The Common Good

Noam Chomsky

[From his speech delivered at the Progressive Challenge, an educational forum featuring progressive thinkers and activists, held on Capital Hill on January 9, 1997]

Background issues are worth attention, because it’s important, I think, to recognize how sharply contemporary ideology has departed from traditions and values which are quite important and significant and which it claims it upholds. That divergence is worth understanding and I think it carries a lot of direct lessons about the current scene.

Let’s begin with the common good. We can trace that concept back to the earliest foundations of political theory. Anyone who went to a good college knows that it all comes from Aristotle’s Politics which is surprisingly timely in many ways. In Politics, which is pretty subtle and complex, the main problem is how to achieve what Aristotle calls, “the Common Good of All.” Per Aristotle, “the state is a community of equals.” It’s aiming at the best life possible for all of them. The people must be supreme and they must participate fully and equally. (A qualification: “people” is a narrow category for Aristotle. We’ve at least learned something in 2,000 years.) But among those he considered the people, they have to be equal, free, participatory. And the government must not only be democratic and participatory, but also a welfare state, which provides, as he put it, “lasting prosperity to the poor by distribution of public revenues” in a variety of ways that he discusses.

The point being that an essential feature of a decent society, and an almost defining feature of a democratic society, is relative equality of outcome—not opportunity, but outcome. Without that you can’t seriously talk about a democratic state.

These concepts of the common good have a long life. They lie
right at the core of classical liberalism, of enlightenment thinking. Adam Smith, as everyone knows, advocated free markets, but if you look at the argument for free markets, it was based on his belief that free markets ought to lead to a perfect equality, which is a desideratum in a decent society. Like Aristotle, Smith understood that the common good will require substantial intervention to assure lasting prosperity of the poor by distribution of public revenues.

So Adam Smith’s praise of the division of labor is well known, but less known is his condemnation of the division of labor for its inhuman effects which, as he said, “will turn working people into objects as stupid and ignorant as it is possible for a human creature to be” and therefore must be prevented in any improved or civilized society by government action to overcome the devastating market forces.

Other leading contributors to classical liberalism went much further than this, condemning wage labor itself, for the reason that it deprives people of their humanity. When the laborer works under external control, we may admire what he does but we despise what he is—a classic liberal slogan. deToqueville said that the art advances, the artisan declines. He was, of course, also a great figure of the classical liberal pantheon and he agreed with Smith, Thomas Jefferson and many others, that equality of outcome is an important feature—a crucial feature in fact-of a free and just society. And he warned of the dangers of a permanent inequality of condition and an end to democracy if the manufacturing aristocracy (which is growing up under our eyes in the United States in the 1830s, remember, one of the harshest that has ever existed in the world) should escape its confines, as it later did beyond his worst nightmares.

That’s classical liberalism, way back to Aristotle.

Similar ideas run through the independent working class press from the very origins of the industrial revolution. There was a lively press, say in eastern Massachusetts-Lowell, Lawrence and places like that-back in the 1840s and 1850s. It was run by working people, “factory girls” as they were called, artisans and so on. They bitterly condemned what they called “the new spirit of the age”—“gain wealth forgetting all but self” which they regarded as a demeaning and degrading doctrine that sweeps aside any concern for the common good, and also was destroying their culture, the rights that they’d felt they’d won in the American Revolution, later the Civil War. They bitterly condemned the tyranny of rising industrial capitalism, much as deToqueville had, insisting, in their words, “that those who work in the mills should own them,” and that people should run their own affairs, certainly in the political arena, but beyond as well. Well, I don’t think the mill hands of Lowell and Lawrence would have been much surprised by the views of America’s leading Twentieth Century social philosopher, John Dewey, who like them was as American as apple pie. He describes politics as “the shadow cast over society by big business” and he-the leading
philosopher of democracy in this century—goes on to say, “talk of democracy has little content when big business rules the life of the country through its control of the means of production, exchange, the press and other means of publicity, propaganda and communication.” Like the working people in eastern Massachusetts almost a century earlier, he held that in a free and democratic society, workers must be masters of their industrial fate and private power must be changed from a feudalistic to a democratic order. These are ideas that trace back to the Enlightenment and classical liberalism and they’ve reappeared constantly in popular struggle in the United State and elsewhere. I don’t think they have lost their significance, or relevance or, for that matter, appeal. Some of the concerns of working people had been expressed by James Madison years earlier. By 1792, shortly after the Constitution was established, he was already expressing deep concerns over the fate of the democratic experiment that he had crafted. He warned that the rising developmental capitalistic state was leading to a real domination by the few under an apparent liberty of the many. He deplored what he called, “the daring depravity of the times, as private powers become tools and tyrants of government, bribed by its largesses and overawing it with their powers and combinations, casting over society the shadow that we call politics.” Madison’s words, but not the values, can easily be translated into a description of the contemporary scene, and you can read them in current writings. For example, Business Week in late 1995, reported with wonder that the new Congress “represents a milestone for business. Never before have so many goodies been showered so enthusiastically on America’s entrepreneurs.” Though they go on to say that’s not enough—the lobbyists are called to go back to the trenches to demand more. Another accompanying headline reads, “The Problem Now: What To Do With All That Cash”—as surging profits are overflowing the coffers of Corporate America and dividends are booming, while wages are stagnating or declining, along with security and work conditions. In large measure, that’s an effect of policy decisions which were directed to these ends, including the criminal assault-criminal in the technical sense-on labor rights in the ’80s which happens to be reviewed rather well in the same journal.

Let me turn to another contemporary issue that traces back to Aristotle’s Politics and took an interesting turn along the way. Aristotle recognizes that democratic systems can come in many different forms. The best functioning of them, even the best, most properly functioning democracy would be flawed, he felt, as long as the goal of equality is not reached. And the reason was that if you had sharp inequality, but perfect democracy, the poor majority would seek the interest of the needy, and not the common good of all. That can be safeguarded only to the extent that people generally have moderate and sufficient property—that is, neither great wealth, nor poverty.
Similar concerns actually entered into our own Constitution, but in a somewhat different form, and not without a lot of tension—which continues right to the present. In the constitutional debates, Madison raised the same problem. He warned that “democracy would undermine the responsibility of government to protect the minority of the opulent against the majority,” that is, to keep them from plundering the rich, as John Foster Dulles and President Eisenhower described the great problem of international affairs in secret some years later.

Madison expected the threat of democracy to become more severe over time because he expected an increase in the proportion of those who “will labor under all the hardships of life and secretly sigh for a more equal distribution of its blessings.” He was concerned by what he called, “the symptoms of a leveling spirit” that he already discerned, and he warned of the future danger “if the right to vote were to place power over property in hands without a share in it.

That problem confronting Madison—the same as Aristotle’s problem—could be solved in one of two ways. One is by reducing poverty. The other is by reducing democracy. Aristotle’s choice was the first. Madison’s was the second. He recognized the problem, but since the prime responsibility of government is to protect the minority of the opulent against the majority, he therefore urged that political power be put in the hands of the more capable set of men, those who represent the wealth of the nation, with the public fragmented and disorganized.

And that’s the Madisonian system, which has remained fairly stable over two centuries—although with outcomes that he very soon deplored, as I’ve indicated. The reason for his surprise, I think, is that Madison, like the rest of classical liberalism, was pre-capitalist and anti-capitalist in spirit. And he expected the leadership to be benevolent and enlightened and so on. He learned differently very fast.

There is no reason now—anymore than there ever has been—to accept the doctrines that sustain power and privilege. Or to believe that we are somehow constrained by mysterious and unknown social laws—not simply decisions made within institutions that are subject to human will. They are human institutions and they have to face the test of legitimacy. And if they do not, they can be replaced by others that are more free and more just, as has often happened in the past.