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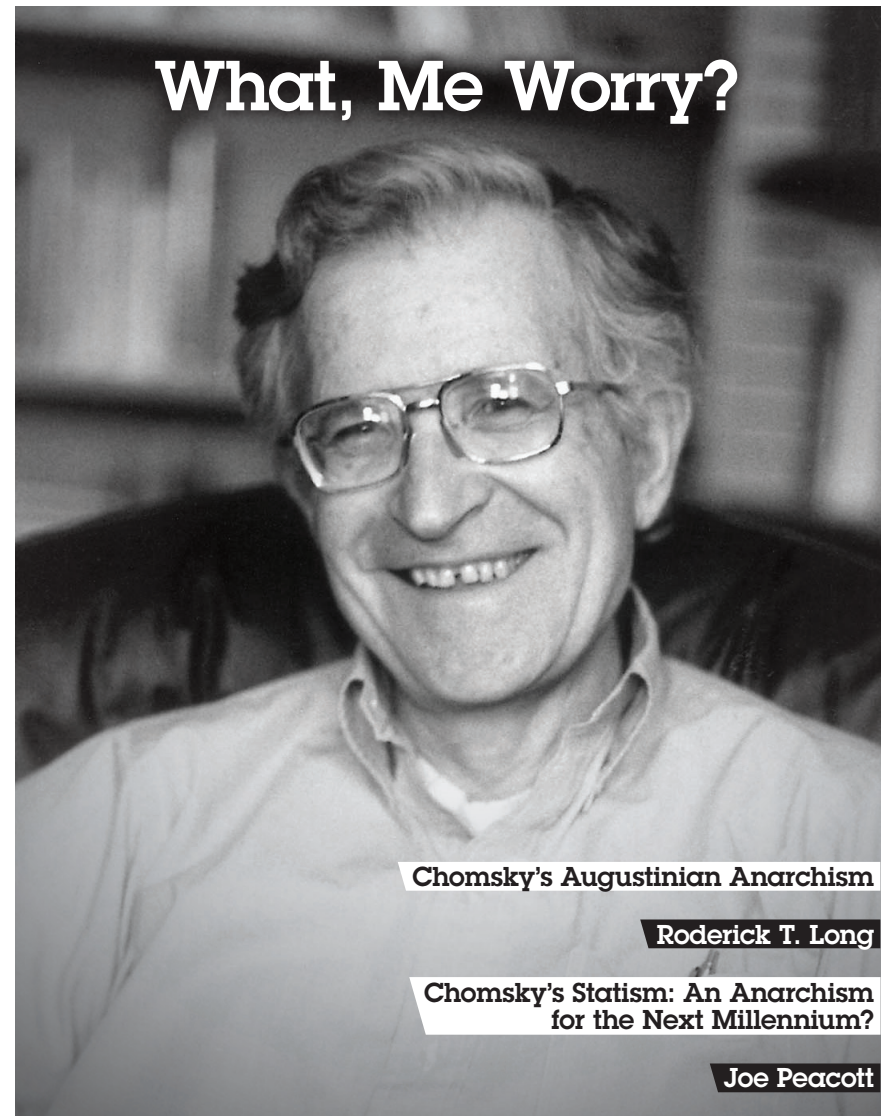
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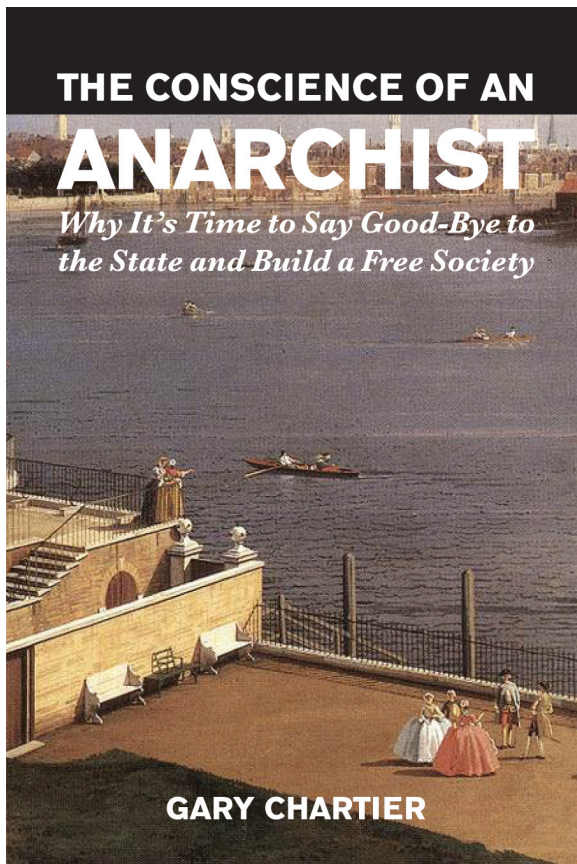
Chomsky's Augustinian Anarchism

Roderick T. Long

**Chomsky's Statism: An Anarchism
for the Next Millennium?**

Joe Peacott

Radical Reprints



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look is closer to an anarchist one than is Chomsky's.

Unlike Chomsky, many rightly see that government schools educate badly, government welfare does not serve poor people well, and government action is largely against the interests of regular people. He is right that private corporations are not in the business of being humanitarian, but neither is the state. Instead of criticizing and fearing this anti-government feeling, we should encourage it and seek to extend it to all areas of government, including the military, police, and taxes.

Private corporate power exists only because it is protected by the state. Government reduces competition and limits entry into the market place with various licensing and regulatory schemes, and grants monopolies and subsidies to favored businesses. Chomsky himself concedes that corporations would not be successful if forced to submit to market discipline, and that markets are under attack. But in addition to actively promoting concentration of private corporate power, the government prevents people from defending their own interests in disputes with corporations with its police powers and laws that disarm working people. Such disempowerment of people makes them unable to resist the power of public institutions as well, allowing the state to tax, regulate, and imprison people at its whim. Abolishing state power is a more effective and libertarian method of limiting private and public tyranny than is increasing the scope of the federal government. Only anarchist means have any hope of producing anarchist ends.

by Joe Peacott

Joe Peacott is an individualist anarchist writer based in the United States. He is a leading figure at BAD Press, a publishing outlet for individualist anarchist philosophy. His work on economics and sociology has been published by the Libertarian Alliance and referenced favourably by leading anarchist scholars such as Kevin A. Carson. Peacott's anti-war activism in Anchorage, Alaska was the subject of TV station KTUU broadcast. Peacott, in the tradition of the 19th century American individualist anarchists, supports private property in the sense of ownership based on labor and trade except for in land where he supports property titles only while the land is being occupied or used and opposes profit in economic relations. He opposes both capitalism and state socialism.

the public and private arenas..

Government is a package. The welfare state is also the warfare state, and, while Chomsky criticizes the federal government's support of prisons and corporations, he thinks government can protect people from prisons and corporations. He says that people can participate in government, but com-

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plains that it is not under popular influence. Government is force and should be done away with. People can act for themselves and take care of themselves. That is the anarchist attitude to the state, and Chomsky rejects it.

In fact, he is troubled that people might hate or fear the government. He admits that the state steals from poor people to subsidize wealthy people, but he thinks discussions about whether the government can be trusted to care for poor people are irrelevant. He dismisses as far-right the rejection of public

schools. He feels that when people feel disillusioned about power, they turn to "irrational" alternatives. He arrogantly states that those who think there is a contradiction in supporting centralized state power even though one opposes it "just aren't thinking very clearly."

Chomsky seems not to be able to envision any means of offsetting the power of private tyrannies other than increasing the power of public tyrannies. Chomsky speaks glowingly of the efforts of poor people in places such as Haiti. "Poor people, people in the slums, peasants in the hills, managed to create out of their own activity a very lively, vibrant civil society with grass-roots movements and associations and unions and ideals and commitments and hopes and enthusiasm and so on which was astonishing in scale, so much so that without any resources they were able to take over the political system." He seems to see their assumption of state power as a victory, unable to envision that people this resourceful could continue to function quite nicely without a government. And people are this resourceful, both in haiti and the united states, and this is where anarchists get their inspiration.

Even Barbara Ehrenreich, a social democrat, and, with Chomsky, a member of the New Party, can countenance non-statist solutions to working and poor people's problems. As she says, "[W]e can no longer allow ourselves to be seen as cheerleaders for government activism...We need to emphasize strategies and approaches that do not depend on the existing government, that in fact bypass it as irrelevant or downright obstructionist." She then goes on to mention organizing the unorganized, citizen initiatives against corporate abuses, and non-governmental self-help projects in the tradition of the feminist health centers of the 70s. In addition, she sees the state as a clear enemy in its erosion of civil liberties and the growth of the punishment industry. She calls her approach "progressive libertarianism." Such an out-

Chomsky's Augustinian Anarchism

Noam Chomsky is perhaps the United States' best-known anarchist. There's a certain irony to this, however; for just as St. Augustine once prayed, "Grant me chastity and continence, but not yet," Chomsky's aim is in effect *anarchy, but not yet*.

Chomsky's reason for the "not yet" is that a powerful central government is currently necessary as a bulwark against the power of the corporate elite; thus it will not be safe to abolish or even scale back the state until we *first* use the state to break the power of the corporate elite:

In the long term, I think the centralized political power ought to be eliminated and dissolved and turned down ultimately to the local level, finally, with federalism and associations and so on. On the other hand, right now, I'd like to strengthen the federal government. The reason is, we live in this world, not some other world. And in this world there happen to be huge concentrations of private power that are as close to tyranny and as close to totalitarian as anything humans have devised.

There's only one way of defending rights that have been attained, or of extending their scope in the face of these private powers, and that's to maintain the one form of illegitimate power that happens to be somewhat responsible to the public and which the public can indeed influence. — *You Say You Want a Devolution*

Now Chomsky's notion of the state as a crucial bulwark against "concentrations of private power" might initially seem puzzling, given that – as Chomsky's own research has confirmed time and again – the state has historically been the chief *enabler* of such concentrations. But what Chomsky seems to mean is not so much that it generally acts as a bulwark *now*, but rather that it *can* be made to do so; if you're facing a much stronger opponent (private power) who also has a sword (government power), you're better off trying to grab the sword and use it against him than you would be simply destroying the sword.

The government is far from benign – that's true. On the other hand, it's at least partially accountable, and it can become as benign as we make it.

What's not benign (what's extremely harmful, in fact) is something you didn't mention – business power, which is highly concentrated and, by now, largely transnational. Business power is very far from benign and it's completely unaccountable. It's a totalitarian system that has an enormous effect on our lives. It's also the main reason why the government isn't benign. — *On Gun Control*

There are two assumptions here with which I want to take issue.

First, Chomsky assumes that the influence of private business on government is “the main reason why the government isn’t benign.” Why on earth does he believe this? Monopoly power tends to invite abuse, whether those who direct that power are mostly within or mostly outside the state apparatus. If Chomsky thinks government would be so harmless without evil capitalists pulling the strings, why does he want to abolish it even in the long run?

Second, Chomsky assumes that state power is “partially accountable” while business power is “completely unaccountable.” Now to begin with, I’m not sure whether the accountability of state power is here being contrasted with that of actually existing, state-enabled business power or instead with the accountability of business power as it would be without governmental

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support. But if it’s the former, then the contrast, even if correct, would provide no grounds for resisting the state’s abolition; the fact that X + Y is more dangerous than X by itself is not a good reason to defend

X. The contrast is relevant to a defense of the state only if business, *without state support*, would *still* be less accountable than the state. And here it seems obvious that the state – even a democratic state – is *far less* accountable than genuinely private business.

After all, a business can get your labour and/or possessions only if you agree to hand them over, while a government can extract these by force. Of course you can try to vote your current representatives out of office, but only at multiple-year intervals, and only if you convince 51 % of your neighbours to do likewise; whereas you can terminate your relationship with a business at any time, and without getting others to go along. Moreover, each candidate offers a package-deal of policies, whereas with private enterprise I can choose, say, Grocery A’s vegetables and Grocery B’s meats.

David Friedman illuminates the contrast:

When a consumer buys a product on the market, he can compare alternative brands. ... When you elect a politician, you buy nothing but promises. ... You can compare 1968 Fords, Chryslers, and Volkswagens, but nobody will ever be able to compare the Nixon administration of 1968 with the Humphrey and Wallace administrations of the same year. It is as if we had only Fords from 1920 to 1928, Chryslers from 1928 to 1936, and then had to decide what firm would make a better car for the next four years....

Not only does a consumer have better information than a voter,

by the corporations anyway. He even quotes a poll in one of his interviews to the effect that 82% of americans feel the state is not run in the interests of the people. Nowhere does he back up his claim that government is or has been open to popular participation in any meaningful sense.

Governments have been influenced by popular pressure, however. The anti-war movement made it impossible for the military to use nuclear weapons in south-east asia, thereby preventing a united states conquest of vietnam. Anti-racist activists in the sixties and seventies pressured governments

at all levels to eradicate racist laws and practices and brought about the end of most legal segregation. But these are not examples of people participating in government. Instead these are instances of outsiders (which regular people will always be vis-a-vis the state) bringing pressure on an evil institution to change its ways.

Such measures can also bring about change in private institutions as well. The labor movement brought about changes using pressure tactics such as strikes and sabotage against private businesses, and activists have assisted workers with boycotts and public actions directed at corporations as well. While it may be easier in some settings to win concessions from government because individual politicians wish to be elected in the sham of elections, people acting for themselves can often accomplish great things on their own in both

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Chomsky's Statism: An Anarchism for the Next Millennium?

Noam Chomsky is seen by many as one of the more prominent anarchists in the United States. But, many times in the last several years he has come out publicly in favor of strengthening the federal government. Moreover, he argues that there is no contradiction between this stance and his advocacy of a stateless future. Such a position is in direct conflict with the traditional anarchist insight that means inevitably influence (and frequently corrupt or totally derail) intended ends, and deserves examination and rebuttal.

Chomsky bases his support for the federal government on his contention that private power wielded by corporations is much more dangerous

to people than state action, and that government can, and should, protect its defenseless citizens against the depredations of the capitalists. While the power of private corporations in the United States is truly awesome and oppressive, this power exists because these businesses are supported by the state, a point that Chomsky concedes. Anarchists have generally opposed the state for precisely this reason:

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that it protects the interests of some, primarily the wealthy exploiters, while preventing others, especially working people, from challenging this power on their own. But, because of poor and working people's movements, the state has instituted some social welfare programs and instituted some regulation of private business to ameliorate the conditions of those most harmed by state-supported capitalism. These and other alleged public services are the aspects of government power that Chomsky supports and would see expanded.

Chomsky further argues that the state is the only form of illegitimate power in which people have a real chance to participate. Besides the question of whether it is moral for people to participate in the exercise of this illegitimate power, he doesn't make a very convincing argument for his contention. In one interview he states that the Pentagon budget is going up, while the population opposes this by a 6 to 1 ratio. In another article he says that government regulatory mechanisms are very weak, and mostly controlled

it is of more use to him. If I investigate alternative brands of cars ... decide which is best for me, and buy it, I get it. If I investigate alternative politicians and vote accordingly, I get what the majority votes for. ...

Imagine buying cars the way we buy governments. Ten thousand people would get together and agree to vote, each for the car he preferred. Whichever car won, each of the ten thousand would have to buy it. It would not pay any of us to make any serious effort to find out which car was best; whatever I decide, my car is being picked for me by the other members of the group. ... This is how I must buy products on the political marketplace. I not only cannot compare the alternative products, it would not be worth my while to do so even if I could. — *The Machinery of Freedom*

The "accountability" provided by democratic government seems laughable by comparison with the accountability provided by the market. The chief function of the ballot, it would seem, is to make the populace more tractable by convincing them they're somehow in charge.

None of this should be news to Chomsky, who after all has himself pointed out:

As things now stand, the electoral process is a matter of the population being permitted every once in a while to choose among virtually identical representatives of business power. That's better than having a dictator, but it's a very limited form of democracy. Most of the population realizes that and doesn't even participate. ... And of course elections are almost completely purchased. In the last congressional elections, 95 percent of the victors in the election outspent their opponents, and campaigns were overwhelmingly funded by corporations. — *Chomsky's Other Revolution*

Well, yes, exactly. So what is the basis of Chomsky's faith in the democratic state?

Chomsky might object that my defense of market accountability ignores the fact that such "accountability" involves voting with dollars, so that the wealthy have more votes than the poor — whereas in a democratic state everyone has an equal vote. But even if we leave aside the causal dependence of existing disparities of wealth on systematic state intervention — as well as the fact that government, by controlling the direction of resources it does not own, magnifies the power of the wealthy — it still remains the case that however few dollars one may have, when one votes with those dollars one gets *something* back, whereas when one votes with ballots one gets back *nothing* one was aiming for unless one happens to be voting with the majority. Which is less democratic — a system in which the effectiveness of one's vote varies with one's resources, or one in which 49% of the population has no

effective vote at all?

Chomsky is hardly unaware that what he calls “business power” depends crucially on government intervention – since he has done as much as anyone to document this relationship. As he notes:

Any form of concentrated power, whatever it is, is not going to want to be subjected to popular democratic control or, *for that matter, to market discipline*. Powerful sectors, including corporate wealth, are naturally opposed to functioning democracy, *just as they're opposed to functioning markets, for themselves, at least*. — *Reflections on Democracy*; emphasis added

So if the corporate elite are so terrified of the free market, why is Chomsky so reluctant to hurl them into it?

Perhaps Chomsky's view is that although government is needed to *create* these concentrations of private power, it's not needed to *maintain* them, so

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just suppressing the state at this point in the game would leave business power intact. That's not a crazy view, but it needs argument. After all, systematic government intervention on behalf of big business isn't just something that happened back in the Gilded Age or the Progressive Era or

the New Deal; it continues, massively and unceasingly. I wouldn't claim (indeed I've denied) that private power depends *solely* and *uniquely* on state support; but it's hard to believe that all that state support is simply *superfluous*, as it must be if removing such state support wouldn't appreciably weaken business power.

Chomsky has said (in Answers to Eight Questions on Anarchism) that although he finds himself “in substantial agreement with people who consider themselves anarcho-capitalists on a whole range of issues,” and also “admire[s] their commitment to rationality,” he nevertheless regards the free-market version of anarchism as “a doctrinal system which, if ever implemented, would lead to forms of tyranny and oppression that have few counterparts in human history.” Why? Because “the idea of ‘free contract’ between the potentate and his starving subject is a sick joke.”

But this argument is blatantly question-begging. Chomsky is assuming the very point that's in dispute – namely that without government intervention on behalf of the rich, the economy would be divided into “potentates”

and “starving subjects.” Now it's true that market anarchists (for reasons explained elsewhere, I prefer to avoid the term “anarcho-capitalist”) themselves have sometimes – mistakenly, in my view – described their ideal economy as looking very much like the distribution of wealth and labour roles in our present economy, only minus the state. But why should Chomsky take *their* word for it? If the state really is intervening massively and systematically on behalf of the “potentate” and against the “starving subject” – as Chomsky must admit that it is, since his research explicitly demonstrates just this – why on earth would he expect that power imbalance to remain unchanged once that intervention ceases?

Not only does Chomsky underestimate the resources of anarchy, but he also appears to overestimate the serviceability of the state. He writes as if, even though the state is doing lots of bad stuff *now*, this could all be changed if more people would vote correctly. Now it's true enough that people voting differently can

make a difference to just *how* bad the government is. (If enough Germans had voted differently in 1932, they could have gotten a less awful regime.) Still, at the end of the day, what's

wrong with a coercive monopoly is not that the wrong people are running it, but rather that – leaving aside its inherent injustice – such a monopoly brings with it incentival and informational perversities which there is no way to avoid (except by removing the source of the problem, the monopoly, in which case what you have is no longer a state).

Not only does Chomsky underestimate the resources of anarchy, but he also appears to overestimate the serviceability of the state.

By Roderick T. Long

Dr. Long specializes in Greek philosophy; moral psychology; ethics; philosophy of social science; and political philosophy (with an emphasis on libertarian/anarchist theory). He has also taught medieval philosophy and eastern philosophy. He is the author of Reason and Value: Aristotle Versus Rand (Objectivist Center, 2000) and Wittgenstein, Austrian Economics, and the Logic of Action (Routledge, forthcoming 2012); and co-editor of Anarchism/Minarchism: Is a Government Part of a Free Country? (Ashgate, 2008) and of the Journal of Ayn Rand Studies. He runs the Molinari Institute and Molinari Society; serves as webmaster and archivist for the Alabama Philosophical Society; blogs at Austro-Athenian Empire; serves as faculty advisor to the AU Libertarians; and is a senior scholar at the Ludwig von Mises Institute, a co-founder of the Alliance of the Libertarian Left, and a member of the board of the Foundation for a Democratic Society.