

Querying Young Chomsky

In 1976, looking a bit like Buddy Holly, Noam Chomsky gave Peter Jay what I think may be his most [extensive interview](#) (audio of interview available [here](#)) regarding what a desirable society might look like. I believe the views he offered are still dear to him as well as to many other anarchists. They are dear to me, as well, and have influenced my own commitments, albeit with some changes.

Chomsky offers his observations as part of the heritage of “libertarian socialist or anarcho-syndicalist or communist anarchist views,” following “in the tradition of [Bakunin](#) and [Kropotkin](#) and [Anton Pannekoek](#)” favoring “a society organized on the basis of organic units, organic communities.”

Chomsky adds that he means “that the workplace and the neighborhood, are central, and that “from those two basic units there could derive through federal arrangements a highly integrated kind of social organization which might be national or even international in scope.”

Chomsky adds that “decisions could be made over a substantial range...by delegates who are always part of the organic community from which they come, to which they return, and in which, in fact, they live.” While some anarchists entirely reject the idea of representation, clearly Chomsky doesn't, nor would I.

Chomsky also clarifies that “representative democracy, as in, say, the United States or Great Britain, would be criticized by an anarchist of this school on two grounds. First ... because there is a monopoly of power centralized in the state, and second... because the

representative democracy is limited to the political sphere and in no serious way encroaches on the economic sphere.”

Thus Chomsky's, Kropotkin's, Bakunin's, and Pannekoek's liberated society doesn't reject institutions. It does, however, reject political or economic entities that are divorced from and rule over the population.

Chomsky adds, that “anarchists of this tradition have always held that democratic control of one's productive life is at the core of any serious human liberation, or, for that matter, of any significant democratic practice.” He continues, “as long as individuals are compelled to rent themselves on the market to those who are willing to hire them, as long as their role in production is simply that of ancillary tools, then there are striking elements of coercion and oppression that make talk of democracy very limited, if even meaningful.”

I think pretty much all anarchists and indeed anti capitalists of all types would agree. However a question arises. How does one organize an economy in accord with the need for “self-management, direct worker control, ... personal participation in self-management.”

Asked for an example, Chomsky replies “A good example of a really large-scale anarchist revolution... is the Spanish revolution of 1936...” which was “in many ways a very inspiring testimony to the ability of poor working people to organize and manage their own affairs, extremely successfully, without coercion and control,” though, “how relevant the Spanish experience is to an advanced industrial society one might question in detail.”

For himself, Chomsky thinks that “self-management ... is precisely the rational mode for an advanced and complex industrial society, one in which workers can very well become masters of their own immediate affairs, that is, in direction and control of the shop, but also can be in a position to make the major, substantive decisions concerning the structure of the economy, concerning social institutions, concerning planning, regionally and beyond.” But he adds that, “at present, institutions do not permit workers to have control over the requisite information and the relevant training to understand these matters.”

And so again an obvious questions surfaces, how does one structure an economy so it conveys the “requisite information” and “relevant training”?

Asked to switch fill out his vision of anarchism, Chomsky replies, “Let me sketch what I think would be a rough consensus, and one that I think is essentially correct. Beginning with the two modes of organization and control, namely organization and control in the workplace and in the community, one could imagine a network of workers' councils, and at a higher level, representation across the factories, or across branches of industry, or across crafts, and on to general assemblies of workers' councils that can be regional and national and international in charter. And from another point of view, one can project a system of government that involves local assemblies -- again, federated regionally, dealing with regional issues, crossing crafts, industry, trades, and so on, and again at the level of the nation or beyond.” I agree with Chomsky that this is likely a rough consensus among anarchists, and rightly so, in my view.

Chomsky continues, an “idea of anarchism is that delegation of authority is rather minimal and that its participants at any one of these levels of government should be directly responsive to the organic community in which they live. In fact, the optimal situation would be that participation in one of these levels of government should be temporary, and even during the period when it's taking place should be only partial; that is, the members of a workers' council who are for some period actually functioning to make decisions that other people don't have the time to make, should also continue to do their work as part of the workplace or neighborhood community in which they belong.” Again, this is unobjectionable.

Then, however, comes a point of possible concern. Chomsky says, “As for political parties, my feeling is that an anarchist society would not forcefully prevent political parties from arising. In fact, anarchism has always been based on the idea that any sort of Procrustean bed, any system of norms that is imposed on social life will constrain and very much underestimate its energy and vitality and that all sorts of new possibilities of voluntary organization may develop at that higher level of material and intellectual culture.” So far so good, though the minimal not “forcefully prevent” formulation foreshadows what follows when he adds, “but I think it is fair to say that insofar as political parties are felt to be necessary, anarchist organization of society will have failed.”

Why would people forming a political party be a sign of failure?

Chomsky explains, “it should be the case, I would think, that where there is direct participation in self-management, in economic and social affairs, then factions, conflicts, differences of interests and

ideas and opinion, which should be welcomed and cultivated, will be expressed at every one of these levels.”

Agreed. But then Chomsky adds, “Why they should fall into two, three or n political parties, I don't quite see. I think that the complexity of human interest and life does not fall in that fashion. Parties represent basically class interests, and classes would have been eliminated or transcended in such a society.”

Of course I agree to the elimination of parties as agents of class interests. But does that imply that the existence of parties would indicate failure? Chomsky is saying he thinks human preferences are so diverse and varied that the only reason a considerable number of folks would share a set of views consistently contrary to those that other sets of people hold would be if the folks were in a different class due to occupying a structurally different economic position, thus having opposed economic interests. I don't think so.

Imagine a party forming around some new values that the participants are seeking to advocate and introduce into social life. Perhaps it is animal rights, as but one possible example. Or perhaps a new economic value - to equalize pleasure, say. Or maybe the issue is abortion, or something about space flight, or something to do with the rights of future generations compared to present populations. People form a party because they agree on some views and think other folks are wrong in not agreeing on those views, and because they want to make their case in concert with one another. Why must such a constituency be a class, or even any group within some hierarchy of power? Why can't it be that it is simply a group with a view that they deem very important but that others differ from?

However, as long as he says factions are welcome, I think the values underlying what Chomsky is saying and what I am amending are in accord. What I am calling a party is just a large faction that crosses neighborhoods and workplaces and which, for some purposes, wants to coordinate their collective efforts on behalf of ideas they share. So, if that is welcome, there is no real dispute, I think.

Chomsky also indicates that he is “unpersuaded that participation in governance is a full-time job. It may be in an irrational society, where all sorts of problems arise because of the irrational nature of institutions. But in a properly functioning advanced industrial society organized along libertarian lines, I would think that executing decisions taken by representative bodies is a part-time job which should be rotated through the community and, furthermore, should be undertaken by people who at all times continue to be participants in their own direct activity.”

As to how much time will have to go to adjudicating disputes, dealing with anti social actions, determining legislation for steadily altering circumstances, and implementing collective projects, I don't know, but I suspect it will be whole lot more than Chomsky seems to suggest. He is certainly right, however, that much and likely most of what current governments do will no longer be needed. He is also right that all people in all political functions, like for all other functions, must be well prepared to do their tasks well, and must be engaged in those tasks in ways and with responsibilities that do not elevate their power or wealth or their capacity to amass privilege either for themselves or for others, or to have say over outcomes beyond what is appropriate for all actors. Of course, how to

accomplish all this is the meat and potatoes of the assertion that it must be so.

Chomsky pinpoints a broad underlying insight, I think, when he says, "it seems to me the natural suggestion is that governance should be organized industrially, as simply one of the branches of industry, with their own workers' councils and their own self-governance and their own participation in broader assemblies." Again, this is unobjectionable as long as we keep in mind that an airplane pilot, a steel worker, a doctor, or a governance worker, all need to have appropriate skills and knowledge, on the one hand, but also roles that give them no more overall power or privilege than any other citizen, on the other hand.

To put the problem another way: consider two industries: widget making and governance. Workers councils in both these industries would exist, and both would not have complete autonomy but instead be subject to a broader social plan they, however, contribute to, because their acts affect other people as well as other people's acts affecting them. Nevertheless, the external constraints on widget-making are likely to far less intrusive to how widget workers operate each day than the external constraints on governance. For widget-makers society's interest is the number of widgets produced and the amount of resources to be used in their production (two simple numbers) - as well as that the workplace is classless - and beyond that (considering working conditions, etc.) the workers' interests are totally sovereign. But when you take a job like police officer, as one example of a job in the political/governmental sphere - society's interests are not just "enforce the law" (which is far more complicated than "produce 45 million widgets using this amount of

inputs"), but do so in a way that protects and respects everyone's rights, doesn't give too much discretion (i.e. power) to police officers to rule over us thus imposing further constraints on how they operate. But this is a matter of degree. Thinking about airplane pilots or doctors reveals need for very similar types of socially determined guidelines and constraints as for governance, though unique to each case, including widget making.

At any rate, in a question his interviewer asks, Chomsky is quoted as saying, "in a decent society, everyone would have the opportunity to find interesting work and each person would be permitted the fullest possible scope for his talents." And then, as himself asking: "What more would be required in particular, extrinsic reward in the form of wealth and power," to elicit such work? Chomsky answers his own query, nothing more, unless "we assume that applying one's talents in interesting and socially useful work is not rewarding in itself."

This is where problems start to surface. The above assertion is false for three reasons. The first has to do with the need to correlate work and consumption, including having information and indicators which permit sensible choices by all concerned. The second is that a central reason for remuneration is not only to provide incentives, but to have just outcomes regarding both production and consumption. And, finally, the third problem bears on the incentive issue itself, the only aspect Chomsky directly speaks to. But someone saying he or she likes to work, as Chomsky feels all would say in a desirable society - with which I would agree - is not the same as that person saying work is the only thing he or she likes. And this obvious and seemingly nitpicky distinction actually matters.

First, by work we mean labor undertaken (a) within the economic institutions of society, and (b) to produce contributions to the social product which other people, not the producer or his or her family and friends, will enjoy.

Second, Chomsky is of course right that there are intrinsic reasons to do work for the social good including self expression and to benefit others. But what is missing is the obvious parallel truth that there are intrinsic reasons to want to have leisure too - and not just to rest, but also to play, to relate to family and friends, to do things that we like but that we are not good enough at to be making a contribution to society doing, and so on.

As a result, if we are free to individually choose the ratio of productive work in the economy we do and the leisure we enjoy while not working, and if making a choice for less work and more output has zero bearing on our claims on social output as a consumer, then we may well choose to work less than society needs, or than equity and justice warrant.

To explain his contrary view, Chomsky says, “there's a certain amount of work that just has to be done if we are to maintain [a worthy] standard of living. It's an open question how onerous that work has to be.”

That is certainly correct, though it is important to realize that what a “worthy standard of living from outputs of production is” depends precisely on an active choice by people as to their relative desire for more outputs, or for more free time. And it is also important to realize that quite a lot of that work, for a very long time to come, will have to be demanding, and often even boring and tedious, and

sometimes dangerous. And that even more of it, however positive it may be to do, will not be intrinsically more rewarding than spending the same time, instead, pursuing hobbies, or personal relations, or playing, and so on.

When Chomsky adds, “let's recall that science and technology and intellect have not been devoted to ... overcoming the onerous and self-destructive character of the necessary work of society,” he is of course correct. When he adds that “the reason is that it has always been assumed that there is a substantial body of wage slaves who will do it simply because otherwise they'll starve., he is again correct. And he is also correct when he says, “if human intelligence is turned to the question of how to make the necessary work of the society itself meaningful, we don't know what the answer will be.” True, but it isn't going to happen in a week, month, or decade. And there will be limits, not least environmental, on how much onerous work can be replaced by more uplifting work. But, in any event, this raises another issue for a good economy which is that it must facilitate sensible and warranted attention to matters bearing on improving over time the quality of work life, as well as on the pleasure and potentials unleashed by the products of work life.

Chomsky continues, “My guess is that a fair amount of [work] can be made entirely tolerable.” I would agree, but I would also say that there is a large gap between “entirely tolerable,” on the one hand, and as engaging and interesting as what we typically choose to do with leisure time, on the other hand. And “fair amount” is, as well, far short of all.

Chomsky says, "It's a mistake to think that even back-breaking physical labor is necessarily onerous. Many people, myself included, do it for relaxation." Sure, but does anyone really do back breaking physical labor day in and day out for relaxation? Not many, I would wager.

Chomsky goes on, "Recently, for example, I got it into my head to plant thirty-four trees in a meadow behind the house, on the State Conservation Commission, which means I had to dig thirty-four holes in the sand. You know, for me, and what I do with my time mostly, that's pretty hard work, but I have to admit I enjoyed it. I wouldn't have enjoyed it if I'd had work norms, if I'd had an overseer, and if I'd been ordered to do it at a certain moment, and so on."

My guess is that he also wouldn't have enjoyed it if it was his job, day in and day out. He might have enjoyed it somewhat less, also, if it wasn't in his own backyard, and if, because he was working with a team, he had to abide a schedule. And, mainly, whether he enjoyed it or not, the amount of time he would give to it - simply to have the pleasure of the involvement, could easily be way less than the amount needed, or the amount others might give to it, etc. What if someone wanted to do back breaking labor once every twenty or thirty years, and the rest of the time he wanted to do highly empowered conceptual labor of a creative sort? Who then plants trees?"

When Chomsky says, "On the other hand, if it's a task taken on just out of interest, fine, that can be done," he means that it will be enjoyable, as it was for him. True enough. But the implication is that we can all just do what we want - and somehow what we choose on

grounds of just our interest will match up, regarding output, with what people want to consume.

The questioner says, "I put it to you that there may be a danger that this view of things is a rather romantic delusion, entertained only by a small elite of people who happen, like elite professors, perhaps journalists, and so on, to be in the very privileged situation of being paid to do what anyway they like to do." I think this is a fair question - but it does miss additional points. What is just? What is needed to convey necessary information?

Chomsky answers, "that's why I began with a big 'If'. I said we first have to ask to what extent the necessary work of the society -- namely that work which is required to maintain the standard of living that we want -- needs to be onerous or undesirable. I think that the answer is: much less than it is today. But let's assume there is some extent to which it remains onerous. Well, in that case, the answer's quite simple: that work has to be equally shared among people capable of doing it."

Coal mining will remain onerous. So will many kinds of cleaning, among a great many other rote tasks - (and, in truth, for example, even the finest most creative chef on the planet is unlikely to want to cook other peoples' meals for more hours than needed to justify his own level of consumption). Do we each do an equal share of coal mining, cleaning, cooking and every other onerous aspect of work? Of course not. So the point is that we would each, in Chomsky's formulation, share a fair amount of such onerous tasks along with our other more intrinsically fulfilling tasks, balancing our jobs for onerousness, and I would agree that equilibrating each person's job

for quality of life implications would by definition eliminate the issue of unequal onerousness from any economic calculus. In that case, paying attention to onerousness as a factor in determining income becomes irrelevant to just outcomes.

But equilibrating onerousness of work does not address the full issue of incentives, indicators, or fairness. Incentives means providing reason for people to work in a manner and for a duration that yields social output in accord with popular desires - where those desires are in turn also mediated by knowledge of the implications of the chosen output level for work. Indicators means providing information able to guide people in sensibly and responsibly deciding what to consume and what to produce, and also where it makes sense to invest to improve work further, to generate new output, etc. And fairness means ensuring that the distribution of benefits and costs associated with economic life - both production and consumption and both what we do and what we receive - is fair, whatever we decide we mean by that term.

When Chomsky says, “as I watch people work, ... automobile mechanics for example, I think one often finds a good deal of pride in work. I think that that kind of pride in ... complicated work well done, because it takes thought and intelligence to do it, especially when one is also involved in management of the enterprise, determination of how the work will be organized, what it is for, what the purposes of the work are, what'll happen to it, and so on -- I think all of this can be satisfying and rewarding activity which in fact requires skills, the kind of skills people will enjoy exercising.”

I agree that much of work, but far from all of it, has such attributes. But it is important to be clear that the fact that I am involved in determining what the purposes and composition and timing of the work I do are is not the same as saying I alone determine the purposes, composition, and timing. Instead, I'm part of a discussion on what we should do, but I might be on the losing end of a vote. Like a good citizen, I will still feel socially responsible to do the tasks, but my internal incentives are likely to be lower than if the decision had gone my way. In any event, even regarding more engaging and intrinsically rewarding work, people will also want to spend time with their kids, enjoying hobbies, celebrating, contemplating, or whatever.

Chomsky adds, talking only about the onerous work aspect, "suppose it turns out there is some residue of work which really no one wants to do, whatever that may be -- okay, then I say that the residue of work must be equally shared, and beyond that, people will be free to exercise their talents as they see fit."

This is ill thought through. First, everyone will not want to do work that is tedious and boring if not doing it would have no known adverse effects on oneself and others. Second, suppose after we agree on equilibrating jobs for quality of life implications, that in the fulfilling part of my job I am free to use my talents as I see fit, as Chomsky suggests. Well, I was once a fairly good tennis player - nothing to write home about, but I loved playing. So suppose I decided, okay, that's the talent I want to exercise, choosing as I see fit, in the hours left after I do my share of onerous work. The problem is, my playing tennis would contribute nothing valuable to society's social product.

Chomsky may say no one will opt to do something that is not socially valuable to others, but how does anyone know what is and what isn't? How does anyone know that their effort isn't up to snuff? Perhaps his answer would be that the tennis industry has to hire new players or teachers - and wouldn't hire me - but then we are not free to exercise our talents as we see fit. We can only do that within certain norms and social relations that prevent useless endeavors, including preventing me being an incompetent tennis player, or an incompetent surgeon, and so on.

But what are these norms and relations which yield good economic outcomes, and which are also consistent with eliminating class division and with people exercising self managing say? These are the questions that one must address to give substance to the values of those favoring self management.

Pushed further by his questioner, Peter Jay, who doubted the amount of tasks that would be deemed intrinsically negative would be low, Chomsky replied, "whatever it is, notice that we have two alternatives. One alternative is to have it equally shared, the other is to design social institutions so that some group of people will be simply compelled to do the work, on pain of starvation. Those are the two alternatives."

That observation is false. Rather, one could also go a long way toward improving the quality of life effect of work - within ecological limits, time limits, allocation limits, etc. But then, one could refuse to compel a minority to do all that was left. And one could rejecting sharing it all equally, as well. But one could then, as the third

alternative, remunerate to offset the negative impact of the more onerous tasks.

Chomsky replies to the questioner raising roughly the same point, by saying, "I'm assuming everyone essentially gets equal remuneration." But then one wonders, why we should assume that - or even what the word "essentially" means? This is the core of the justice and incentives side of the issue. What if I am happy with less income - which is less claim on social product - if working fewer hours to get less income means that I can have more leisure? Am I free as an option to take less income as a basis for working less hours? If I am not, can I as an option just work fewer hours for the same income? The first option seems socially responsible. The second option does not, at least to me. The first is also economically viable. The second is not.

A basic anarchist principle is that wherever possible and when it doesn't conflict with the social good, we should enable people to pursue their own personal visions of the good life. Having a single income level and a single work-time-requirement for everyone is an instance of an unnecessary and coercive requirement. There is no social reason why people should not be able to trade off income for leisure time or vice versa (while there is a social reason why people should not be able to on lower their work time without lowering their income, or raise their income without increasing their time working).

Chomsky says, "Let's imagine three kinds of society: one, the current one, in which the undesired work is given to wage-slaves. Let's imagine a second system in which the undesired work, after the best

efforts to make it meaningful, is shared. And let's imagine a third system where the undesired work receives high extra pay, so that individuals voluntarily choose to do it. Well, it seems to me that either of the two latter systems is consistent with -- vaguely speaking -- anarchist principles. I would argue myself for the second rather than the third, but either of the two is quite remote from any present social organization or any tendency in contemporary social organization.”

I am not sure why Chomsky would argue for the second rather than the third. Saying that everyone gets the same income seems to me, as noted above, to be more of a constraint on personal choice - and an unnecessary one - than does permitting or acknowledging some differences in quality of life implications in people's jobs but remunerating accordingly.

However, in any case, Chomsky's conclusion on this specific matter is unobjectionable. Both his options two and three do exist and each is compatible with classlessness and with self management, and with anarchist fairness as Chomsky is outlining it in his interview. But even after that considerable agreement, we are still not getting to the issue of hours worked matching up with output desired, nor to the issue of indicators to inform intelligent decision making - that is, to providing the information Chomsky rightly spoke of earlier that people need if they are to engage responsibly in economic life, nor have we seriously broached the subject of consumption rights.

The questioner at this point asks, “It seems to me that there is a fundamental choice, however one disguises it, between whether you organize work for the satisfaction it gives to the people who do it, or

whether you organize it on the basis of the value of what is produced for the people who are going to use or consume what is produced.”

This polarized formulation misses that you can and must, if there is to be real self management, accomplish both these priorities at once - as in, considering both the impact on workers and the impact on consumers to inform decisions whether to produce and distribute items.

Still, the questioner continued: “And that a society that is organized on the basis of giving everybody the maximum opportunity to fulfill their hobbies, which is essentially the work-for-work's-sake view, finds its logical culmination in a monastery, where the kind of work which is done, namely prayer, is work for the self-enrichment of the worker and where nothing is produced which is of any use to anybody and you live either at a low standard of living, or you actually starve.”

This goes too far - but the underlying point is real. What will connect work that is done purely because it is fulfilling to the level of outputs that are desired? What will connect needs and desires for outputs to needs and desires of workers producing those outputs?

Chomsky replies, “My feeling is that part of what makes work meaningful is that ... its products do have use. The work of the craftsman is in part meaningful to that craftsman because of the intelligence and skill that he puts into it, but also in part because the work is useful... The fact that the kind of work you do may lead to something else ... that's very important quite apart from the elegance and beauty of what you may achieve. And I think that covers every field of human endeavor.”

Of course the above is true - but it is also not addressing the issue raised, because even though the observation is true, the issues remain operative unless one wants to claim that the pleasure of doing self managed labor that contributes to social output is so great that everyone will automatically want to do more than an amount, in sum, consistent with what people want to consume, and unless one wants to claim that people will know appropriate amounts, also automatically.

Chomsky adds, "Furthermore, I think if we look at a good part of human history, we'll find that people to a substantial extent did get some degree of satisfaction -- often a lot of satisfaction -- from the productive and creative work that they were doing."

Also true. But also not addressing the issue raised, unless one wants to claim as above.

Chomsky says, "I think work freely undertaken can be useful, meaningful work done well." Of course it can. But it can also produce stuff that no one wants, or that is too much of a good thing, or that is too little. It can be fun to do, but not of sufficient quality to be contributing. How does one know? And more, just because it can be meaningful and well done - especially if we create institutions that ensure that - this still doesn't mean we all, or perhaps even any of us, automatically want to do as much of it as our desires for outputs requires.

Chomsky says, "Also, you pose a dilemma that many people pose, between desire for satisfaction in work and a desire to create things of value to the community. But it's not so obvious that there is any dilemma, any contradiction." If we police ourselves - which means if

we have information that permits us to police ourselves - perhaps Chomsky is right. But in the absence of that information, why can't I play tennis, or be a surgeon, as my work, even if I am not very good at these pursuits?

Chomsky emphasizes a particular point about work having intrinsic rewards - and regarding that point, at least among anarchists and serious leftists of all types, I believe he is pushing on an open door. He says, "Recall that a person has an occupation, and it seems to me that most of the occupations that exist -- especially the ones that involve what are called services, that is, relations to human beings -- have an intrinsic satisfaction and rewards associated with them, namely in the dealings with the human beings that are involved. That's true of teaching, and it's true of ice cream vending. I agree that ice cream vending doesn't require the commitment or intelligence that teaching does, and maybe for that reason it will be a less desired occupation. But if so, it will have to be shared."

So what we have now emerging is a list of less desired tasks - and those will have to be shared, as people also do desired things they want to do, intrinsically to fulfill themselves for enough duration to fill out a responsible job. Or course we also need some way to ensure that people aren't doing things they want to do, but are not good enough at to produce a worthwhile output.

Here is the crux of it, though. Chomsky says, "what I'm saying is that our characteristic assumption that pleasure in work, pride in work, is either unrelated to or negatively related to the value of the output is related to a particular stage of social history, namely capitalism, in which human beings are tools of production. It is by no means

necessarily true. For example, if you look at the many interviews with workers on assembly lines, for example, that have been done by industrial psychologists, you find that one of the things they complain about over and over again is the fact that their work simply can't be done well; the fact that the assembly line goes through so fast that they can't do their work properly.”

That producing vehicles in a self managed workplace will be vastly better than in a capitalist one is true. That one will not want to do it to the complete exclusion of leisure, however, is also true. And the idea that all work, because it benefits society, and because it is self managed, will be intrinsically fulfilling to the same degree as all other work, is obviously false. So such differences may matter. And duration will certainly matter.

Then Chomsky says something quite important, in my view, and a bit different. “But let's imagine still that at some level it does harm. Well, okay, at that point, the society, the community, has to decide how to make compromises. Each individual is both a producer and a consumer, after all, and that means that each individual has to join in these socially determined compromises -- if in fact there are compromises.”

Exactly. But this means that there must be institutions that facilitate such decisions, and that we have to have some kind of norms, as well, to know what is fair, what is just, what, as well, is consistent with preserving classlessness, in our future economy.

Chomsky of course knows all this, and so says, “it seems to me that anarchist, or, for that matter, left-Marxist structures, based on systems of workers' councils and federations, provide exactly the set

of levels of decision-making at which decisions can be made about a national plan. Similarly, state socialist societies also provide a level of decision-making -- let's say the nation -- in which national plans can be produced. There's no difference in that respect. The difference has to do with participation in those decisions and control over those decisions.”

In the case of central planning and authoritarian states - the decisions are top down. In the anarchist alternative, they are self managing - which, I think, if it means anything coherent - means that we strive to have people involved in them to the extent they are affected by them. But then we need institutions and associated information flow that permits, facilitates, and even makes that the inevitable case.

As Chomsky says, “In the view of anarchists and left-Marxists ... those decisions are made by the informed working class through their assemblies and their direct representatives, who live among them and work among them.” Fine, this is unobjectionable, but it leaves the question, how is it that the workers - and as mentioned earlier, also the consumers - are informed? From where do they get the information essential to the decisions? And, as well, by what methods do they tally their preferences into decisions that all then abide by?

This is not asking for a blueprint, it is asking for a minimal structural description that can give real substance, and believability, to the possibility of self management.

Chomsky continues, “certainly in any complex industrial society there should be a group of technicians whose task it is to produce

plans, and to lay out the consequences of decisions, to explain to the people who have to make the decisions that if you decide this, you're likely to get this consequence, because that's what your programming model shows, and so on. But the point is that those planning systems are themselves industries, and they will have their workers' councils and they will be part of the whole council system, and the distinction is that these planning systems do not make decisions. They produce plans in exactly the same way that automakers produce autos. The plans are then available for the workers' councils and council assemblies, in the same way that autos are available to ride in."

This too raises important questions, what keeps these planners, and other experts, from dominating outcomes? It is one thing to provide expertise in assembling information. It is another thing to have power over outcomes. How do we get the former but without having the latter? Likewise, on what basis do workers determine what to favor? Where is the opinion and influence of consumers in this process? Why does anyone abide by emergent plans - where abiding would of course entail working specific numbers of hours and at times and in ways one may not optimally prefer?

There is a very real sense in which the economic vision called participatory economics, or parecon, was conceived precisely to answer all the questions raised above. The interview with the young Chomsky was in 1976, and the conception and formulation of parecon began in earnest not long thereafter. How do we give legs to an anarchist or libertarian and certainly classless and self managing vision for economy? The answers that emerged from that concern

bear directly upon all the points raised above, and some very important additional ones.

First, parecon, moved by the call for self management, settled on workers and consumers councils as the venues of decision making power. This is where people get together, air views, discuss options, manifest preferences, settle on decisions. This was also just borrowing from past practice. The norm guiding the councils, in parecon, however, was conceived as to conduct discussions, debates and explorations, and then tally preferences, all such as to convey to each actor say in decision-making in proportion as they are affected - at least to the extent possible and without being overly anal about it. This refined past practice, somewhat.

Second, there arose a concern about the distribution of tasks - work - among all those able to do work. How should tasks be combined into jobs? While the issue of more or less onerous, or more or less fulfilling tasks arose, in accord with Chomsky's observation of the need for workers to be prepared to participate in and make decisions, we realized that some kinds of work are empowering for those doing it - and other kinds are disempowering for those doing it. The empowering tasks produce not only goods and services, but in the workers involved: increasing confidence, advancing skills, evolving socially enriched connections, steadily growing awareness of critical information, and steadily enhanced experience of daily decision making. The disempowering tasks produce not only goods and services, but in the workers involved: declining confidence, diminishing skills, fragmentation, declining awareness of critical information, and enforced divorce from daily decision making.

Combining overwhelming empowering tasks into roughly 20% of all jobs, and combining overwhelmingly disempowering tasks into roughly 80% of all jobs, guarantees that the 20% who are empowered, who we called the coordinator class, will rule over the 80% who are disempowered, the working class.

Thus we saw the need to replace that corporate division of labor with a new approach, which we called balanced job complexes. The idea is trivially simple: balance the jobs people do for empowerment effect. We all do a job with a mix of tasks and responsibilities which, on average, over time, has the same empowerment impact as each other job in the economy. Of course balancing for empowerment also largely balances for onerousness and intrinsic desirability of jobs, too, but not entirely. And to our thinking this empowerment balance was by far the more important step to take to avoid class division and all the ugly derivative effects it entails. Slight differences in onerousness could easily be addressed by differential income allotments to offset the debits thereby incurred, as per the suggestion from Chomsky, above.

So what about remuneration and consumption? Well, here comes a key point of disagreement with the formulations in Chomsky's interview. The first problem to address is the need for fairness. The second problem is the need for people to have incentives to do that which they should do but would, assessing only their own condition, prefer not to do. The third problem is the need to have signals that communicate needed information for wise and ethically sound decision making about what to produce and consume. The fourth problem is the need to correlate the population's desires for social

product to the population's desires for work and to also enjoy leisure.

A frequent anarchist answer is, okay, let's have work from each able bodied person in accord with their abilities, and let's have consumption by each person in accord with their needs. The trouble is, no one who says this literally means it. That is, no one means that they favor that each person decides, independently of all other people, and consulting only their own preferences, how much to take from the social product for their own consumption, and how long to work and what to work at. Taken literally, the from each to each norm is remarkably anti social, so it is not intended literally.

If I have only my own tastes to consult, I will want a whole lot of stuff. Why not take it, assuming there is no injustice involved, and no loss to others. And I will also only want to work up to the point at which the pleasures of working are outweighed by the pleasures to be had from leisure. In other words, I will want too much - actually, way too much. And, despite Chomsky's correct insights into the intrinsic values of work, I will also very likely want to work far fewer hours than would be required to fulfill everyone expressing consumption needs like mine. So, there is a problem - the mesh between work and consumption - not to mention taking into account the full social and environmental costs of both production and consumption.

The anarchist task is to solve these matters without defaming or degrading work or leisure, without violating self management, and without imposing class division. It can be done, I believe, by combining the self managed network of councils and balanced job

complexes with two additional structures - remuneration for duration, intensity, and onerousness of the socially valued work we do, called equitable remuneration, and cooperative negotiation of production and consumption by those same councils using procedures that account for full social costs and benefits and that convey to each actor a self managing say, via an allocation methodology called participatory planning.

The remunerative scheme is fair. If we all do socially valued labor - which, in time, has had the onerous components minimized, but even until then - and we all do it for the same duration, and all working equally hard, and all having an equal share of fulfilling and onerous tasks - then we should all earn an average income. You can get more income, however, by working longer, harder, or at more onerous tasks, all in agreement with your workmates, and all in a socially productive manner. Alternatively, you might value leisure more and might opt for less consumption and thus also for less hours spent at socially valued labor. Both choices are fair, in the parecon view. And the system is not only fair, but also provides precisely the incentives needed to coordinate work with desires for the output of work, as well as providing precisely the information needed for people to sensibly determine investment patterns, volumes of production, etc.

The participatory planning allocation procedures are also desirable. They are consistent with self management, classlessness, and equity. They elevate human need and well being - both in work and in leisure - to the guide for economic decisions. They make it part and parcel of personal fulfillment for people to take into account all social and environmental effects.

Finally, I have here addressed the young Chomsky's interview for two reasons. One, I wanted to bring it to light for people who have likely never seen it. Two, I wanted to demonstrate that while the motives and values guiding Chomsky's formulations are in tune with all our finest aspirations, a few of the extrapolation to judgements about institutions are not. And three, I wanted to make a case that participatory economics is in tune with the anarchist aspirations, but also accurately addresses the actual complexities of economic life.

My hope is that the next discussion with an anarchist who has doubts about parecon might go something like this:

Anarchist: Liking much about parecon, there is a still a key point that worries me. How do pareconists see work?

Pareconist: By work pareconists mean activity undertaken in the economy to produce goods or services that others, not the person doing the work, will enjoy.

Anarchist: But in a parecon this is self managed, yes?

Exactly.

Anarchist: So isn't work, in that case, one of the cornerstone ways a person expresses and fulfills him or herself?

Yes, as long as it is self managed, without class rule, and without impositions perverting it, of course.

Anarchist: Then why give an income for doing self managed socially valued labor? Doesn't remunerating work assume that without pay, people would rather vegetate than work? Why not get from each according to ability, and give to each according to need?

For one thing, while work that is freely undertaken to create worthy outputs is indeed part of a fulfilling life, nonetheless certain aspects of work are boring or burdensome, causing us to want to do less. But, more, so is taking care of kids part of a fulfilling life, or resting, playing games, reading, going to a concert or movie, taking a walk, or seeing something new. Other activity that is not about producing something which others benefit from via the economic allocation system is also fulfilling, so we each have a trade off, if you will, between work for the social output, and leisure that we put to other desirable ends, not vegetating.

Anarchist: Why can't we each decide how much leisure and work we want? Why do you assume that we will work too little, or consume too much?

We should each decide, I agree, but not in isolation from the implications for people who produce what we consume, or who consume what we produce, and for the environment, as well. The implication of opting for less work and more leisure, is generating less social output.

Anarchist: So, if I want to work less, I should take correspondingly less, and I will.

But how do you know how much it is just and fair to take, or to work? The assumption of your norm, "from each to each," is that people will be responsible. There will be many more things you would like to have than you will take, but you will responsibly restrain yourself. There will be times you would rather not work, but you will anyhow, to be responsible. Let's just assume, which most would doubt, that all people will automatically want to act thusly. The question

nonetheless arises, how will such people be responsible? According to what shared value system? With what indicators to guide their choices?

Anarchist: So you need remuneration for duration, intensity, and onerousness to get fair results - not mainly as an incentive?

Yes, but there is another issue, too. By having income as we do in parecon, the allocation system is not only able to be fair, but is also able to unearth desires for leisure versus desires for output, as well as for different types of work that people prefer or dislike, as well as revealing the relative desires for and costs of different types of production, so that we can alter current plans and investments accordingly. People restraining themselves is actually not so helpful. It is better for an economy if people reveal their actual true and full desires, since this can usefully inform investment choices regarding where to aim in the future, even if for now people will wind up having to settle for less.

Anarchist: I still feel like I would rather not besmirch what labor is, and what we think are people's motives, by offering rewards.

I don't see why fair allocation, with self management so that work's character and average duration is mutually agreed, is besmirching it, but since you do feel that way, perhaps another observation might bridge our gap.

Say we establish a parecon. If I am right, it would be disastrous to have no remunerative norm other than that people work and take whatever they independently choose to do and to have. So, as a

caution, to avoid risk of destructive outcomes, how about if we start with parecon's norm.

Then, however, over time, as people become more and more social, we experiment with having additional free goods and with more lenient accountings of duration, intensity, and onerousness in various workplaces or industries. And we see what happens. If you are correct, outcomes won't change, or will even improve. In that case, we continue the experiments. If I am right, outcomes will get seriously messed up, for want of guiding indicators, and many problems will arise. If that happens, we slow or stop the experiments. By this approach, we minimize risks of calamity but we also preserve and explore possibilities to further refine the income norm.