Another World is Possible Noam Chomsky's Concept of Human Nature in the 21st Century

Otro mundo es posible
El concepto de Noam Chomsky sobre la naturaleza humana en el siglo XXI

Florian Maiwald*
Rhenish Friedrich Wilhelm University of Bonn, Bonn. Germany. flomai1@gmx.de

Nicol A. Barria-Asenjo**
Directora de la colección, Estudios Críticos Contemporáneos, Púrpura Ediciones. México. nicol.barriaasenjo99@gmail.com

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Abstract

Chomsky's view of human nature and his notion of a society characterized by freedom and equality are, as some of Chomsky's remarks suggest, inextricably linked. The following article examines how Chomsky's conception of an ideal society that meets the needs of human nature presents itself in a new light in the 21st century.

Keywords

Human Nature, Chomsky, libertarian Socialism, Universal Grammar.

Resumen

La visión de Chomsky sobre la naturaleza humana y su noción de una sociedad caracterizada por la libertad y la igualdad están, como sugieren algunas de sus observaciones, inextricablemente unidas. El siguiente artículo examina cómo la concepción de Chomsky de una sociedad ideal que satisfaga las necesidades de la naturaleza humana se presenta bajo una nueva luz en el siglo XXI.

Palabras clave

Naturaleza humana, Chomsky, Socialismo libertario, Gramática universal.

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1. Introduction

At the time of writing this introduction, it seems to be more obvious than ever why economic historian Adam Tooze seems to be right with his thesis that we are living in a time of *polycrisis* (Tooze, 2022). While southern European countries are literally on fire due to massive heat waves (Copernicus, 2023), right-wing parties are growing stronger not only in Germany, my home country, but also at the European level and worldwide. In addition, there is a new form of bloc formation, not least caused by Russia's attack on Ukraine, bringing the idea of nuclear escalation back into many people's awareness. The concerns arising from this situation seem all the more justified when one considers the increasing geopolitical tensions between the United States and China. The remarkable thing is that all the previously listed crises - which by far do not cover the complete spectrum of crises the world is confronted with - occurred after the already long-lasting COVID-19 pandemic, which already made it more than obvious that we - by the pronoun *we* I would like to refer to humanity as a whole - had to say goodbye to an old form of normality, to put it with reference to the title of Nicol Barria-Asenjo's book published in 2021 (Barria-Asenjo, 2021).

The aforementioned concept of *polycrisis* developed by Adam Tooze is based on the assumption that a problem - understood as an issue that is caused by disruptions of familiar procedures - only becomes a crisis when our ability to find an answer to the said problem is challenged (Tooze, 2022). According to Tooze, a *polycrisis* is specifically characterized, against the background of this semantic delimitation, by the fact that "[...] the shocks are disparate, but they interact so that the whole is even more overwhelming than the sum of the parts" (Tooze, 2022). Mohamed A. El-Erian expresses this idea in a similarly accurate way when he points out that the world is currently dealing with several small fires - which are emblematic of the multiple crises with which the world is confronted - that threaten to degenerate into a larger conflagration (El-Erian, 2022).

In view of this initial situation, Noam Chomsky, to whom this essay is dedicated, aptly pointed out in a speech at the Progressive International in 2020 that nowadays nothing less than the experiment of human life on earth is at stake and further substantiates this point as follows:

> We are meeting at a remarkable moment, a moment that is, in fact, unique in human history, a moment both ominous in portent and bright with hopes for a better future. [...] We are meeting at a moment of confluence of crises of extraordinary severity, with the fate of the human experiment quite literally at stake (Chomsky, 2020).

In my view, it seems reasonable to take Chomsky's remarks as a starting point for the following considerations. If one reads between the lines there are two aspects that seem to be of particular relevance: First, Chomsky clearly points out that the multiple crises by which the current global situation is characterized - as well as their interdependence - are not to be regarded as phenomena whose outcome is determined by historical laws, but by the active, voluntaristic capacities that human beings possess for taking action. It is precisely against the background of this consideration that Chomsky's statement that the current historical situation confronting humanity is "[...] both ominous in portent and bright with hopes for a better future" can be understood (Chomsky, 2020). Secondly, Chomsky's statement that the human experiment is at stake can be directly linked to the first aspect. Experiments, by their very nature, are characterized by participatory and voluntaristic experimentation within a given context and the outcome of these experiments is initially open to debate. At the political level, however, experiments can be characterized by different - more concretely: constructive or destructive - intentions. If one considers Chomsky's statement - and this assessment seems more than accurate - the current experiment that has been practiced by mankind on this planet has often been of a destructive nature - the still rampant poverty, the danger of nuclear escalation as well as the ever advancing climate change seem to support this thesis immensely.

This is illustrated by the fact that the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* has set the Doomsday Clock - to which Chomsky repeatedly refers in order to accentuate the potential danger that characterizes our world situation (Chomsky, 2023) - to 90 seconds to midnight in early 2023, on the grounds that "Russia's invasion of Ukraine has increased the risk of nuclear weapons use, raised the specter of biological and chemical weapons use, hamstrung the world's response to climate change, and hampered international efforts to deal with other global concerns" (BAS, 2023).[1] However, experiments can also be characterized by the impetus

[1] BAS = Bulletin of Atomic Scientists

of the utopian - understood as the will to move the world in a better direction through active engagement. Zygmunt Bauman, for instance, has drawn attention to this idea in his work *Socialism - The Active Utopia* (1976), pointing out that "(b)y exposing the partiality of current reality, by scanning the field of the possible in which the real occupies merely a tiny plot, utopias pave the way for a critical attitude and a critical activity which alone can transform the present predicament of man" (p. 13).

According to Bauman, the critical examination of empirical reality - understood as the social, political, and institutional conditions - with which human beings are confronted should always be characterized by the spirit of the utopian, understood as the imagination of a better future (Bauman, 1976, p. 13). Chomsky expresses this idea in a similarly apt way, pointing out that active, voluntaristic engagement - or, to put it in line with the previous remarks: experimentation with a positive intention - must always take the existing social parameters into account in its own actions:

> We exist and work in given historical conditions. We may try to change them, but cannot ignore them, in the work we undertake, the strategies for social change that we advocate, or the direct action in which we engage or from which we abstain. In discussion of freedom and equality, it is very difficult to disentangle questions of fact from judgments of value. We should try to do so, pursuing factual inquiry where it may lead without dogmatic preconception, but not ignoring the consequences of what we do (Chomsky, 1978).

When in the title of this contribution it is suggested that "another world is possible", then I intend to refer specifically to the fact which Chomsky alludes to: that voluntaristic commitment guided by *values* - which seems more necessary than ever in the face of the political challenges existing today - should not ignore the *facts*. In this context, *facts* can be understood as the historical - and thus also the social, institutional, political, etc. - circumstances with which people find themselves confronted (Chomsky, 1978). The possibility of a different world thus depends on the strategies with which one is supposed to initiate a social change. The possibility of a different world is therefore already a value judgment that refers to a different state which is considered desirable - a world in which the ideals of freedom and equality have been realized to the greatest possible extent (Chomsky, 1978). Nevertheless, Chomsky also points out explicitly that this form of possibility (of a different world)

can only find its practical realization if one first recognizes the social status quo as it prevails (i.e. the facts), and then, in a second step, tests suitable strategies for overcoming it (Chomsky, 1978). The possibility of a different world - and thus of social progress - is closely related to Chomsky's conception of human nature. In a first step, I will present this connection in an elaborated way below, while in a second step I will discuss to what extent the question of human agency for social change arises under new parameters in the 21st century.

2. A View from the UFO: The Dialectics of Human Potential

In the first chapter of his work *Hegemony or Survival*, Chomsky constructs an interesting thought experiment with reference to a thesis of the biologist Ernst Mayr. Against the background of his work in evolutionary biology, Mayr once proposed the thesis that the intellectual organization of humanity might not be favoured by the primacy of natural selection. Mayr supports this consideration with the sobering observation that a review of the history of evolutionary processes reveals that intelligence does not seem to be such a relevant factor when it comes to processes of natural selection as previously assumed - against the background of this consideration, Mayr points out that beetles and bacteria have proven to be far more successful than the human species in terms of their own survival (Chomsky, 2003, p. 1).

Against the background of these considerations, Chomsky states:

> We are entering a period of human history that may provide an answer to the question of whether it is better to be smart than stupid. The most hopeful prospect is that the question will not be answered: if it receives a definite answer, that answer can only be that humans were a kind of "biological error," using their allotted 100,000 years to destroy themselves and, in the process, much else. The species has surely developed the capacity to do just that, and a hypothetical extraterrestrial observer might well conclude that humans have demonstrated that capacity throughout their history, dramatically in the past few hundred years, with an assault on the environment that sustains life, on the diversity of more complex organisms, and with cold and calculated savagery, on each other as well (Chomsky, 2003, p. 1-2).

Chomsky's thought experiment is interesting in many respects and aptly expresses the dilemma, here to be referred to as the *dialectics of human potential*. According to Chomsky, if an extraterrestrial species were to observe what is happening on planet Earth, it could only conclude that the human species must be some kind of "biological error" (Chomsky, 2003, p. 1-2). Throughout the period of its existence, humanity has managed to destroy the natural foundations of its existence to such an extent that nothing less than the future of human life itself - and terrestrial life in general - is at stake. However, if one makes the effort to read between the lines in Chomsky's more than cogent thought experiment, it also becomes clear why the term of a *dialectics of human potential* was chosen for the heading of this subchapter.

The fact that the extraterrestrial observer has to find out with astonishment that the human species is a kind of "biological error" clarifies this dialectic by which the *conditio humana* is characterized very aptly. This can be explained primarily because the astonishment of the extraterrestrial stems from the fact that the high intellectual capacities, which one usually assigns to the human species, seem in an unmistakable contrast to their actions, which are marked by the destruction of their own bases of life and hence the destruction of their own species. To pursue this thought a little further, it is also helpful to point out that this contrast, which causes the extraterrestrial to assume a "biological error" in the human species, seems to be only an *ostensible* one. The fact that human potential - by which I mean all the cognitive, creative, and emotional capacities that characterize human existence - is characterized by a form of dialectics suggests that humans can use their own capacities both to promote social progress and to promote social regression. Or, to put it in line with the considerations noted in the introduction: Experimental trials with political, institutional, and societal frameworks not only presuppose certain mental, motivational and intellectual capacities on the part of the human species, but may furthermore be characterized by, as I have deliberately put it, constructive or destructive intentions – Chomsky's previously quoted words that the current historical situation confronting the human species is "[...] both ominous in portent and bright with hopes for a better future" (Chomsky, 2020) reinforces this fact. To put it as concisely as possible at this point: The dialectic of human potential is a basic prerequisite for understanding the possibility of change of the social conditions with which people find themselves surrounded in various social and historical formations - these conditions, in turn, can be constructive or

destructive, which in turn depends to a considerable degree on the way in which people make use of their potential.

Erich Fromm once clarified this aspect aptly on the basis of the invention of the atomic bomb, when he pointed out that the invention of the atomic bomb represents one of the greatest phenomena of alienation in modern human civilization:

> A most dramatic and gruesome symbol of what alienation is are nuclear weapons. They are the work of man. They are the expression of his greatest intellectual achievements, and yet nuclear weapons dominate us. It has now become very questionable whether we still control them (Fromm, 1961, p. 12).[2]

According to Fromm's reading, the origin of the alienation generated by the development of nuclear weapons can be traced back to the fact that, on the one hand, they have sprung from the high intellectual capacities characteristic of human existence, but on the other hand, they threaten to destroy everything that characterizes human existence - together with all the cultural and intellectual achievements (Fromm, 1961, p. 12).

When we speak of the possibility of another world - as indicated in the title of this paper - this raises the question whether this *other world* is characterized by the spirit of the utopian or the dystopian, by constructive progression or destructive regression. For Chomsky, as already indicated, both options are possible and the human experiment should therefore be considered far from complete (Chomsky, 2020).

To return at this point to the thought experiment mentioned by Chomsky, the following can be stated: From the point of view of the extraterrestrial observer it may be strange that mankind seems to use its potentials for its own destruction. However, this form of astonishment, which characterizes the reaction of the extraterrestrials, implies at the same time why - and there lies, I think, the hidden message of Chomsky's thought experiment - human potential can also be harnessed for social progress. Chomsky expresses this aspect aptly by pointing out that social change "[...] is never linear. It goes forward in some respects, backwards

[2] Cf. my article *Do we need an enlightened Anthropocentrism? Erich Fromm and the Contradiction of Human Existence,* where I also discuss this aspect (Maiwald, 2023). The quote from Fromm has been personally translated from German into English.

in others. Just to take the positive side, there has been a very substantial increase in the general level of civilization of society, and we see that in dimension after dimension. Concern for human rights has increased enormously and has many components. Women's rights, for example, are protected way beyond what was true forty years ago. Minority rights are far more protected, though there is plenty of distance to go" (Chomsky, 2005).

Here, once again, it is also worth reading between the lines. When Chomsky points out that social change implies at the same time that progress in some societal aspects can always be accompanied simultaneously by regressive tendencies in other societal aspects, one may at first be intuitively inclined - a theme of many critical theorists, as the quotation of Fromm shows - to think that progress is always characterized by an unmistakable form of dialectics (Adorno & Horkheimer, 2002, p. 27). At this point, however, it is by no means my intention to construct such an intellectual, and in theoretical terms possibly even arbitrary, parallel. Rather, the *dialectic of human potential* I apostrophize is meant to illustrate that, according to Chomsky's theoretical and political (as will be shown in the following) view, human nature, and thus inevitably society, are capable of change - whether this change takes place in a positive or negative direction remains open.

When Chomsky, in addition to the socio-critical remarks by which his apt and important analyses are always characterized, at the same time admits, as indicated in the above quotation, that nowadays there is also a substantial measure of progress in civilization - the achievements of the struggles of minorities but also the development of human rights in general bear witness to this development - this aspect is once again directly accentuated (Chomsky, 2005). However, what becomes clear above all on the basis of what has been said so far is that social change is inseparably linked to the changeability of human beings. Or to put it differently: Chomsky's views on human nature are of immediate relevance when one thinks of the ideal form of society.

3. Human Beings and Society: The Connection between Chomsky's Conception of Human Nature and his Political Views.

Something that becomes apparent upon a more detailed examination of Chomsky's general work is that Chomsky comes very close to what one would call a polymath - which is all the more impressive when

one realizes that, against the background of the modern differentiation of the sciences, it is increasingly difficult to occupy such a category.[3] The reason why it seems anything but absurd to place Chomsky in this category can be shown by a closer look at his work, which is more than impressive on both a quantitative and qualitative level. On a quantitative level, it can be stated that already in 2005 Chomsky published more than 80 books, hundreds of articles and countless speeches - at this point I refer to remarks in an anthology published by James McGilvray in 2005, which is why the numbers may have increased considerably (McGilvray, 2005, p. 1). The categorization of Chomsky as someone who comes very close to the ideal of a polymath, however, raises another extremely interesting question, which is of particular relevance for the further considerations. On a general level, it seems evident by which characteristics a polymath is concretely distinguished: A wide-ranging knowledge that extends beyond the boundaries of individual disciplines (CUP, 2023).[4] However, another far more significant question which arises following this minimal definition is (and this question seems more important than ever against the background of the differentiation of the sciences that prevails today): Are the boundaries that define the various fields of knowledge really of much importance from the polymath's perspective? Or, more precisely, are the various fields of knowledge in any way interrelated from the polymath's perspective?

The previous considerations seem to be particularly relevant if one takes a closer look not only at the *quantitative* but also at the *qualitative* level of Chomsky's work. On this level, it becomes clear why the characterization of Chomsky as a modern form of polymath is by no means an exaggeration. Whether one considers Chomsky's linguistic work or his political engagement, again and again it becomes apparent that the motivation behind Chomsky's research is shaped by an image of human nature that has influenced his political views in a significant way. Or as James McGilvray aptly puts it with regard to the question of the extent to which the various disciplines with which Chomsky dealt in the course of his life are connected:

> A person's intellectual work as a scientist need not be connected to his or her political views - there is no reason, for instance, that a biochemist's scientific work should have

[3] That Chomsky can justifiably be placed in this category is also emphasized by Emran Feroz (Chomsky & Feroz 2018: 7ff.).
[4] CUP = Cambridge University Press.

> anything to do with her neoliberal views. But Chomsky's linguistics and his political views seem to be special cases, particularly when one takes into account his philosophical/ scientific work on the human mind and human nature. One reason to look for connections and perhaps even a degree of convergence in all three areas of Chomsky's work is that each has, in its own way, something to say about human beings. More narrowly, each focuses on distinctive features of human beings - on language, a biologically unique mental faculty; on our distinctive natures and minds with their limited but biologically unparalleled intellectual capacities for dealing with both practical and scientific problems; and on those apparently unique forms of social organization that we think of variously as polities, communities, societies, and/or cultures. No other organism creates for itself organized groups of non-kin individuals in ways that allow for cooperative, non-contact, coordinated ways to meet needs and solve problems (McGilvray, 2005, p. 7-8).

First, McGilvray justifiably draws attention to the fact that it can be wrong - or, as could also be argued: arbitrary - to link a scientist's work to his or her political views. It would thus seem questionable, as implied by McGilvray's example, to attempt to postulate an inevitable connection between a scientist's neoliberal views and his or her biochemical research (McGilvray, 2005, p. 7-8).

In Chomsky's case, as McGilvray rightly points out, this question arises under different circumstances: Chomsky's linguistic and scientific works as well as his philosophical and political interventions seem to be linked by a very fundamental question: The question of human nature (McGilvray, 2005, p. 7-8). By means of his linguistic research, it could be argued, Chomsky has investigated human language and thus at the same time - as will be explained in more detail later on - a unique ability that is a key to understanding why humans are to be regarded as creative and freedom-seeking creatures (Chomsky, 2005, p. 263).

Against the background of this consideration, Chomsky's research at the same time points to a deeper aspect which concerns human nature in general: the creative use of the linguistic capacities shows in all clarity that human nature - something which can be explained by the human mind - strives for freedom. In other words, by means of his linguistic approach, Chomsky accentuates that human beings

are creative creatures and that the possibility for the greatest possible development of this creative potential depends in no small measure on the prevailing social, political, and historical circumstances (Madarasz & Santos, 2018, p. 1094). To return to McGilvray's quotation at this point, it can first be stated that a connection can certainly be discerned between Chomsky's theoretical arguments with "[...] those apparently unique forms of social organization that we think of variously as polities, communities, societies, and/or cultures" (McGilvray, 2005, p. 8) and his scientific exploration of human nature - especially at the linguistic level.

Günther Grewendorf also substantiates this connection by noting that "(a)lthough Chomsky himself is rather cautious on the question of whether there is a connection between his linguistic research and his political analyses, it is undeniable that his concept of human nature and his view on the innate creativity of language and mind has an influence on his political opinions" (Grewendorf, 2021, p. 19). If in this context there is talk of Chomsky being rather cautious when it comes to the question to what extent there is a connection between his linguistic research - and thus also his exploration of human nature - and his political engagement, then Chomsky is first of all referring to a *logical* level. When asked whether concepts such as "freedom" or "spontaneity," which Chomsky repeatedly uses in the context of his linguistic research, are related to his political views or whether this linkage is rather coincidental/random, Chomsky responds:

> A little of each. It is accidental in that the way these concepts arise in the study of language and the theses they sustain are appropriate or inappropriate, true or false, quite independently of politics. In that sense, it is independent. And similarly, in my opinion, a Marxist-anarchist perspective is justified quite apart from anything that may happen in linguistics. So that in that sense they are logically independent (Chomsky, 1969).[5]

When Chomsky assumes a *logical independence of* linguistic and political terminology, he first wants to draw attention to the fact that these terms derive their specific meanings from very specific contexts - that is: the scientific examination of linguistic phenomena or political facts. Thus, according to Chomsky, the postulates of an anarchist perspective, to

[5] The online version of the *New Left Review* is not paginated, so the page numbers in the bibliography are not included in the text citation.

which Chomsky himself also professes, can receive their own justification quite independently of what happens in linguistic research. In the same way, according to Chomsky, it is the other way around: the findings of linguistic research (and, of course, of other fields of research) can initially have their truth content independently of political discourses (Chomsky, 1969).

Besides this *logical independence,* however, there may well be a *loose connection* (Chomsky, 1969) between the findings of linguistic research in particular (and the study of human nature in general) and political facts. This linkage, according to Chomsky, is initially based on his personal conviction that "[...] anyone's political ideas or their ideas of social organization must be ultimately rooted in some concept of human nature and human needs" (Chomsky, 1969). According to Chomsky, one of these fundamental human needs is the ability and desire to express one's own creative potentials - here it is worth quoting Chomsky again:

> Now my own feeling is that the fundamental human capacity is the capacity and the need for creative self-expression, for free control of all aspects of one's life and thought. One particularly crucial realization of this capacity is the creative use of language as a free instrument of thought and expression. Now having this view of human nature and human needs, one tries to think about the modes of social organization that would permit the freest and fullest development of the individual, of each individual's potentialities in whatever direction they might take, that would permit him to be fully human in the sense of having the greatest possible scope for his freedom and initiative (Chomsky, 1969).

For Chomsky - an aspect that will be explained in more detail - human language is not only a manifestation of the ability and the need for the creative expression of one's own self, but also shows in all clarity why social conditions are needed in which human nature can unfold in the freest possible way (Chomsky, 1969). For Chomsky, the question of human freedom and the concomitant unfolding of individual dispositions is thus inextricably linked to the nature of the respective social and institutional circumstances by which a specific form of society is characterized. Emerging from this consideration, Chomsky concedes the possibility that a social science can be developed which is based on an empirically grounded conception of human nature:

> Moving along in this direction, one might actually develop a social science in which a concept of social organization is related to a concept of human nature which is empirically well-founded and which in some fashion leads even to value judgements about what form society should take, how it should change and how it should be reconstructed. I want to emphasize again that fundamentally the two are logically independent, but one can draw a sort of loose connection. This connection has been made occasionally (Chomsky, 1969).

Against the background of the considerations explained above, it seems to make sense to concretize Chomsky's conception of human nature in the following in order to discuss in a further step which kind of socio-political organization proves to be most suitable according to Chomsky's conception, in order to do justice to human needs - and thus also to human nature - in the most meaningful way possible.

4. Chomsky's Conception of Human Nature or: Why Limitations are constitutive for Human Freedom.

I have already explained how Chomsky's linguistic research has contributed to his view of human beings as creatures capable of creativity. In a second step, I pursued the question as to what extent this circumstance leads to the view that between Chomsky's conception of human nature and his political-theoretical considerations a - possible, though not necessarily logical - connection can be discerned. In the following, it seems to make sense to examine in more detail what *(I) Chomsky understands by creativity and (II) why the human potential for creativity leads Chomsky to the assumption that human beings are to be regarded as creatures striving for freedom, whose potentials can only be best developed when socially repressive institutions are abolished* (Grewendorf, 2021, p. 19).

In the introduction to this paper, I already pointed out that for Chomsky the question of the possibility of a more just and egalitarian world must always take into account that the attempt to initiate social change depends on people, as political actors, acting under specific historical and social conditions. In other words, the normative notion of a world characterized by freedom and equality can only find its possible realization by acknowledging the empirical facts (Chomsky, 1978). If we consider this idea more closely, the following can be concluded: The will to initiate social change not only requires creativity, but must

also take into account the limits - i.e., the social circumstances - within which this change has to take place. As noted earlier, the creativity of language within Chomsky's theory suggests that humans are creatures striving for freedom (Madarasz & Santos, 2018, p. 1094). However, the human potential for creativity - even if this may sound paradoxical at first - is only favoured by the fact of limitation. In other words, without limits there is no creativity (Chomsky, 1997, p. 11).

To understand this point in more detail, it is worthwhile - even if this will not be the main focus in the following - to take a closer look at Chomsky's linguistic theorizing. First of all, Chomsky, significantly influenced by Wilhelm von Humboldt's philosophy of language, starts from the postulate that the creativity of human language leads to conclusions not only with regard to general human creativity but also with regard to socio-political issues (Chomsky, 1969). However, Chomsky clarifies that the use of creativity is inseparable from specific limits within which creativity can only unfold, referring to Humboldt's view that the use of language always implies at the same time that an *infinite use of finite means* takes place (Chomsky, 2016a, p. 7). A question that may inevitably arise at this point is what Chomsky specifically understands by (I) *infinite use* and (II) *finite means*.

As will be shown in the following, by answering these two questions it does not only become clear how the human language faculty functions according to Chomsky's view, but beyond that also what Chomsky concretely understands by the term creativity. When Chomsky speaks of *infinite use,* he is at the same time hinting at something that is to be regarded as constitutive of human creativity. Creativity can be regarded as a phenomenon which is to be considered as formative for the uniqueness of human existence and which is applied in manifold situations. In Chomsky's view, creative behaviour is most evident in everyday language practices when people are challenged to make original statements through the use of linguistic means or to decipher possibly more complex linguistic remarks of other people (Wilkin, 1999, p. 197). The *original statements,* which are made by means of linguistic capacities, refer in this context to what was previously called *infinite use.* To give an example at this point: Human language and the creativity expressed in the use of human language can produce a variety – or infinity - of semantics. By means of language, for example, not only more complex political theories can be developed, but also detective stories. This infinity of semantics points to the creative aspect

of language. The *infinite use* of language, however, takes place on the basis of *finite means* - which brings us directly to the core essence of Chomsky's linguistic theory, *universal grammar*: language, together with the variety/infinity of complex semantics it is capable of generating, is based on universal grammatical structures which represent the basis of all human languages. These grammatical structures are in turn present in the human mind before any form of language is acquired at all (Chomsky, 1997, p. 11). The grammatical structures that are present in the human mind - and which all humans share on a universal level - thus represent the *finite means,* since they delimit on what basis the infinite and creative use of human language can take place (Chomsky, 1997, p. 11). At this point, it becomes all the more clear - even if this has only been dealt with in broad strokes before and does not do justice to the complexity of Chomsky's linguistic research - to what extent Chomsky's exploration of human language in particular provides a key to understand Chomsky's conception of human creativity in general. Here it is worth citing Chomsky himself:

> I think that true creativity means free action within the framework of a system of rules. In art, for instance, if a person just throws cans of paint randomly at a wall, with no rules at all, no structure, that is not artistic creativity, whatever else it may be. It is a commonplace of aesthetic theory that creativity involves action that takes place within a framework of rules, but is not narrowly determined either by the rules or by external stimuli. It is only when you have the combination of freedom and constraint that the question of creativity arises. I would like to assume on the basis of fact and hope on the basis of confidence in the human species that there are innate structures of mind. If there are not, if humans are just plastic and random organisms, then they are fit subjects for the shaping of behavior. If humans only become as they are by random changes, then why not control that randomness by the state authority or the behaviorist technologist or anything else? Naturally I hope that it will turn out that there are intrinsic structures determining human need and the fulfillment of human need (Chomsky, 1969).

Upon closer examination of this passage, two essential aspects emerge. These aspects do not only answer the question of how human creativity is defined within Chomsky's theoretical framework, but they also demonstrate why it is a crucial indication that humans are essentially

free beings who require liberation from social institutions to reach their full potential.

In the quoted passage, Chomsky uses his theory of universal grammar to explain the broader concept of human creativity. This understanding is crucial in recognizing why the desire for freedom is a fundamental aspect of human nature. Chomsky argues that creativity is essentially an act of freedom - applied to Chomsky's linguistic theory: the creative (*infinite*) use of language - which itself takes place within a system of rules - again applied to Chomsky's linguistic theory: the grammatical structures as *finite means* (Chomsky, 1969/Chomsky, 1997, p. 11).

As the passage quoted above shows, however, Chomsky does not simply assume that the unfolding of human creativity is limited by specifically prevailing rules, but rather *that those limits are constitutive of the unfolding of human creativity in the first place* (Chomsky, 1969). Chomsky also makes this point with reference to aesthetic theorizing: throwing paint cans at a wall indiscriminately could hardly be considered a genuinely creative act. Rather, the creative act - and thus also the moment of freedom expressed in this creative act - takes place within specific rules and structures. In short, Chomsky correctly points out that the question of human creativity can only be meaningfully posed against the background of the interplay between freedom and constraint (Chomsky, 1969). According to Chomsky's definition of human creativity, it is important to consider why human beings have a strong desire for freedom. Chomsky argues that repressive social institutions can hinder human development and hence believes that understanding the true nature of human beings is key to finding the answer to this question.

The passage quoted above shows that Chomsky's perspective on human nature differs from the behaviourist theory. Chomsky believes that humans have innate structures and needs, such as grammatical structures, which shape the human mind according to his theory of universal grammar. On the other hand, the behaviourist paradigm suggests that humans are entirely malleable and can be guided in specific directions by external influences. Without acknowledging innate structures and needs, the behaviourist theory leads to this conclusion. According to Chomsky, this would in turn entail the danger that repressive state institutions would take advantage of the fact of this malleability in order to control people and move them in a direction that corresponds to their own interests (Chomsky, 1969). The mind's

inner structures, although they may impose limitations, are essential for enabling individuals to fully express their freedom and creativity. This is crucial for people to become active and willing agents of social change, rather than passive individuals who are moulded by external influences - a central thesis of behaviourism (Wilkin, 1999 p. 196).

4.1. Freedom Against Power - The Sociopolitical Implications of Chomsky's View of Human Nature

Based on the previously discussed assumption that between Chomsky's linguistic research, his political-theoretical works as well as his activist commitment no compellingly logical, but nevertheless a - as Chomsky puts it - loose connection can be discerned (Chomsky, 1969), in the following it will be examined in more detail which form of social organization seems to be most conducive to human nature according to Chomsky's view. As mentioned earlier, Chomsky's view of human nature is build on a clear distinction from behaviourist - or optionally: empiricist - theory. If one wants to understand human beings as essentially free and creative beings, the behaviourist view of human nature must be clearly rejected - not least because such a view of human beings as a blank sheet, which has no innate mental structures and needs, could give social power apparatuses a reason to subjugate people by means of manipulation and indoctrination (Grewendorf, 2006, 184).

As I have already addressed in the introduction, the idea that political commitment guided by values should not ignore the *facts* - understood as the social, political, and institutional circumstances toward whose transformation this very commitment is directed - plays a significant role in Chomsky's outlook (Chomsky, 1978). Or, as has also been formulated with reference to Bauman: The engagement with contemporary social problems or issues should *ideally* be characterized by the spirit of the utopian (Bauman, 1976, p. 13).

In his work *Powers and Prospects,* Chomsky draws attention to an interesting differentiation between *goals* and *visions.* In this regard, Chomsky states:

> By visions, I mean the conception of a future society that animates what we actually do, a society in which a decent human being might want to live. By goals, I mean the choices and tasks that are within reach, that we will pursue

> one way or another guided by a vision that may be distant and hazy (Chomsky, 1996, p. 107).

Visions, if one reads this passage carefully, thus represent the political commitment guided by values. Or to speak with Bauman: That state of society imagined as utopian in light of which the attempt to change social conditions takes place (Bauman, 1976, p. 13). With the term *goal,* Chomsky refers to the fact that these visions cannot necessarily be realized immediately, but rather that individual decisions are required which are directly realizable on the political level. These decisions, however, should always be characterized by the spirit of a certain social vision or utopia (Chomsky, 1996, p. 107). At this point, Chomsky draws attention to the fact that political engagement should always recognize the facticity of the social framework within which this engagement takes place (Chomsky, 1978). What does Chomsky's vision of an ideal society, which best meets the needs of human nature, look like in concrete terms?

In the further course of his remarks, Chomsky draws attention to the fact that his personal visions of an ideal society "[...] are fairly traditional anarchist ones, with origins in the Enlightenment and classical liberalism" (Chomsky, 1996, p. 108). When Chomsky points out that his vision of anarchism does not only have its roots in the Enlightenment but also in classical liberalism, Chomsky does not mean - this clarification is important - ideologically distorted forms of liberalism characteristic of the modern capitalist system (Chomsky, 1996, p. 108).

Chomsky's main concern is to challenge any type of authority that may hinder the natural growth of human beings. He rightly notes that this is the fundamental principle of liberalism, which is a key element of his vision for a fairer and more equitable society based on anarchism.

> When I speak of classical liberalism, I mean the ideas that were swept away, in considerable measure, by the rising tides of state capitalist autocracy. These ideas survived (or were reinvented) in various forms in the culture of resistance to the new forms of oppression, serving as an animating vision for popular struggles that have considerably expanded the scope of freedom, justice, and rights. They were also taken up, adapted, and developed within libertarian left currents. According to this anarchist vision, any structure of hierarchy and authority carries a

> heavy burden of justification, whether it involves personal relations or a larger social order. If it cannot bear that burden - sometimes it can - then it is illegitimate and should be dismantled. When honestly posed and squarely faced, that challenge can rarely be sustained. Genuine libertarians have their work cut out for them (Chomsky, 1996, p. 111).

Chomsky's anarchist vision is - as Wilkin shows, this position can also be called a form of *libertarian socialism* (Wilkin, 1997, p. 151) - characterized by a very specific understanding of freedom. This may illustrate in particular why Chomsky points out that his vision of an anarchist society is to be located within classical liberalism. According to this worldview, any form of hierarchical and authoritarian structure bears the burden of justification. If it cannot meaningfully legitimize its own authority, the corresponding authoritarian and hierarchical structures need to be abolished (Chomsky, 1996, p. 111). In Chomsky's view, authoritarian and hierarchical structures are not limited to authoritarian state systems, but can also be found in wage dependency - common in today's Western societies - which, in Chomsky's view, also resembles forms of slavery in certain cases (Chomsky, 2016b). Chomsky's anarchist vision is defined by the idea that society should allow individuals to develop themselves without authoritarian structures and the pursuit of accumulation. Chomsky cites John Dewey and Bertrand Russell as influential thinkers, but also acknowledges the impact of Rousseau, Willhelm von Humboldt, and Kant on his concept of freedom. The focus should be on promoting the freedom and equality of individuals rather than enforcing rules and accumulating power (Chomsky, 1996, p. 116; Grewendorf, 2006, p. 189).

To connect back to previous ideas, it's worth noting again that Chomsky's vision of a society based on anarchist/libertarian-socialist principles is not necessarily linked to his scientific and theoretical views on human nature. However, his ideas do stem from his belief in the importance of human freedom and creativity as essential needs. It is true that even in capitalist societies, there are opportunities for human creativity to flourish. However, it is important to acknowledge one of Chomsky's key criticisms of capitalism: the unequal distribution of social power means that only those with access to material resources have the freedom and ability to fully develop their creative potential. This issue of inequality is a significant problem within the capitalist system (Wilkin, 1997, p. 158).

5. Truth and Power - The Responsibility of Intellectuals

In 2022, protests by rail workers' unions broke out across Great Britain, sparked by the demand for higher wages due to the rising costs of living (Robinson, 2023). According to an analysis by Nathan J. Robinson in *Current Affairs* magazine, the British government's response to the protests was particularly interesting. Initially, the government's offers to the unions were not satisfactory, including additional work on Sundays. As a result, the workers went on strike, causing significant disruptions in British rail traffic, resulting in many train cancellations. Much more interesting, however - although not surprising - is what the British government under Prime Minister Rishi Sunak tried to do in the following days. After Sunak publicly announced - shortly before Christmas - that those union protests were making life more difficult for millions of people in Britain, the media landscape joined in the chorus of accusations - for example, an oncologist reported that union strikes were costing lives (Robinson, 2023). In the further course of his analysis, Robinson comes to the conclusion that this is a phenomenon that often occurs when established power structures are confronted with social discontent and are called into question: the principle of blame reversal.

The goal is to delegitimize specific protests, whether against racism, climate change, or for fairer wages. On closer examination, this strategy is often characterized by a similar pattern. As Robinson points out, the attempt is

> [...] to get people to focus on negative effects of the protests rather than the factors that caused them, so that protesters can be blamed for something that is ultimately the fault of those who created the intolerable conditions to which protests are a response. Learn to spot this tendency so that whenever you see it, you can point the finger at those who actually deserve blame (Robinson, 2023).

In order to recognize the tendency of this strategy, however, it is necessary to remember what Chomsky has set out in his essay *The Responsibility of Intellectuals* in an impressive and, from an analytical point of view, incomparable way. According to Chomsky, the responsibility of intellectuals, due to their privileged position, is "[...] to expose the lies of governments, to analyze actions according to their causes and motives and often hidden intentions" (Chomsky, 2017, p. 15).[6]

[6] No pagination. Page 15 refers to the actual number of the page of the displayed document.

In favour of focusing on the content, I will refrain from a further contextualization of Chomsky's seminal essay and only analyze Chomsky's statement about the responsibility of intellectuals in more detail. Chomsky's statement that the privileged position of intellectuals obliges them to expose any lies that governments may tell and to bring to light the true intentions that shape the actions of specific political decision-makers is based on a fundamental conviction that Chomsky repeatedly emphasized in the course of his work: Because of the privileges enjoyed by the intellectual classes in Western democracies, their main task should be "[...] to seek the truth lying hidden behind the veil of distortion and misrepresentation, ideology and class interest" (Chomsky, 2017, p. 15). To uncover the truth is to expose those ideologies and misrepresentations that serve the class interests and maintenance of power of the respective ruling political and economic elites. Applied to the example of the British trade unions, this means, as Robinson pointedly puts it, recognizing that

> (i)f the government denies workers decent working conditions and fair pay, and the workers go on strike, and the strikes mean people can't get to work or to the doctor's office, and then someone *dies* because they couldn't take a train when they really needed to, it is a biased conclusion to say that the rail workers are the cause of the death. Surely the one responsible is the party who was making the *unreasonable* demand (the government) and thereby sparking a strike (Robinson, 2023).

The reason I have previously thematized Robinson's analysis of the rail strikes in Britain is that Robinson provides a wonderful example of what Chomsky's normative view suggests should be the core function of intellectuals. Specifically, in this case, it would be to expose that it is not the protesters who are to blame for the infrastructure breakdown, but the government - more specifically, Sunak's government - which has been unwilling to pay higher wages and is, consequently, attempting to deflect its own blame through ideological distortions (Robinson, 2023).

6. Is a Change possible? - The 21st Century as a new Challenge for Human Freedom

At this point, a first basic prerequisite can be named, which must be given, so that a social change of the - as formulated at the beginning -

human experiment can take place in a positive direction: Those people, i.e. above all the intellectuals, who have the freedom and privileges, have at the same time the moral responsibility to ensure that the human experiment (Chomsky, 2020) succeeds, instead of making themselves compliant servants of political power interests (Gendzier, 2005, p. 261). Chomsky's conception of an anarchist society in which illegitimate forms of authority are largely abolished thus presupposes first of all that those illusions and ideologies which are instrumentalized by political power apparatuses in favour of their own legitimation are uncovered. Inextricably linked to this is the need for active voluntarism, which leads to collectively organized forms of protest for a fairer and freer world (Gendzier, 2005, p. 262). However, as already touched upon in the introduction, humanity increasingly seems to be confronted with a *polycrisis* - to use the term coined by Tooze once again (Tooze, 2022). The changing climate and, not least, the war in Ukraine have shown that humanity seems to be advancing ever closer to its own destruction: be it in the form of a nuclear catastrophe or in the form of a complete climate collapse. At the same time, oil and gas companies have been able to reap massive profits, as fossil fuels are increasingly becoming a resource in demand, especially against the backdrop of sanctions against Russia. Furthermore, it should be pointed out at this point that the war in Ukraine itself is being waged with fossil fuels (Polychroniou, 2022). All these developments are inextricably linked to an impoverishment of broad segments of the population worldwide, which have to struggle with the massive energy costs (Polychroniou, 2022). Against the background of these global development processes, Chomsky's vision of a free and egalitarian form of society (Chomsky, 1996, p. 116), in which people can bring their own creativity to fruition, seems to have receded into the distant future. Rather, against the background of today's world situation, it is necessary, to put it with Walter Benjamin, to no longer think of the great utopias, but to pull the emergency brake, so that the global development processes do not end in a total catastrophe (Löwy, 1985, p. 55). But is the situation really that hopeless?

At this point, it is worthwhile to recur to the *dialectic of human potential* mentioned at the beginning. That imagined extraterrestrial observer, whom Chomsky repeatedly invokes as a thought experiment, may, against the background of the current world situation, ask himself more than ever why the human species seems to be such a blatant "biological error" (Chomsky, 2003, p. 5). However, as a closer analysis of Chomsky's thought experiment also revealed, the astonishment of

the extraterrestrial observer regarding the "biological error" by which the human condition is characterized is virtually constitutive for an explanation of the *dialectic of human potential*. Thus the reason for the alien's astonishment can be traced back to the fact that the actions of mankind stand in an *ostensible* contrast to the high intellectual capacities which are usually attested to the human species. This contrast is to be classified as *ostensible*, however, because human beings can use their own abilities/potentials both for the promotion of social progress or for the promotion of regressive developments. Against the background of these considerations, Chomsky states with regard to the global situation in the 21st century:

> Evolution of higher intelligence is an intriguing scientific problem. It is even possible that we are the only species in the accessible universe to have evolved what we call higher intelligence, or at least to have sustained it without self-destruction. Yet. As for why the existential crises that may soon end sustainable life on Earth receive far too little attention, one can think of many possible reasons. There is also a deeper question lingering in the not too remote background. The question burst into consciousness with dramatic intensity 77 years ago, on August 6, 1945. Or should have. On that fateful day we learned that human intelligence had registered a grand achievement. It had devised the means to destroy everything. Not quite yet, in fact, though it was clear that further technological progress would soon reach that point. It did, in 1952, when the U.S. exploded the first thermonuclear weapon, and the Doomsday Clock advanced to two minutes to midnight. It did not become that close to terminal disaster again until Trump's term, then moving on to seconds as analysts abandoned minutes. The question that arose with stark clarity 77 years ago was whether human moral intelligence could rise to the level where it could control the impulse to destruction. Can the gap be overcome? The record so far is not promising. The game is not over unless we choose to end it. The choice is unavoidable. How humans will decide is by far the most important question that has arisen in the brief sojourn of humans on Earth. We will soon provide the answer (Chomsky/Polychroniou, 2022).

Against the background of important historical key dates, such as the dropping of the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki - dates on

which it became more than evident that mankind has the potential for its own destruction - Chomsky once again makes it unmistakably clear that the fate of humanity is by no means a foregone conclusion. When Chomsky asks whether that gap can be overcome, he is referring to the discrepancy between the high cognitive capacities of the human species and the practical, i.e. self-destructive, behaviour that characterizes human beings. Even if the past is not able to provide a particularly great reason for hope, the "[...] game [...] is not over unless we choose to end it" (Chomsky/Polychroniou, 2022), as Chomsky aptly puts it. According to Chomsky, the possibility of *another world* - and thus also the possibility of change - is accordingly still quite imaginable. For this reason, the human experiment, and therein lies the hope, can by no means be considered over, but is, in Chomsky's words "[...] both ominous in portent and bright with hopes for a better future" (Chomsky, 2020).

The worldwide protests for a higher level of social justice, peace, and a more climate protection bear witness to such a possibility. Many of these protests are shaped by the *vision* of a freer and more just world as detailed by Chomsky (Chomsky, 1996, p. 108). However, the actions of the protesters also show that - in order to come closer to the *vision* of a freer and more just world in the first place - it is necessary to achieve *short-term goals*, which can partly also stand in contrast to such visions, since, again speaking with Benjamin, it is first a matter of pulling the emergency brake in order to avoid an absolute catastrophe (Löwy, 1985, p. 55). For example, certain measures, which are necessary to combat climate change, could have a repressive effect, in that state governments interfere with the freedoms of the population. At the same time, however, these measures are necessary to preserve the freedoms of future generations. In other words, in order *to come closer to the vision of a freer and fairer world, it is sometimes necessary to achieve goals that seem contrary to this vision* - an important aspect to which Chomsky aptly draws attention (Chomsky, 1996, p. 111-112).

Towards the end of his *Problems of Knowledge and Freedom,* Chomsky quotes the following words from the British philosopher and mathematician Bertrand Russell:

> Meantime, the world in which we exist has other aims. But it will pass away, burned up in the fire of its own hot passions; and from its ashes will spring a new and younger

> world, full of fresh hope, with the light of morning in its eyes (Chomsky, 1971, p. 111).

This new world, which will one day arise from the ashes of the present world, depends on the present, active and voluntaristic engagement of people. Before Chomsky quotes Russell, Chomsky precisely expresses - also referring to Russell - that such a world is indeed possible:

> Yet it would be tragic if those who are fortunate enough to live in the advanced societies of the West were to forget or abandon the hope that our world can be transformed to "a world in which the creative spirit is alive, in which life is an adventure full of hope and joy, based rather upon the impulse to construct than upon the desire to retain what we possess or to seize what is possessed by others" (Chomsky, 1971, p. 110-111).

Against the background of these considerations the assumption arises that Chomsky's thought experiment concerning the perspective of the extraterrestrial, who looks with astonishment at planet earth, can also be provided with a completely different reading: Rather than interpreting the extraterrestrial perspective as neutral and separate from our own, it could be seen as a normative stance that human beings themselves are capable of adopting. This perspective is crucial for considering the previously mentioned possibility of another world.

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