

Has Civilization Failed?

Don't Ask Noam Chomsky!

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What he said in *Anarchy*

The failure of civilization: it has been given some eight thousand years to prove itself a superior mode of life to the ninety-nine percent of previous human existence, primarily in tribal, communal, mostly egalitarian societies. Has the transformation to complex civilizations made the species more peaceable, more communal, more egalitarian, or has it had the opposite effect? Let us consider not civilization's ideal, but rather what might be termed "real-existing" civilization.

None of the original problems of life—none of the questions posed before the immensity of the cosmos by ancient Greeks and Chinese, by the prophets, by shamans and seers of primal societies, by contemplatives and social-cultural revolutionaries and visionaries—have been resolved by civilization. Civilization has only managed to give the dark side of our nature access to push-button massacres and alienation, threatening now, with all its tools and toys, to "resolve" its problems and all fundamental questions of existence once and for all by the final eclipse of humanity and the natural habitat in which we have evolved.

"Has civilization failed?" should be the starting point for meaningful discourse on where we find ourselves along the continuum of our real (natural, species) history. But there is enormous denial on this matter, most of all it seems among civilization's most dedicated reformers. Reform of civilization could arguably be our only real option; we should not dismiss without serious consideration the compelling possibility of biological irreversibility (and its parallel in cultural irreversibility) as a paradigm for our mono/cultural destiny so far. Everything seems to go downhill. But let us at least have the courage and the honesty (with ourselves) to admit that civilization has brought no ultimate good to our species, has failed to deliver what dubious promises it offered, while in planetary terms has proved an unmitigated disaster.

This is in a sense where a group of people around the publication *Anarchy: A Journal of Desire Armed* attempted to begin with celebrated left libertarian writer (and one-man anti-imperial truth squad) Noam Chomsky when they interviewed him briefly before a speaking engagement in Columbia, Missouri. (See their Summer 1991 issue.) We owe them our praise and gratitude for opening the dialogue, even if the results were so disappointing. It was an interesting idea to ask Chomsky about issues other than what we normally expect to hear from him, particularly given the energy such discussions have taken up in the anarchist anti-authoritarian milieu. But judging from the interview, Chomsky was very negative and closed-minded about the discussion, refusing to even consider it as a valid area of dialogue or to recognize any distinction in the terminology describing civilization (complex, hierarchic, mega-technic societies) and primal and vernacular communities. To Chomsky, all human cultures are civilizations (so much for linguistic subtlety), from gatherer-hunters to modern capitalism. "Civilization has many aspects," he told the people from the Columbia Anarchist League. "It doesn't mean anything to be for it or against it," as if it were a simple for/against formula that we have been elaborating.

Is Technology Neutral?

Chomsky may be forgiven for his unfamiliarity with what the FE has tried to elaborate over the last decade or so—he’s a busy man, and he does very important work. But he also appears to know nothing about the insights of critical anthropology (writers such as Sahlins, Clastres, Diamond) or the critique of technology (an enormous literature including critical work by his colleague Joseph Weizenbaum and former colleague Langdon Winner, but including people like Ivan Illich, Jacques Ellul, and someone of the stature of Lewis Mumford, who laid groundwork for the possibility of a critique of civilization based on its technical, and by implication, its social relations. Chomsky appears to know little about any of this, since it never occurred to him in the midst of the truncated conversation, but he had plenty of opinions nevertheless.

For example, he relativizes oppression by claiming it existed in all civilizations (by which he means societies). “Some of the worst forms of oppression and brutality are in pre-technological societies,” he argues, repeating modern civilization’s standard dogma. Thus the presence of social conflict or oppression in other societies not only silences discussion of primal and vernacular cultures and their values but mystifies the important distinctions that critical anthropologists and others have made between direct, highly idiosyncratic social relations in small societies and the kind of systemic (and alienated), institutionalized violence and oppression in hierarchic societies. Here Chomsky reveals himself to be much more of a marxist (and a rather conventional one at that) than an anarchist or libertarian.

This becomes clear as the discussion continues. When the technology discussion really starts heating up, the good professor declares it all entirely neutral. “A libertarian society,” he tells us, “would want to make use of the most advanced technology there is, and in fact would want to advance it further. Take a real contemporary technology like, say, information processing technology. You know, that can be used for oppression; it can be used for liberation...” There is not even a shred of criticality here—no influence of Mumford (or perhaps Schumacher), nothing of the sensitivity of a writer like Bookchin (who lies somewhere between us and Chomsky), not even a healthy dash of Emerson or Thoreau! Nope, everything “depends on the social institutions in which [technology] exists.” Even robotics: “Robotics: itself is neutral.”

Unquestioning Affirmation of Civilization

What is so disappointing is Chomsky’s arrogant certainty that technics itself could never become systemic, culture-forming, not only being shaped by but eventually shaping the institutions that engender and administer it; or that technology might possibly have inertial aspects that synergize with the social environment, that it might come to shape meaning, that it might complicate or even ultimately undermine our possibilities for a liberatory society. And nothing from tribal societies is allowed in the discussion of models for freedom if any examples of oppression and brutality can be found in any of them. There is not the slightest suspicion in this normally skeptical thinker that there might be more to “information processing technology”—let alone information processing or even information—than pragmatically meets the eye within present circumstances. (I suspected that Chomsky’s position on technology might be less than enlightened when I read, in *The Chomsky Reader*—a generally excellent book, by the way—that he has been “in an electronics laboratory for the last thirty years”—a punishment!)

For such a brilliant critic of empire to have failed to study technics more profoundly is perhaps understandable, though very unfortunate. But to so authoritatively affirm all the shibboleths of technological civilization is horrid. It marginalizes not only what we have attempted to do, but the greens and the anti-development movements in the Third World, native peoples and radical ecologists of all kinds. For Chomsky, civilization’s cardinal rule that more is better, bigger is better, faster is better, more complicated is better, and all the rest, goes entirely unquestioned. “Automobiles [!!!], robotics, or information processing, there you have a liberatory technology,” he chided his anarchist interviewers, and then the final, predictable reckoning: “The only thing that can possibly resolve environmental problems is advanced technology.” Full steam ahead; forgive us if we choose to disbelieve the assurances of the faithful.

Long life to Chomsky in his courageous, relentless, single-minded (and sometimes seemingly single-handed) battle against the Big Lie. (This is why we have no problem selling his books to disseminate historical truth in order to combat the imperial propaganda machine. As my friend Dolores told me, “Hey, he’s still worth reading—nobody’s perfect.”)

But in other matters, such as a more fundamental critique of modern civilization, of what capital engendered on a global scale—megatechnics, cybernetic alienation, and weapons of mass destruction that not only come in the form of bombs and warships and the like but also in the form of conveniences, scientific efficiency, and progressive rationalization—he’s pretty hopeless. Too bad. Another ‘painful example of how impoverished real prospects for freedom remain.

FE note: Thanks to *Anarchy* for bringing this to light. I wish they could have brought up some of the points—and writers—mentioned here. But it seemed to go pretty fast, and downhill. Imagine getting into an argument with an articulate, fast-talker like Professor Chomsky!

The last few issues of the magazine have been lavishly designed and filled with interesting material. The Spring ’91 issue covers the Gulf War, Eastern Europe, and has lots of reviews, an insert of the *North American Anarchist Review* and the complete text of James Koehnline’s *Legend of the Great Dismal Maroons* (reviewed in FE #335, Winter, 1990–1991). The Summer 1991 issue contains the Chomsky interview, a recent article by Chomsky on the Gulf War, a huge spread on the situationists, material on the Greek anarchist movement, squatters in British Columbia, reviews and more. Single issues available for \$2 (checks to C.A.L.) from C.A.L., POB 1446, Columbia MO 65205–1446.

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