance; why not a similar sort of explanation for self-determining minds?

NC You can tell any story you want, but that’s far from understanding the issue. The adaptive stories are what serious biologists call ‘just-so stories’. Maybe it was this way, maybe another way – that’s baby-talk Darwinism. Incidentally, even if we had an adaptive explanation it would tell us nothing about the basic cognitive and neurological processes involved in it. We can say ‘they evolved because they’re useful’. But what are they? That remains mysterious. Again, even for insects, many questions like this are at the very least not yet understood; whether they can be understood remains uncertain.⁸

PH In principle, then, do you think there’s any chance that our understanding of freedom might one day change in something like the way our understanding of infinity began to change, in the late nineteenth century? As far back as Aristotle, the notion of the infinite was routinely held to define the limit of all human cognition, one inaccessible to any conceptual distinction, the source of all sorts of apparent absurdities (parts as large as the wholes they belong to, and so on). Infinity was supposed to be an idea we could never get our heads round, the divine or transcendent attribute par excellence. But then Georg Cantor and others showed how we might ‘number’ different orders of infinity, and in the process laid the foundations for a whole new way of thinking about number in general; the mathematical consequences of the new theory of sets would redefine many things about the field as a whole.

NC You could say the same about the Pythagorean theorem; at first it was such a mystery, so offensive to reason that it was kept secret. Yes, sure, right through history there are cases

where what seems utterly outlandish was later absorbed into scientific common sense. But that doesn't imply that it will always happen, and it doesn't imply that, in particular, we can gain some new insight into the way things really *are* in the sense of the early modern scientific revolution, later abandoned.

I think the most dramatic case is in fact Newton's physics. What was considered outrageous then is considered scientific common sense today – but it's not that we understand it any better; we still don't have an intuitive understanding of it. The classical modern scientists, Galileo through Newton, they were looking for a conception of the world that we could comprehend – not just the theory, but also its object. That was the point of the mechanical philosophy. We can understand gears and levers and things pushing each other, and so on, but we can't comprehend what Newton and his contemporaries regarded as mystical forces. We may accept them, we may develop a theoretical approach for dealing with them, but that doesn't mean that they become intelligible. And in fact they don't. They're just as inexplicable to us as they were to Newton. We have just modified our conception of intelligibility, so that we now say that they're intelligible, but they aren't, by their standards, though theories about them – and about matters even more remote from common-sense understanding – may be intelligible.

PH I wonder if your criteria for what counts as a viable explanation are a little exorbitant, or anachronistic: why should the sort of 'intuitive understanding' that might have been appropriate to the (illusory) mechanical philosophy serve as a sort of model for intelligibility in general? Didn't the scientific revolution of the seventeenth century also serve to distance understanding of the physical world from empirical observation or intuition, and to restore mathematics as the paradigm for intelligibility? In this very general sense, didn't it mark a sort of post-medieval revenge of Plato over Aristotle? This seems to apply to Descartes algebraicization of geometry as much as to Galileo or Newton's methodological contributions to physics.

NC It is important to make a distinction between intelligibility of the world and intelligibility of theories about the world. The former was the goal of the 'mechanical philosophy', the reigning conceptual framework from Galileo through Newton and beyond, considered so obvious that Newton regarded his own discoveries as an 'absurdity' that no serious scientist could accept. To repeat, as these discoveries were absorbed into 'scientific common sense', the goals of science were lowered, to intelligibility of theories. And the conceptions of the great scientists who created the modern scientific revolution are indeed now dismissed as 'exorbitant' – but there is nothing anachronistic about the inquiry into what happened and why, or how the goals of understanding and explanation have changed and the significance of this crucial development of intellectual history.

PH What if we approach the question of freedom through the category of causality, which is again central to the rationalist conception of things? Both Spinoza and Kant assume the natural world is governed by sufficient reason – that is, by the uninterrupted play of causation – which is why there is no freedom of will in Spinoza, and only an 'extra-natural' freedom of will in Kant. But if we understand freedom in your terms as an 'instinct' or as an aspect of nature – that is, as something that has come to exist as a spatio-temporal capacity, itself located within the field of spatio-temporal causation – shouldn't it be possible in principle to track the evolutionary sequence of steps that led it to become the capacity of a particular sort of organism?

NC If by 'in principle' you mean in abstraction from whatever our cognitive capacities are, and from the limitations of evidence (e.g. the lack of tape recordings from tens of thousands of years ago), then in principle the evolutionary history could be reconstructed. But in reality the questions have to be posed differently: we don't know the evolutionary history, and may not be able to find out, as Lewontin discussed. There are people like the philosopher Colin McGinn who have tried to develop the distinction I'm drawing between

problems and mysteries – that is, between questions, which we can at least pose, whose answers we can at least imagine, on the one hand, and, on the other, mysteries, in relation to which we can't even pose serious questions; we may recognize certain kinds of phenomena, but understanding them appears to be beyond our cognitive grasp. If we are organic creatures, then such a distinction must exist: it follows from our being biological organisms, like the rats in the prime number maze. In principle we might even find out what these limits are. It's not unintelligible to suppose that we can investigate our own cognitive capacities and determine what their limits are.

We can only speculate at the moment, but it's possible that problems like freedom of the will are mysteries in Hume's sense, beyond what our cognitive capacities can explain. Of course, there is a question as to whether such freedom even exists, but that's a rather curious question. William James pointed out, and I think it's an interesting observation, that the people who argue that freedom of the will doesn't exist are themselves acting extremely irrationally. Why give us what they take to be reasons? They believe it and are giving these reasons because it's determined; we don't believe it because it's determined. So what's to discuss?

There's also a lot of pseudo-scientific argumentation brought in, to try to explain the problem away. For example a couple of years ago there was an interesting discovery, showing that if a person is going to carry out some action, say pick up this pen from a table, there's activity in the motor cortex of the brain before you're aware of making the decision.⁹ This was brought up as an argument against freedom of the will. But it doesn't tell you anything, except that decisions are made unconsciously, who knows how.

PH But isn't one of the cardinal features of free will, at least in the conventional sense, that it's a matter of voluntary and thus conscious action?

NC It's a standard assumption that mental acts must somehow be accessible to consciousness ('in principle'). Some philosophers have held that that is a criterion of the mental (notably John Searle, following W.V. Quine). But why take the assumption to be correct (even if it can be formulated coherently, which I doubt, for reasons I've discussed) – particularly when there is so much evidence that it is false, for example our best understanding of the mental acts that enter into what you and I are now doing? If we abandon the doctrine – which is just dogma, in my opinion – then it could turn out that there is a distinction between voluntary and conscious. And if that is correct, this experimental work might be evidence for that distinction.



PH One last question along these lines, before moving on. In the past you've said, in passing, that 'I'm not sure that I want free will to be understood.'¹⁰ Is your scepticism about adaptive explanations to the evolution of our 'instinct for freedom' purely a response to the unpersuasive science involved, or do you also have normative reasons for rejecting them – perhaps the same sort of reasons at work in your critique of applied behaviourism?

NC To say that the speculations are 'unpersuasive' is I think an understatement. Furthermore, it is important to distinguish evolutionary accounts from adaptive accounts. It's well understood in modern biology that these are quite different notions. I wouldn't quite say that the reasons for the feelings expressed in the statement you quote are 'normative'. It's rather that I think that our appreciation of the richness and excitement inspired by human actions would be seriously diminished if it were understood – an eventuality that seems to me remote, despite sophisticated and intriguing work on the topic.

Psychoanalysis

PH So, if now we admit that, given our current understanding of the biology and psychology, freedom remains an essentially mysterious fact, what then about the domains that border this mystery? There's been a great deal of work on this sort of problem in the so-called human sciences, over the past century. Psychoanalysis has tried to investigate the boundaries between voluntary and involuntary action, and has explored the ways that people's formative experiences structure certain aspects of their unconscious life, shaping the more or less repressed desires or drives that account for at least some of their subsequent behaviour. Sociologists have considered the ways that class tends to structure cultural habits or reflexes. Marxists have looked at the ways a given mode of production generates ideological patterns that serve to justify or naturalize the class relations required to sustain it. Someone like your old debating partner Michel Foucault helped to excavate some of the institutional, social and cognitive processes that consolidate norms of behaviour, the 'biopolitical' mechanisms that regulate ways of living and reinforce patterns of obedience to the established order of things, ways of governing and being governed. Do you think that this sort of investigation has gone any way towards shedding light on the mysteries of freedom and voluntary action?

NC It's interesting work but it leaves questions of freedom untouched.

PH Completely untouched?

NC It shows the influences on our *use* of freedom. Let's assume for the moment that we have freedom of will. These studies demonstrate conditions on how we may choose to exercise it, but not on its existence in nature. Independently of your class background, cultural influences, and so on, you can still make choices that conflict with them. And many people do, for example dissidents, or revolutionaries, or just independent people.

PH This formulation seems to double the category of freedom: we have freedom, and we are also more or less free to choose to use it. What sorts of constraints do you recognize on this freedom to use freedom? In the capitalist world we live in, how much real independence do individual workers, for instance, have in relation to those who might employ and exploit them? In this and many similar cases, doesn't the freedom or independence in question only become 'actual' (to use the Hegelian term) when we are able to organize and act collectively? I take that to be one of the main points that Rousseau and then Marx and Lenin were trying to make.

Is there a danger, if you separate freedom, on the one hand, from 'the influences on our use of freedom', on the other, that you might (in line with Kantian precedent) confine freedom *per se* to a sort of indeterminate, purely moral domain? At least that was the argument that split the field of French philosophy in the early 1960s, between those who like Sartre wanted to retain the primacy of free individual choice in relation to all structuring influences, and those (e.g. Lévi-Strauss, Althusser, Lacan, Foucault, Kristeva and many others) who began to emphasize at deeper and deeper levels the role of such influences, economic, unconscious, ideological, epistemological, linguistic...

NC Those two positions are not inconsistent. You can perfectly well recognize, and I certainly do, that there are all kinds of influences that shape, frame and limit the range of choices that we can even consider, let alone make. But that doesn't bear on the question of whether we have the capacity to make choices, or whether it is all determined. And if we have the capacity, what is it, and how do we exercise it? Those questions remain untouched. I don't think it's quite accurate to say that this stance 'doubles the category of freedom'. If freedom of choice exists, then we have the freedom to choose. To adopt Descartes's example, we have the freedom to put our hands in the fire – and some actually do (metaphorically).

PH They may be compatible in principle, but if you look at what happened in the field of recent French philosophy in particular (which came to have a good deal of influence in the domain of contemporary human sciences and cultural studies more generally) in the 1960s there was instead a clear shift from one position to another: there's a move from an emphasis on freedom and the anguish of responsibility for choices independent of all structuring constraint, to an emphasis on structuring factors that seem to proceed independently of all freedom and choice, such that the subject of choice is itself reduced to the status of a mere effect or 'support' of structuring causality.¹¹

NC The people who advocate that sort of position don't believe it for a moment. They themselves say 'well, I can escape it.' In fact I don't see any reason to take either of these positions seriously. If you formulate them properly they can be quite consistent. There can be constraints on what you can consider, let alone do, but that doesn't mean you have no choice – in fact you even have the choice of breaking the constraints.

The same sort of situation applies in the arts; the problem goes way back in the history of aesthetics. If you read people like Schlegel, say (and people like Coleridge in England who borrowed from Schlegel), they point out that artistic creativity depends on a system of rules, within which the artist freely creates. You can't have creativity without a system of rules you operate within. However, you can challenge the rules. That can also be a creative act.

Politics

PH In the political domain, to challenge the rules means to wage a revolutionary struggle, and it seems like some situations have developed quite effective ways of defending themselves against the prospect of revolution. A good deal of your own work over the last thirty-plus years – ever since the 'crisis of democracy' challenged the rules in the late 1960s and early 1970s – has documented in compelling detail the long and far-reaching neoliberal campaign to contain this crisis: the assault on unions and the decline of the once-thriving labour press, the consolidation of corporate power, the subversion of genuine popular participation in political decisions, and so on. Already in the late 1990s your diagnosis was rather stark, comparing the situation to the period of the Black Death in Europe's fourteenth century, the trauma of a thoroughly atomized and disoriented peasant society.¹² Presumably it's more difficult, in such circumstances, to act collectively in ways that might challenge a set of political or economic rules.

NC If I've given that impression then it's misleading, because I think that's only half the story. In other respects we're a lot more free now than in earlier periods. If someone like me condemns government policy, in a country like the United States, I'm quite confident that I'm not going to be taken to jail, tortured and killed. There was a time when that wasn't true, and it wasn't that long ago. Eugene Debs, for instance, was thrown into jail because he questioned the nobility of Wilson's war. And he wasn't a member of an oppressed minority; he was a mainstream figure, a major labour leader, a candidate for the presidency, and so on. He was just tossed into jail. That's extremely unlikely to happen today.

PH I agree that's true for prominent figures in the United States – though less true of course for critics of US policy living in a few other places, where your chances of getting killed or tossed into jail still seem pretty high. But if there is less overt repression of 'mainstream' criticism in the US today, is that because there is less real need for it?

NC That's what a lot of people say, but I don't think so. I think it's impossible to silence criticism because the country has become a lot more civilized. There are a lot of things we almost take for granted now which were almost inconceivable thirty or forty years ago. It wasn't that long ago, after all, that England essentially murdered Alan Turing, one of the great mathematicians of the twentieth century and a British war hero. They murdered him

because he was a homosexual – of course they didn't say that's what they did, but that's in effect what happened when he was driven to suicide by forced medical treatment for his 'ailment'. In the United States there were anti-sodomy laws until just a few years ago. The idea of gay rights used to be almost inconceivable, or even women's rights. Elementary rights were more or less marginalized until pretty recently, but now we can almost take them for granted.

PH These are major and hard-won developments. But they don't conflict with class interests.

NC True, the ruling classes are able to accommodate civil and human rights, pretty easily. In fact if you look at the opinions of CEOs, you find that their social attitudes tend to be fairly liberal. These things don't affect their position. When you start to touch on questions relating to authority and the concentration of power in the system you run into more challenging barriers. But still, the freedoms that exist elsewhere give you the opportunity to work against those barriers.

PH Opportunity, yes, and in some ways a kind of facility; you're right, of course, to remind people of the differences between political activism in a place like the USA and in places like Colombia or Pakistan. But the barriers themselves have also evolved in ways that make them harder to change, not least because for many people they no longer appear as barriers at all; many of the undergraduate students I've worked with over the last fifteen years or so have seemed to accept them as a sort of second nature. In an interview on the BBC in the mid 1970s, I think it's from 1976, you anticipated that 'the tendency towards the concentration of power in capitalism will lead to constant revulsion' – and, yes, there's been plenty of revulsion, that's for sure, but also a lot of confusion and resignation.

Over these same years, many academic critics of these old barriers, critics who retain a more or less distant sympathy to the revolutionary tradition (for instance critics influenced by Adorno and the Frankfurt School), have become more and more pessimistic about the prospects of changing the rules, as you say, especially as the legacy of the 1960s began to fade. They argue that capitalism's hegemony has become so overwhelming and commodification so far-reaching that resistance has been reduced to an impotent demonstration of moral indignation. They point, as you have also done, to the impact of globalization and financialization, the eclipse of left-leaning political parties, the corporate hold on the media, the perversion and subsequent collapse of socialism in Russia and China, the dilution of a distinctive working-class consciousness and culture in the more affluent countries, integration of an increasing proportion of the population into the networks of private property (through debt, home ownership, pension schemes), and so on. And they tend to conclude that the very notion of 'revolution' has become anachronistic. What's your view about this?

NC Power systems don't respond to challenges by saying 'fine, I'll disappear'. They react by finding new ways to sustain themselves. To take a classic case, about a century ago, in the two freest societies in the world, the USA and UK, dominant elites recognized that too much freedom had been won for them to control the population by force, so it would be necessary to turn to controlling attitudes and beliefs – to 'fabricate wants' and 'manufacture consent' (respectively, Thorstein Veblen, who condemned the practice; Walter Lippmann, who lauded it). One outcome was the rise of the public relations industry, dedicated to these ends. And there were others. These developments were reactions to victories of resistance to systems of power. They changed the terrain while the range of opportunities extended. The same is true, I think, of the strong counterattack on the liberating tendencies of the 1960s, pretty much across the mainstream spectrum, from the Powell memorandum on the right to the 'crisis of democracy' at the liberal internationalist end. As for whether one chooses to be optimistic or pessimistic about the prospects for moving on towards greater freedom and justice, that's a personal matter, of little significance that I can see. We should act the same way, essentially, whatever our expectations of success.

PH Perhaps this is another point where the relation between action and ‘actuality’ deserves more consideration, but I agree that for decades now people living in the more privileged parts of the world have been too quick to accept ‘strategic’ or ‘pragmatic’ limits on our range of action. We’ve been too quick to internalize the historical logic of the dominant class, the idea that ‘there’s no alternative’, and to filter our own sense of possibility through this presumption of impossibility.

This filtering has taken place in all sorts of ways, through many kinds of institution and organization: even some of the groups that played a progressive role twenty-five or thirty years ago, for instance some of the human rights groups and NGOs you often referred to in your campaign work on Latin America in the 1980s, now seem to fulfil a more ambiguous function. More or less by their own admission, USAID and the National Endowment for Democracy have taken on some of the functions that used to be associated with the CIA, and they wield considerable influence in the ‘development’ sector. Many veterans of the popular mobilizations in places like Haiti, India or Thailand, for instance (I’m thinking of people like Patrick Elie, Arundhati Roy, Giles Ji Ungpakorn), point to the way that human rights groups and NGOs have come to serve as defenders if not apologists of the status quo.¹³

NC To some extent no doubt, though it was always the case with USAID and NED, and to a much more limited extent genuine human rights groups. But for the latter, I’m not convinced that the changes have been generally in the direction that you describe. I’ve worked pretty closely with many of them for a long time. Take Israel, which is of course a touchy subject in the USA. I was pretty close to the US leadership of Amnesty International, for instance, and through the 1980s, at least, they wouldn’t touch it; now’s there’s very little hesitation. Human Rights Watch was also very careful on this issue, and today it’s calling for the US government to withhold funding from Israel to the extent that it’s involved in any way with settlements or discrimination within Israel. The press doesn’t report that, but it’s significant, and I think it’s an indication of how they’re becoming more free and more open, as they reflect changes in the society.

PH Affluent societies are more free and open in some ways, but on the other hand you’d have to go back a long way, at least in Britain, to find a period when political discussion was so narrowly focused. In many ways, the Thatcher–Blair–Cameron sequence represents the consolidation of a sort of single-party system; expression of any serious political alternative is confined to the margins. Meanwhile ‘security’ has become a genuine obsession, and one way or another the political criminalization of the poor seems to break new barriers year on year, while the ongoing privatization of so much of the public sphere makes it that much more difficult to formulate a concerted response. Higher education, for instance, is being transformed at dizzying speed into a mere extension of the corporate sector, with little determined resistance, so far, outside of fairly small groups of committed activists. Everywhere you find ‘the market’ and in particular financial markets exercising something close to tyrannical influence.

NC To the extent that that’s true, there’s no point lamenting it. It’s more reason for dedicated efforts to combat it, which is by no means impossible. I’m sure we agree about that.

PH What about recent developments in the media? Do new mainstream providers like Al Jazeera or Telesur offer a real alternative to the corporate media? How far does the rapid growth of blogs, new social media, that sort of thing, challenge the older concentration of power?

NC They do, though it’s a mixed story. With regard to the mainstream media, I have a much more nuanced view than many others I know. I think there are many respects in which the media are more free and open now than they were thirty or forty years ago.

PH Adherence to the propaganda model you presented (with Edward Herman) in *Manufacturing Consent* (1988) has become less binding in recent years?

NC Well, the propaganda model is still there, with few changes, as far as I can see. We discussed some of these in the second edition, in 2002. However, we didn't really go into how effective the system was. We said: here are the factors that we think help to shape media content and so forth, but a separate question is: how effective are they? And there have been a lot of changes. For one thing, a lot of people in the media, reporters, editors and so on, came through the experience of the 1960s. It changed them, and the society changed. The media are now somewhat different. I think it's a mixed story.

It's absolutely true that as people have won more freedom, dominant groups have sought other ways to constrain that freedom. Sometimes this is perfectly overt, as in the case a century ago that I mentioned when British conservatives and their counterparts in the USA recognized that enough freedom had been won that you just can't control people by force any more. The rise of parliamentary labour parties, the growth of trade unions, the acquisition of civil rights, and so on, all this marked the crossing of a sort of threshold. So they turned instead to propaganda. It was very explicit: we can't control people by force, so we'll need to control their attitudes and beliefs.

PH Yes, I think you could track this back a little earlier, in its modern form at least back to the anti-Jacobin panic of the 1790s. In Britain, by the middle of the nineteenth century, after the first Reform Act, as the danger posed by Chartism began to fade, you find people like Walter Bagehot and J.S. Mill pondering how best to shape the population's political opinions, how to preserve mass deference and passivity without open recourse to violent coercion. As you've shown, in the age of Bernays and Goebbels, manipulation of the public mind quickly became a huge industry, one that has grown steadily ever since.

How do you see the status of public opinion in such a context? You often refer to polls of American popular opinion, especially when they confirm how popular attitudes tend to be well to the left of mainstream commentary and the dominant political parties – that is, more or less in line with your own principles.

NC I also often refer to public opinion when it's radically opposed to my principles. For example, fundamentalist religious beliefs, very significant in the USA, where half the population firmly believe the world was created a few thousand years ago, one-third believe in the literal truth of the Bible, and so on. In general, though, it's a very interesting point. To give you just one example, a fairly extensive and serious poll came out recently, from CBS, a fairly detailed analysis of people's attitudes on current political and economic issues, the financial crisis, that sort of thing. And it turns out, as in the past, no matter how right-wing you get – say, the Tea Party – most people have more or less social-democratic attitudes. So the Tea Party segment of the population support more spending on health, education, and so on. On the other hand, if you ask other questions, take say proposals for a balanced budget amendment to the constitution, which would be monstrously ridiculous, well I think around 75 per cent of people support it; I think that's a result of effective propaganda, of making people believe somehow that balancing the budget – economically suicidal, but a high priority for financial institutions – is extremely important. So people think that we need to cut down on our spending, but they also think we should increase spending on social services and so on; you get attitudes that are internally contradictory, but more liberal than many people suppose.

PH OK, but do most people in the USA currently support the sort of measures you've defended as necessary for the building of a more just and more egalitarian society – the abolition of corporate 'private tyrannies', the end of class distinctions, collective ownership of the means of production, an equal sharing out of unrewarding work, and so on? Given the context in which these sorts of things are usually discussed, the overwhelming mass of ideological pressure that's brought to bear on them, is there any reason to expect more than minority support for such measures, for the time being?

In general, when it comes to political struggle, what is the decisive point of reference for you: majority popular support, or the validity of a general principle? In many if not most of the campaigns you've been involved in, the initial mobilization involved only a small minority of people, a group of activists. What role should the reference to public opinion play in this sort of situation? In the case of the long campaign to end the US assault on Vietnam, for instance, you began as a tiny minority, even if it was one that could present itself as the leading edge of tendency that might become more inclusive, in fact all-inclusive.

NC Not just a tiny minority but an embattled and oppressed one; we couldn't have a public demonstration in Boston against the war without it being broken up.

PH Exactly. How, then, do you see the general position of what you might call a 'principled vanguard' – whether it's John Brown or Noam Chomsky – in relation to majority opinion? How do you see the relation between a principle of justice and the position of public opinion, which may or may not be aligned with such a principle?

NC I don't quite see the problem. We should uphold principles of justice whatever public opinion may be, and we should try to influence public opinion when we feel that it supports injustice. That raises an interesting question, which I don't think has been well studied, though there's some evidence we can draw on. Take say 1975, when everyone or almost everyone agreed that the war in Vietnam was wrong. It's a little crude, but you can divide reactions between those of intellectual elites and those of the general public. It's easy to study elite opinion, because it's written down. Among the elites, just about the most critical view you could find, on the liberal edge of the spectrum (people like Anthony Lewis at the *New York Times*), was that the war began with 'blundering efforts to do good' (almost a tautology, since if we do something it must be good), but by 1969 it had become a disaster, since we couldn't bring democracy to Vietnam at a cost acceptable to ourselves. That was the outside limit of liberal critique – and you could have heard similar views, presumably, among members of the German general staff after Stalingrad.

On the other hand, there were a few studies of popular opinion at the time. Around 70 per cent of people said that the war wasn't a 'mistake', it was fundamentally and morally wrong. But those sorts of questions never get pursued. The pollsters don't ask, 'What do you mean it was morally wrong? Do you mean we shouldn't be invading another country?' Those sorts of questions are unimaginable to those who run the polls, so we don't actually know. The numbers, though, remain pretty steady for several years, and suggest a pretty substantial split between the moral principles of the population and the ideological dogmas of elites.

PH You'd have heard different views among Marxist intellectuals, of course, but I recognize that in the USA, by the mid-1970s they didn't have the sort of public profile you have in mind.

Do you think there's anything left in a version of Marx's old idea of the proletariat as the 'universal class', or rather as the tendentially universal class – the class whose enforced role in capitalist relations of production gives it a unique social and political position, one that might come to represent the interests of humanity as a whole (and whose political supremacy might then be justified, in the short term, by more or less despotic if not 'dictatorial' measures)?

NC Not just Marxist intellectuals, by any means. On the proletariat, I'm not sure that's properly called the Marxist view. Marx himself, in his later years, was deeply interested in the statistical and political work of the Narodniks, on peasant Russia, and apparently believed there was a lot of revolutionary potential in the Russian peasantry. This was largely suppressed by the urban intellectuals, by the Social Democrats and the Bolsheviks, who didn't like that idea; in fact it wasn't even revealed until years later. I think there's something to Marx's mature position as to the revolutionary potential in the general population.

And I don't think it's that far below the surface. I think it can be brought out: it's not the classical proletariat; we're living in a different sort of society.

PH I agree that in the 1870s, after some hesitation, Marx expressed some sympathy with the populist position, given the distinctive features of Russia's economy, and he was careful to avoid prescribing a kind of 'super-historical' narrative that might apply in one and the same way to very different places.¹⁴ In the 1890s, and after, Lenin himself also had some sympathy with the Narodniks, rather more than some of his polemical texts might suggest.¹⁵ But do you think that Lenin's basic position about the underlying tendencies of capitalist development (sketched for the first time in his 1899 *Development of Capitalism in Russia*) was contrary to the general thrust of Marx's own assessment of the logic at work in the consolidation and expansion of capitalism? Is it inconsistent with the general positions Marx himself took in the *Communist Manifesto*, in the volumes of *Capital* and his other economic writings? The late Russian letters aside, Marx has a lot to say about the proletariat as a revolutionary class, but overall he seems sceptical about the revolutionary potential of the peasantry as a class (notably in France), and after 1848 he doesn't refer much to broader categories like 'the people' or 'the general population'.¹⁶

NC I don't quite accept that picture of the later Marx, or of Lenin, but no doubt in some respects Lenin developed views that Marx had expressed.

PH Compared with Smith, Humboldt and some of the classical liberals, you don't often refer to Marx. Is this because you think that he doesn't add much to Smith's own critique of the stupefying and degrading effects of the division of labour, or to broader critiques of 'wage slavery' that you can find all through the working-class press of the nineteenth century? Doesn't Marx's critique of classical political economy, his clarification of what's at stake in the extraction of surplus value, in the mechanics of commodification, and so on, add something distinctive and important to anti-capitalist struggle?

NC No doubt. I sometimes refer to his critique, but not much, because, rightly or wrongly, I don't think it helps much with regard to the topics I'm studying. Nor incidentally does Smith's critique, which I brought up in a different connection: the serious misrepresentation of Smith in much of the standard literature, and the ways in which his actual views contrast with capitalist doctrine. On the nineteenth-century working-class press in the USA, I think the attitudes and beliefs of 'factory girls' from the farms, artisans from the urban poor, and others like them (with little if any familiarity with Marx) are very interesting for different reasons: for insight into the ways in which the 'instinct for freedom' manifests itself under conditions of oppression and regimentation, with a good deal of significance for today.

PH One of the lessons that cultural critics influenced by Marx often emphasize is the command to 'always historicize!' (Fredric Jameson). Do you think that a Marxist insistence on the historicity of particular modes of exploitation and domination obscures a more basic simplicity and consistency of power relations, the sort of age-old 'Godfather' model of politics whereby (as you've often reminded your audiences) 'the strong do as they wish while the poor suffer as they must'?

NC Maybe I'm simple-minded, but it seems to me obvious that we should always be sensitive to specific historical conditions while at the same time seeking to identify pervasive themes that show up in one or another way under varying circumstances.

Communism

PH You've always been very critical of Lenin, who still remains, I think, a symptomatic point of reference for some broader political questions. Of course I understand why you consistently condemned Soviet Russia as a betrayal of communism – needless to say, many 'old

Bolsheviks', not least Trotsky and his supporters, would agree with some of your criticisms. But I'm struck by the force of your hostility to Lenin in particular. In various places you've described him as 'rightwing deviation of the socialist movement', as 'one of the greatest enemies of socialism', and so on.¹⁷ I don't mean to go back over the historical sequence for its own sake here, but I think there are some general points of principle at issue that are worth evoking.

It seems to me you underestimate the degree to which the Bolsheviks, in the run-up to October 1917, and precisely on account of the relative consistency and clarity of their political principles, came to lead a genuine mobilization of Russia's urban working classes. Even relatively middle-of-the-road historians (for instance Sheila Fitzpatrick) have long argued against Cold War-era assumptions that the October Revolution was a mere coup or putsch, led by a conspiratorial party with little or ephemeral popular support. More detailed contextual reconstruction of his early work has gone a long way towards undermining the image of Lenin as a ruthless top-down political opportunist, injecting party-sanctioned political consciousness into a passive working class.¹⁸

And I wonder if you then underestimate some of the practical problems facing the Bolsheviks after October, which were daunting by any standard: economic and military catastrophe, the immediate and vigorous opposition on all fronts of the propertied classes, non-cooperation or betrayal of the officer corps and much of the government, soon followed by a full-blown and exceptionally ruthless civil war combined with international assault... Like many of his contemporaries, and with good reason, Lenin remained mindful throughout this period of the disastrous fate of the Paris Commune; in some ways the butchery of 1871 set an agenda for much of the twentieth century. If not through the sort of measures that Lenin and Trotsky came to advocate in 1918, how in practice could any government based on Soviet power have survived?

This isn't to justify the subsequent perversion of the emancipatory movement, the subsequent move away from the Soviet and towards the single-party system. But it seems important, if we're to assess fairly the historical legacy and its contemporary significance, to appreciate the scale of the challenge; given what they were up against it's no accident that the first successful revolutions against slavery (in Haiti) and capitalism (in Russia) both involved a good deal of forceful political and military power. An anarchist like Victor Serge, for instance, who would later become one of Stalinism's sharpest critics, quickly came to justify many of the strict measures the Bolsheviks took during the civil war, soon after he arrived in Russia in 1919¹⁹ – I wonder if you have some sympathy with that sort of assessment of the situation?

Rosa Luxemburg, whom you cite as a critic of and alternative to Lenin, actually took a quite nuanced position once the historical die was cast. Like Trotsky and Martov back in 1903–04, she was certainly worried, again with good reason, about the concentration of power in the Russian party, but she also argued that in a certain sense 'the future belongs to Bolshevism', and she applauded many aspects of the Bolshevik achievement of 1917.²⁰

NC I've never tried to give a detailed analysis of Lenin's doctrines and actions, they are not a topic that interests me very much, frankly, but I think the few comments I've made about it are accurate. In particular, I've stressed exactly what you say about the pre-October period. During those months, Lenin veered towards the libertarian Left, in *April Theses* and *State and Revolution*. I think there is some justice in the critique by scholarship that this was the opportunism of a skilled politician. On taking power, he pretty quickly reverted to previous stands, and moved to undermine the popular achievements of the post-February period, including factory councils and soviets, while of course blocking the Constituent Assembly because it would be out of his control. In general, he moved (with Trotsky's assistance) to create a 'labour army' under the command of the central leadership which was supposed to drive this backward peasant society to industrialization, a prerequisite for the development of socialism in his version of Marxism. Undoubtedly the Western intervention

and civil war were factors in this evolution, but I think the record shows that it was under way for more fundamental reasons. In this regard I think the ‘infantile ultraleftists’ he castigated were basically right. As for Luxemburg, I read her account as more sharply critical than your summary – and we have to bear in mind that she was in prison, with only limited knowledge of what was happening, expressing hopes and solidarity but with serious reservations: and that in the brief period afterwards, before her assassination, she called for paths quite different from those that Lenin and Trotsky were pursuing. This barely skims the surface, but I think it’s accurate as far as it goes.

PH A last question, again generalizing from this historical sequence, about the nature of revolutionary change. Elsewhere you’ve mentioned, alongside Luxemburg, Trotsky’s early and prescient critique of the Bolsheviks’ authoritarian inflection. The most heated polemic dates from 1904, in his *Our Political Tasks*, where he worries, with remarkable and often-cited foresight, that overcentralization might encourage the party to impose itself in the place of the proletariat, and then ‘lead to the Party organization “substituting” itself for the Party, the Central Committee substituting itself for the Party organization, and finally the dictator substituting himself for the Central Committee’.²¹ Trotsky himself would have plenty of opportunity to ponder this substitutionist sequence, soon enough.

But I wonder how you yourself might respond to a contemporary version of the question Trotsky went on to raise, immediately after the 1905 revolution in Russia, regarding the



Bolsheviks’ anticipation of a fairly gradual movement from a liberal-bourgeois phase to a socialist-proletarian phase in the revolutionary sequence (i.e. a relatively slow shift from the ‘minimal’ to the ‘maximal’ programmes of social democracy). In practice it could never work like this, Trotsky argued in *Results and Prospects* (1906). Imagine that a progressive coalition government were to come to power in Russia, he wrote, one that included a leading proletarian component. And imagine that this government then begins to impose some moderate liberal reforms – for example, an eight-hour limit to the working day. This would provoke an immediate backlash from the factory owners and their supporters in the army and in established circles of power more generally. There would be mass lockouts followed by mass strikes, and very quickly the government would need to make a choice: to back down or to persevere. And if it decided to persevere, then in order to prevail it would be obliged to follow an ‘uninterrupted’ transition to socialist revolution – that is, to accept the logic of class war, to overcome capitalist resistance, appropriate the factories, deal with the army, and so on.²²

Wouldn’t a version of this question face anyone who had even a partial chance of implementing the sort of measures you’ve long advocated, regarding the abolition of corporations, appropriation of factories by workers, and so on?

NC What Trotsky imagined might have happened, or other developments, could have taken place. The questions we face primarily have to do with what *is* happening, taking account no doubt of possible eventualities but not responding prematurely to some worst-case scenario. I doubt that Trotsky would have disagreed. As for now, I don’t think we’re far from such concerns. In fact I think that in the last couple of years it could have happened. When Obama essentially nationalized a good part of industry, say General Motors, the government basically took it over. The Obama administration followed the predictable

policies, namely, restoration of the old system, including off-shoring production, laying off workers, closing down factories, and various other things. But with enough consciousness and organization, there could have been an alternative. Workers in GM plants in Michigan and Indiana could have said no, we're not going to close down our factory, we're going to take it over and we're going to produce things the country needs, like say high-speed rail. Well you can imagine the reaction among the banks, the media, and so on. But again, with enough organization and general consciousness, it could have succeeded. I don't think it's *that* remote, and I think that people understand it. In fact you come very close to that with sit-down strikes; a sit-down strike is just a step before saying 'toss out the bosses, we'll run it ourselves'.

PH But that's just it: aren't the conditions for such consciousness and organization today relatively discouraging, overall, compared to the late 1970s or early 1980s, when organized labour sustained the first of a long series of damaging defeats? Even a quasi-revolutionary mobilization like May '68 in France was actually contained quite quickly. What's left of the union movement has been fighting a mostly defensive rearguard action for as long as I can remember. In the USA, even the SEIU, which had some real organizing momentum a few years back, seems to have lost much of its militant edge, and in California has turned against some of its own most progressive locals. However you measure it, labour militancy seems to have declined in recent years. Perhaps things are beginning to change this year, in 2011, with the protests that have spread across North Africa and Europe's capital cities, and in some of the public sector protests in the USA. But do you think it's realistic to anticipate more radical challenges to the established political and economic order in the foreseeable future, especially in the absence of a militant and well-organized mass party?

NC We don't know; these things spring up when you don't expect them. And, to repeat, I don't think one's subjective feelings of optimism or pessimism matter much. We have essentially the same choices whatever these highly uncertain judgements may be.

PH You don't think it would need some sort of 'democratic centralist' organization to help coordinate things, to use the old-fashioned expression? If, say, factory occupations made real headway in a country like the USA, how would they survive the backlash this would provoke?

NC I'm not predicting it, I'm just saying it's not inconceivable. For example, during this recent period, I've noticed, when I talk with working-class audiences, that people perhaps hadn't thought of factory takeovers, but it didn't seem to strike them as an exotic idea. Why shouldn't we?, they often ask. And there were even some attempts, here and there.

MIT, 10 August 2011

Notes

1. Chomsky expands on this point in a recent article on 'The Mysteries of Nature' (2009): 'Though much more optimistic than Galileo about the prospects for mechanical explanation, Descartes too recognized the limits of our cognitive reach [and] speculated that the workings of *res cogitans* may lie beyond human understanding. He thought that we may not "have intelligence enough" to understand the workings of mind, in particular, the normal use of language, with its creative aspects ... However, Descartes continued, even if the explanation of normal use of language and other forms of free and coherent choice of action lies beyond our cognitive grasp, that is no reason to question the authenticity of our experience. Quite generally, "free will" is "the noblest thing" we have, Descartes held: "there is nothing we comprehend more evidently and more perfectly" and "it would be absurd" to doubt something that "we comprehend intimately, and experience within ourselves"?' Noam Chomsky, 'The Mysteries of Nature: How Deeply Hidden?', *Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 106, no. 4, 2009, p. 175.

2. Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 169–70.
3. Noam Chomsky, ‘Linguistics and Philosophy’, University of New Hampshire at Durham, 12 April 1995; cf. Chomsky, ‘Things No Amount of Learning Can Teach: Noam Chomsky interviewed by John Gliedman’, *Omni*, vol. 6, no. 11, November 1983, www.chomsky.info/interviews/198311--.htm.
4. Noam Chomsky, *Reflections on Language*, Pantheon, New York, 1975, p. 25.
5. Chomsky, ‘Things No Amount of Learning Can Teach’.
6. Chomsky, ‘The Mysteries of Nature’, pp. 167–200.
7. The quotation reads: ‘In Hume’s judgment, Newton’s greatest achievement was that while he “seemed to draw the veil from some of the mysteries of nature, he shewed at the same time the imperfections of the mechanical philosophy; and thereby restored [Nature’s] ultimate secrets to that obscurity, in which they ever did and ever will remain” (cited in Chomsky, ‘The Mysteries of Nature’, p. 167).
8. As things stand, Chomsky writes, ‘the evolution of [human] cognitive capacities’ remains mostly obscure. ‘On this topic, evolutionary biologist Richard Lewontin has argued forcefully that we can learn very little, because evidence is inaccessible, at least in any terms understood by contemporary science.’ Chomsky, ‘The Mysteries of Nature’, pp. 199–200; cf. Lewontin, ‘The Evolution of Cognition: Questions We Will Never Answer’, in Don Scarborough and Saul Sternberg, eds, *Methods, Models and Conceptual Issues: An Invitation to Cognitive Science*, Vol. 4, MIT Press, Cambridge MA, 1998.
9. Cf. Benjamin Libet, *Mind Time: The Temporal Factor in Consciousness*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA, 2004.
10. Chomsky, ‘Things No Amount of Learning Can Teach’.
11. See, for instance, Louis Althusser’s classic formulation, from 1965: ‘The structure of the relations of production determines the *places* and *functions* occupied and adopted by the agents of production, who are never anything more than the occupants of these places, insofar as they are the “supporters” (*Träger*) of these functions. The true “subjects” (in the sense of constitutive subjects of the process) are therefore not these occupants or functionaries, are not, despite all appearances, the “obviousnesses” of the “given” of naïve anthropology, “concrete individuals”, “real men” – but *the definition and distribution of these places and functions.*’ Louis Althusser and Étienne Balibar, *Reading Capital*, trans. Ben Brewster, New Left Books, London: 1970, pp. 180; cf. pp. 252–3.
12. Noam Chomsky, *Class War*, audiobook, Epitaph, 1998 [1995]), section 15.
13. Arundhati Roy notes, for instance, that the expansion of charitably funded NGOs in India ‘coincided with the opening of India’s markets to neo-liberalism’, with the downsizing of the Indian state, with the dramatic reductions in public spending and with the still more dramatic ‘blunting of political resistance’. The ‘real contribution of NGOs is that they defuse political anger and dole out as aid or benevolence what people ought to have by right. They alter the public psyche. They turn people into dependent victims ...; the greater the devastation caused by neo-liberalism, the greater the outbreak of NGOs.’ Arundhati Roy, ‘Public Power in the Age of Empire’, *Socialist Worker*, 14 October 2004, www.socialistworker.co.uk/article.php?article_id=2910; cf. Peter Hallward, *Damming the Flood: Haiti and the Politics of Containment*, Verso, London, 2010, ch. 4.
14. See, for instance, Karl Marx, letter to the editor of the *Otecestvenniye Zapisky*, November 1877, www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1877/11/russia.htm. Even here, however, Marx argues that ‘if Russia is tending to become a capitalist nation after the example of the Western European countries – and during the last years she has been taking a lot of trouble in this direction – she will not succeed without having first transformed a good part of her peasants into proletarians; and after that, once taken to the bosom of the capitalist regime, she will experience its pitiless laws like other profane peoples.’
15. Cf. Christopher Read, *Lenin: A Revolutionary Life*, Routledge, London, 2005, pp. 21, 57 and *passim*; Lars T. Lih, *Lenin*, Reaktion Books, London, 2011, pp. 37–40, 44–5.
16. For an overview, see Hal Draper, *Karl Marx’s Theory of Revolution*, Vol. 2: *The Politics of Social Classes*, Monthly Review Press, New York, 1978.
17. ‘Chomsky on Lenin, Trotsky, Socialism & the Soviet Union’, Q&A session 1989, www.youtube.com/watch?v=yQsceZ9skQI; Chomsky, ‘Anarchism, Marxism & Hope for the Future’, *Red & Black* 2, March 2001, <http://struggle.ws/pdfs/rbr2.pdf>.
18. Lars T. Lih, *Lenin Rediscovered: What Is to Be Done? In Context*, Brill, Leiden, 2006.
19. Victor Serge, *Revolution in Danger: Writings from Russia 1919–1921*, Redwords, London, 1997.
20. ‘In the present period,’ Rosa Luxemburg concludes, the decisive question is not ‘this or that secondary question of tactics, but of the capacity for action of the proletariat, the strength to act, the will to power of socialism as such. In this, Lenin and Trotsky and their friends were the first, those who went ahead as an example to the proletariat of the world; they are still the only ones up to now who can cry with Hutten: “I have dared!”’ Rosa Luxemburg, *The Russian Revolution* [1918], www.marxists.org/archive/luxemburg/1918/russian-revolution/ch08.htm.
21. Leon Trotsky, *Our Political Tasks* (1904), pt. 2, www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1904/tasks/ch03.htm.
22. Cf. Leon Trotsky, *Results and Prospects* (1906), ch. 6, www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1931/tpr/rp06.htm.