

Progressive Strategy Studies Project

Chomsky on Progressive Strategy

By Wolfgang Brauner, 29 June 2007

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Noam Chomsky is one of the key figures on the American and global left. He is said to be one of the most widely quoted intellectuals in the world. In 2005, readers of AlterNet voted him MVP (Most Valuable Progressive). And he remains very close to many activists.

For all these reasons, we were very excited when we finally had the opportunity in late May to interview Chomsky for 25 minutes about his thinking on progressive grand strategy for building political power on the American left.

More specifically, and in keeping with the main interest of our Progressive Strategy Studies Project, we asked him whether he finds it useful to think about how to build power in strategic terms.

Glancing at the list of individuals and organizations that we included in our first report, "Finding Strategy: A Survey of Contemporary Contributions to Progressive Strategy (comw.org/pssp/fulltext/0611psspreport1.pdf)", he referred to more "extensive and far-reaching" thinking on progressive strategy than reported in our report.

Throughout the interview, he mainly referred to the work of Gar Alperovitz, Michael Albert and Robin Hahnel, and Joel Rogers (the latter is included in our report), on how to democratize the economy and the workplace through worker self-management, cooperatives, etc. In particular, he referred to Alperovitz' latest book, America Beyond Capitalism: Reclaiming our Wealth, Our Liberty, and Our Democracy (2004), and a number of books by Michael Albert and Robin Hahnel on participatory economics and broader sociopolitical issues. Chomsky considers their work to be very important, particularly for activists.

He started out by emphasizing that the US is "a one-party state with two wings, Democrat and Republican," and claimed that both were "way to the right of the majority of Americans" on many crucial issues. According to Chomsky, social scientists like C. Wright Mills, Thomas

Ferguson, and Bill Domhoff (who also is included in our report) are pretty much right: Corporations dominate the power structure and hence US politics. In the US this is even more so the case than in other countries because of the much more brutal suppression of labor.

Quoting Dewey, Chomsky noted that in the absence of economic democracy, "politics is the shadow cast on society by big business." Since the state, having become so thoroughly co-opted by corporate interests, is part of the problem, it is difficult to significantly change it from within through elections or public policy reforms. While short-term, pragmatic change remains possible and desirable, systemic change would require a transformation of power relations within society through a democratization of economic decision-making.

Criticizing the recent health care reform in Massachusetts as overly complicated precisely because it has to respond to too many corporate interests, Chomsky noted that, even though a large majority of the population favors straightforward changes, the US can't even achieve a real health care reform. While pragmatic change is better than nothing, it pales in comparison to the kind of change a country like Bolivia has been able to achieve, "something the US and other Western societies can only dream of."

Serious progress towards a truly functioning democracy requires democratizing the economy. Traditionally, labor has been the main agent of change, but today it is, as Chomsky put it, "smashed," and struggles to survive. Who can fill the huge gap that labor has left behind? Chomsky admits that other actors, such as churches and universities, are weak, if not marginal, though there has been impressive growth of popular movements, many of them quite new and promising. They offer considerable promise and opportunity for those willing to keep working hard at "building the cells of a future society."

Wolfgang Brauner is the Principal Researcher of the Progressive Strategy Studies Project at the Commonwealth Institute in Cambridge, MA. (comw.org/pssp/index.html). The report, "Finding Strategy: A Survey of Contemporary Contributions to Progressive Strategy," can be found here: comw.org/pssp/fulltext/0611psspreport1.pdf