

Breaking Out of the Cage and Destroying Our Jailers

James Herod

June 1999

June 1999

"Some of the rural workers in Brazil have an interesting slogan. They say their immediate task is 'expanding the floor of the cage.' They understand that they're trapped inside a cage, but realize that protecting it when it's under attack from even worse predators on the outside, and extending the limits of what the cage will allow, are both essential preliminaries to dismantling it. If they attack the cage directly when they're so vulnerable, they'll get murdered."

– Noam Chomsky, *The Common Good* (Interviews with David Barsamian), Odonian Press, 1998, p.85

There is a terrible assumption buried here, namely that the cage protects the workers from murder. This is glaringly false. Workers are being murdered by the millions all over the world, *inside the cage*. The anecdote throws up a false image in other ways as well. The predators are not outside the cage, they, and their practices, *are* the cage. The cage itself is lethal. And when we realize that the cage is as large as the world, and that there is no longer any outside to escape to, then we can see that the only way to keep ourselves from being murdered, or otherwise brutalized and oppressed, is to destroy the cage itself. The cage is not made with metal bars, however, but with people. It consists of real live people who use various means to constrain others. Destroying the cage does not necessarily mean killing these people, but only destroying their ability to function as jailors. Picture a community of people, and intermingling among them are businessmen who say they own everything but that they will offer money to anyone who wants to work for them, armed guards who beat or shoot anyone who actively rejects this arrangement, schoolmasters who instill debilitating ideas, usurers who induce workers to borrow money, priests who preach a fatalistic acceptance of things as they are, entertainers who seduce workers to buy fun, counselors who try to adjust workers to their suffering, and politicians who persuade workers to depend on them to fix things. This is the cage. It should not be protected, but attacked, at every conceivable point and at every conceivable opportunity.

In the same interview cited above Chomsky also said:

"When you eliminate the one institutional structure in which people can participate to some extent – namely the government – you're simply handing over power to unaccountable private tyrannies that

are much worse. So you have to make use of the state, all the time recognizing that you ultimately want to eliminate it."

– Noam Chomsky, *The Common Good*, Odonian Press, 1998, p. 85

Marx also thought that workers should use the government to improve their lives, to win bans on child labor, to get shorter work weeks, and so forth. He argued that proletarians would be foolish not to organize themselves into a political party to capture the state and then use it to overthrow the bourgeoisie. Bakunin and other anarchists disagreed. They wanted to bypass the government and strike directly for what they wanted. This is the dispute that split the First International. The Marxists won, and the anti-capitalist struggle veered off into social democracy and then Leninism: the two main versions of the two-stage strategy – first capture the state, and then destroy capitalism and establish communism. It is now 130 years later and we should be able to evaluate the strategy. Did it work?

Take the OSHA (Occupational Safety and Health Administration) regulations which Chomsky discusses (in the interview published in the last issue of *Anarcho-Syndicalist Review*, to which this article is a response). He admits right off that the government didn't want to set up OSHA but was forced to [in this case by the New Left and the labor and civil rights movements in the sixties], and that "It doesn't enforce them [OSHA regulations] very much, but sometimes it's forced to enforce them." He argues that activists and workers have no moral choice but to use these regulations to save lives. But this sort of misses the point. Think of all the lives that were *lost* because workers have depended on the government to protect them. Think of all the strikes, to force the government to enforce the laws, that did *not* happen. Think of all the time and energy thousands of workers and militants had to spend to get the laws in the first place, and then of all the time and energy it takes to get the government to enforce the laws, to stop them from packing OSHA with pro-business administrators who have no intention of enforcing the laws, and to keep politicians from getting elected who want to abolish OSHA outright.

And then think of what might have been accomplished if a different strategy altogether had been followed, especially if we look at this historically. In the nearly 130 years since the split in the First International in 1872, all we have to show for our struggles, the struggles of millions of radicals over many generations (to stick to the one case of occupational safety, but the same could be said of dozens of other issues, like the need for an unpolluted environment, safe food, help for endangered species, healthy children, civil rights, shorter work weeks) are a few weak government regulations, in a few rich countries, about safety in the workplace, which are almost never enforced and are usually erased from the books as soon as pressure eases up a bit. We are nowhere close to real workers control over the workplace, nowhere close to abolishing wage-slavery altogether, nowhere close to destroying capitalism, nowhere close to dismantling the state, nowhere close to establishing communism (anarchism, freedom, democracy).

So it is not nearly enough to ask, as Chomsky does, "Shall we refuse to use the mechanisms that are available to save people's lives ...?" Nor is it enough to realize that the mechanisms are available in the first place because workers forced the government to set them up. We have to realize that they are there also because radicals were committed to the particular strategy of trying to use the state to achieve radical aims. The 'mechanisms' existing at present resulted from that strategy. They didn't just happen, by themselves.

Has this strategy really worked? As far as I am concerned, the answer has to be a resounding NO! Both versions of the statist strategy failed miserably to overthrow capitalism, Leninism spectacularly

so. Even the minimal welfare and protections that have been gained by means of the statist strategy, in the core capitalist countries (and precious few protections or gains were *ever* achieved in the rest of the world), were only possible because of the transfer of great quantities of wealth from the rest of the world to the rich countries. Without this subsidy, it is doubtful that European and American workers could ever have imposed even weak occupational safety laws on their governments. Considered worldwide therefore, even the successes of the so-called welfare state (social democracy) are an illusion. Moreover, opposition movements in core countries have had virtually no effect on the foreign policies of the those countries. For the most part they have not even tried, focusing instead on getting welfare laws passed within their own nations, ignoring capitalism's inter-nation initiatives. These laws are now (for the past twenty years) being stripped off the books, under conditions of greater concentration of capital, of increased global competition among bigger corporations, increased global organization of the ruling class, weakened labor movements, and weakened national governments (that is, under the global capitalist offensive known as 'neoliberalism').

If instead of trying to use the state for the past 130 years (or 150 if we date the strategy from the failed revolutions of 1848, which is probably more accurate), workers, anti-capitalists, and radicals had been striking directly for control over the workplace through workplace assemblies, striking directly to replace the decision-making apparatuses of the bourgeois state with community control through neighborhood assemblies, striking directly to overcome wage-slavery by organizing cooperative labor (which is not bought or sold), striking directly to destroy the isolation of individuals through household assemblies (expanded households of 100-200 people), and striking directly to curtail world trade by defending local markets, then I think that by now we could have destroyed capitalism and created a free society. Instead, we are watching the world, and humanity along with it, being destroyed before our very eyes.

Thus the wrong turn taken by radicals in the middle of the nineteenth century holds great significance for me. I will not attempt to account for or explain the wrong turn, but merely to note it. It does mean though, at least to me, that *now*, for radicals coming up to the year 2000, questions of strategy are of utmost importance and should be at the center of our discussions, and should be studied seriously.

Apparently though, Chomsky does not think that there is anything much to study with regard to strategy. He has sometimes replied, when asked about strategy, with a three word formula: educate, organize, act. He assumes, wrongly, that this is unproblematic, that there is general agreement as to the substance of these three magic words. We might note that the slogan could apply equally as well to the Klu Klux Klan, corporate executives, born-again Christians, right-wing Muslims, or Liberals, all of whom educate, organize, and act. Obviously, what counts is the *program*, which is what we need to be debating (and the program of course cannot be separated from the means to achieve it). Chomsky's audiences however usually consist of an amalgam of "progressives" – anarchists, social democrats, left liberals, and probably a few leninists and trotskyists – who do share, broadly speaking, a certain program, but disagree about how to achieve it. Just to mention two of the historical debates that have split these groups: (1) the debate between social democrats and leninists over whether to capture the state through elections or through armed struggle (in fact, it is the disagreement about strategy which separates these tendencies in the first place), and (2) the debate among anarchists over whether to focus on workplace or community organizing (the anarcho-syndicalists vs. the anarcho-communists). There are many more such issues.

Chomsky sort of bypasses all these disagreements. He takes, shall we say, a pluralist stance toward strategy. "You've got to do all these things at once," he says. "They're not really alternatives." He does

not think they are mutually exclusive. Thus we don't really have to study very seriously whether one strategy is better than another, or whether one strategy fails whereas another succeeds. Let's just do everything at once. So let's endorse the 'living wage campaigns' and the wobblies too.

The trouble with this is that most of the energy of radicals at present is being spent on projects that don't threaten capitalism in the least, and the living wage campaign is a perfect example. The ruling class works round the clock, against projects that do threaten it, to water them down and co-op them (or else destroy them in some other way, financially or physically, for example). The capitalist ruling class has vast resources available for co-opting its enemies, and it is very good at doing so. What usually happens therefore is that harmless projects survive and spread and effective projects (i.e., ones that are dangerous to capitalists) are crushed and disappear. For anti-capitalists to ease up on the critique of reformism, that is, on the criticism of projects and campaigns that shore up rather than undermine the established order, would be suicidal. Even if we were millions stronger than we are, with vastly more abundant resources, we should not follow Chomsky's advice "to do all these things at once" because some things do not work, and do not lead to victory. This is why we need ongoing, serious debates in the anti-capitalist movement about where best to put our energies, especially since our vision of the world we want is intimately linked to strategies that we need to invent to win it. The answer will not be the same for everyone of course, but neither will it be that we will "do all these things at once".

To me the most distressing, indeed stunning, passage in this interview is Chomsky's remarks on wage-slavery. After commenting that all anarchists would like to see wage-slavery overcome, Chomsky says: "But do we really know how to run a society without wage slavery? Maybe we'll discover that it's impossible. I don't think so. But anyone who's not open to that possibility isn't being very serious. We don't know enough about how to run societies. Can a complex social structure – anything that human beings are going to exist with today, with billions of them around, so it's rather complicated – can it exist and function on the principles that anarchists are committed to?"

This is simply too close for comfort to remarks a mainstream sociologist might have made. I thought for a second there he was even going to use that abominable mainstream phrase "complex industrial society", but he used instead a slightly modified version. Whoever says that anarchism absolutely will work, by the way? And are "we", or is anyone, going to "run" a free society, an anarchist society?

Worst of all, however, his remark seems to indicate a rather ambivalent attitude toward the goal, neglects a vast literature devoted to precisely these questions, and ignores the efforts of anarchist social experimentors who have struggled courageously to work these problems out, over many decades, even centuries – thinking, struggles, and experiments that are still going on today, in many places throughout the world. We certainly do know enough, right now, to live free, if it weren't for our oppressors. If he's not convinced that wage-slavery can be overcome (which is synonymous with destroying capitalism), or that anarchy is a feasible arrangement of social life, then what is he fighting for?

We should be thankful to have on our side a world class intellectual who bashes the ruling class every chance he gets, shredding its credibility piece by piece. We are fortunate to have in our corner an indefatigable genius who analyzes every move the ruling class makes, deciphers its every machination, exposes its every lie, reads between every line it publishes, and keeps us informed about what our oppressors are up to. This is what he likes to do and what he does well. He has done this on a worldwide scale in studying US foreign policy, for several decades now, but also with regard to the media, and more recently with regard to domestic policies as well. This is already a tremendous contribution to the revolutionary struggle.

On the other hand, this does not mean we have to agree with everything he says, obviously. One man cannot do everything. It is wrong of us to turn to him for opinions on matters that he has not really studied, because his priorities have been elsewhere, matters relating to anarchist theory, revolutionary strategy, visions of a free life, and numerous other social questions. And if he does make ill-considered remarks about some of these topics, almost always, we might remind ourselves, in off-the-cuff interviews, and not in his more carefully written formal essays, then obviously we have to take issue with him in a serious way, especially if he is broadcasting such ideas all over the world in numerous interviews, speeches, and cheap Odonian pocketbooks.

Fortunately, things are looking up for anarchism. There are many indications that we are in the midst of a worldwide rejection of the statist strategy among opposition movements. Since there is no possibility of organizing globally or even nationally to defeat global corporations and global institutions like the World Trade Organization, militants are inventing ways to defeat them locally, and are thus opening up, for the first time in ages, the possibility of creating anarchy on a world scale.

The Anarchist Library
Anti-Copyright



James Herod
Breaking Out of the Cage and Destroying Our Jailers
June 1999

Published in Anarcho-Syndicalist Review, #26, Fall 1999

theanarchistlibrary.org