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ACTIVISM AS A ROAD TO PEACE: PERSPECTIVES FROM NOAM CHOMSKY

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Introduction

In the contemporary world, accentuated by the extremes of internationalism and fundamentalism, 'peace' seems to be a highly desired and yet deeply elusive concept. While most of the political and economic representatives of the nation states assert their faith in discussion and 'dialogue' as a way to resolve the differences among them, very often than not, there is some seething feeling of suspicion and distrust that acts as a blockade to the process of conflict resolution. Hence, the efforts for conflict resolution often end up as mere public relations and propaganda exercises – catchy but ineffective.

In such a context, we need to admit that 'peace' and 'development' in the world require some enlightened action, which in turn is based on the right understanding of the world order. In this direction, Noam Chomsky's discourse on globalization, US imperialism and role of activism could provide us with some significant leads and insights.

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Chomsky and his World-view

Avram Noam Chomsky is a linguist, cognitive scientist, philosopher and political activist. Since the 1960s he has become known more widely as a political dissident, an anarchist and a libertarian socialist intellectual.

Chomsky's analysis of world politics grows out of his understanding of power and its significance for human freedom (Wilkin, 1997). As an anarchist, much of his work – on ideology, propaganda, and the hypocrisy of political leaders and intellectuals, for example – stems from an interest in how power shapes the context of people's everyday lives. Human beings, argues Chomsky, have a variety of innate capacities of which the most fundamental 'is the capacity and the need for creative self-expression, for free control of one's own life and thought'. He also regards it as 'a fundamental human need to take part in the democratic control of social institutions' (Quoted in Rai, 1995, p.102). But which of these capacities is realized, and in what ways, depends on the institutional context structuring the social environment. For example, Chomsky regards private property as an obstacle to human freedom (Wilkin, 1997).

A rich understanding of institutionalized power, in all its forms and effects, is a necessary prerequisite to remaking the world in ways that enhance human freedom. It is for this reason that Chomsky finds the work of Foucault insightful, while disagreeing with him on other issues. Indeed, it could be argued that Chomsky, together with Foucault, is part of a 'left realist' tradition stretching back through E.H. Carr to Max Weber, Friedrich Nietzsche and Karl Marx and defined by an emphasis on power and a skepticism of received wisdom and the claims of the powerful (Laffey, 2003, p. 594).

In keeping with his deep skepticism of power and defense of human freedom Chomsky is deeply suspicious of the state. Worship of the state 'has become a secular religion for which the intellectuals serve as a priesthood' (Chomsky, 1991, p. 19). It has also blinded them to its true character. Chomsky sees the state as 'the organized authority, domination, and power of the possessing classes over the masses...' (Chomsky, 2003 p. 7, 9). The government, in contrast, 'consists of whatever groups happen to control the political system, one component of the state system, at a particular moment' (Quoted in Rai, p. 91).

Similar concerns motivate Chomsky's analysis of the modern corporation. In common with early twentieth-century liberal writers, Chomsky sees the corporation as an authoritarian and totalitarian organization, concerned more with command than with the rational pursuit of profit and the efficient production and distribution

of goods and services. Like private property and the state, for Chomsky corporations represent concentrations of unaccountable power, and as such are an obstacle to democracy and the exercise of human freedom (Laffey, 2003, p. 595).

When he turns to world order, Chomsky's analysis is shaped by these assumptions. The foreign policy of a particular state reflects domestic structures of class power. Chomsky rejects the notion that 'nations' are the basic actors in world politics. Inside each nation, he argues, there are 'radical differences in privilege and power' (Chomsky, 1994, p. 5). In the US, for example, the contemporary domestic power structure consists of 'the industrial-financial-commercial sector, concentrated and interlinked, highly class conscious, and increasingly transnational in the scope of its planning, management and operations' (ibid., p. 1). Patterns in foreign policy, in particular, the often stark elision between the stated aims of policy and its actual effects, and the repeated willingness to use force against the weak, are traceable to these structures of power and interest, which are persistent over time. What is worse is that class interests are not confined to particular states but extend across the international system. A key organizing principle of world order, argues Chomsky, is that 'the rich men of the rich societies are to rule the world, competing among themselves for a greater share of wealth and power and mercilessly suppressing those who stand in their way, assisted by the rich men of the hungry nations who do their bidding. The others serve, and suffer' (ibid., p. 5).

Based on this strongly formed philosophical base Chomsky goes on to discuss issues pertaining to globalization and the US imperialism (Edgley, 2000). According to him neoliberal globalization and US imperialism operate hand in hand for the benefit of each other. We could take as an example Corporate America's commitment to "free enterprise". Under this system, "efficient" means obtaining enough power within a particular market through financial profits to become immune from direct competition and to demand substantial government subsidies. The recent trend of merging of big companies demonstrates that there is no limit to corporate efforts to concentrate wealth and power. This helps the titans to coordinate the global markets. Even when the US gives foreign aid it places conditions such that the recipients are forced to purchase American goods. Corporates advocate "corporate welfare" in the form of tax breaks and exception to regulatory principles (Roy, 2003).

The wealthy control the state in various ways both directly and through their corporate institutions. Lobbying and campaign financing are the obvious examples of this. The joining of the state to the corporate brings tremendous benefits to the corporations. So the policies of the states are directed towards the private interests of the corporations. For example, in the "free trade" the powerful seek the protection of

the state and powerful nation-states keep the more undeveloped countries in their subordinate position. Western nations maintain their own protective barriers while they demand poorer nations to open their borders to free trade, which allows the invasion of corporate power at the expenses of the average citizen and the environment (Chomsky, 2003).

According to Chomsky the basic feature of globalization is the marginalization of the majority for the profit of a few. The wealthy have joined with their colleagues throughout the world to form a "de facto world government" to ensure the perpetual triumph of capitalism. The list of institutions promoting this goal grows steadily: the United Nations (UN), the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), and the World Trade Organization (WTO). The government and corporate nexus often has disastrous impact on entire populations, be it Vietnam, Turkey, Palestine, East Timor, Iraq, South, Central or North America or wherever (Fox, 2001).

Activism as a Road to Peace

Having presented a realistic but not very encouraging picture of the world order Chomsky believes that mere intentions, dialogue and non-violent methods may not result in peace. He propounds continuous struggle as the only way to achieve human rights and social justice. It is because no real civil liberty can be enjoyed without popular struggle to gain it first (Rai, 1995).

Although Chomsky argues that in human affairs nothing can be guaranteed he asserts that being optimistic and swinging into action is much better than getting discouraged and withdrawing. He invites all intellectuals and the people concerned to become part of an alternative world vision not based purely on accumulation and domination. As Chomsky puts it, "pick your cause and go volunteer for a group that is working on it. Above all, never give up hope – for yourself, your country, your remarkable species, your planet" (McGilvery, 2005, p. 258-59).

Chomsky argues that it is only through dissent we can hope for an alternative system. He says that the labor unions and labor-based political parties must be part of this process. To achieve the sort of society that will allow the full development of individual potential, the populace must demand governmental support of alternative modes of production that are not solely measured by profit (Chomsky, 1999).

According to Chomsky social action must not be reactionary but be based on rational assessment of the individual and society. It should be directed towards

realization of a vision of a society that would allow for the optimal expression of all that is noble in them. In his own words, 'social action must be animated by a vision of a future society, and by explicit judgments of value concerning the character of this future society. These judgments must derive from some concept of the nature of man' (Chomsky, 2003, p. 403).

Chomsky says that in the field of social action there are some positive developments the world over. Recognition of human rights is growing among people the world over and there are growing movements against free-trade regimes, deprivation and injustice. Only if such movements spread can a positive change in the world order be brought about (Chattopadhyay & Chaudhuri, 2001).

Chomsky advocates networking with other activists as 'to do these things alone is extremely hard, especially when you're working fifty hours a week to put the food on the table'. He says –

Join with others, and you can do a lot of things. It's got a big multiplier effect. That's why unions have always been in the lead of development of social and economic progress. They bring together poor people, working people, enable them to learn from one another, to have their own sources of information, and to act collectively. That's how everything is changed — the Civil Rights movement, the feminist movement, the solidarity movements, the workers movements. The reason we don't live in a dungeon is because people have joined together to change things. And there's nothing different now from before. In fact, just in the last forty years, we've seen remarkable changes in this respect (Keisler, 2002, p. 21).

Chomsky outlines the qualities needed of a social activist in the following words –

Be honest, critical, accept elementary moral principles. For example, the principle that if something is wrong for others, it's wrong for us. Things like that. Understand the importance of the fundamental anarchist principle, namely, prior illegitimacy of power and violence, unless you can justify it, which is not easy. It's their burden of proof, not yours. And that's true whether it's personal relations in a family, and whether it's international affairs. Beyond that, try to join with others who share your interests to learn more and to act responsively to improve the many very serious problems of the world, which can be done (Peck, 1987, p. 127).

Chomsky does not believe that non-violence is the only way in activism, although it is highly desirable. He says that nonviolent resistance is often a way to proceed, but it depends on who you are confronting. If you are confronting people that are going to use extreme violence, non-

violence is not going to be effective. But to appeal to the humanity of the enemy is sometimes effective. There are lots of ways to proceed. Thus, there is no universal formula. Every circumstance requires a unique formula (Rai, 1995).

Conclusion

Chomsky's discourse on globalization and US imperialism and activism as a way to counter their ill-effects is based on strong methodological and theoretical foundation (Ram, 2001). His writing is moved by political and ethical concerns and has great implications for democracy, human rights and social justice – the major preoccupations of all the social scientists today. Hence, looking at the neoliberal challenges to the process of peace and conflict resolution from the perspectives of Chomsky's discourse would at once make the discourse relevant to our times and also enable it to move beyond the narrow confines of 'external affairs' and 'public relations' exercises.

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