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After the first volume on *Monisms and Pluralisms in the History of Political Thought*, the present work aims at further broadening our reflection on the concepts of monism and pluralism beyond Isaiah Berlin's popular dichotomy, while being conscious of how powerfully they penetrated into our language and society. With this purpose the authors of the essays here collected addressed a series of social and political models having monist and/or pluralist connotation, while showing how – in historical terms – the ideal *connection* between pluralism-liberty and monism-lack of it, which is generally taken for granted, becomes more nuanced and problematic.

In this sense, the present work wants to show how just the History of social and political models offers us a series of *diversified pluralisms* and *diversified monisms*. A kind of achievement which might be useful in our time, characterized by a sort of attitude towards easy generalizations.

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Monisms and Pluralisms in the History of Political and Social Models



edited by  
**Andrea Catanzaro**  
**Federica Falchi**  
**Sara Lagi**

Monisms and Pluralisms  
 in the History of Political  
 and Social Models

POLITICAL SCIENCES



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Andrea Catanzaro  
Federica Falchi  
Sara Lagi

# **Monisms and Pluralisms in the History of Political and Social Models**

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## Chapter Thirteen

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# THE PROBLEM OF TRUE MONISM AND FAKE PLURALISM IN NOAM CHOMSKY'S POLITICAL THOUGHT

*Sara Lagi*

### 13.1 INTRODUCING NOAM CHOMSKY: LIBERTARIAN SOCIALIST AND ANARCHIST

Recognized as an internationally prominent linguist, father of Transformational Generative Grammar, Professor emeritus of Linguistics at M.I.T., Noam Chomsky was born in Philadelphia in 1928 into a Jewish Russian family. He is considered a militant and anarchist intellectual, who has, over time, become a point of reference for no-global and radical movements (Barsky 1997; Kinna 2012: 133-134)<sup>1</sup>.

Although he has always rejected the idea of an interconnection between his linguistic theory and his political ideals, it is Marcus Raskin who reminds us that Chomsky's scientific interests in linguistics should be taken seriously into account when analyzing his political thought. Chomsky's linguistic theory,

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<sup>1</sup> In bio and bibliographical terms, a good and reliable research tool for investigating Chomsky's work is the official web-site: [www.chomsky.info](http://www.chomsky.info)

which was systematically elaborated for the first time in his Ph.d. Dissertation entitled *Syntactic Structures* (1955), is based on the idea that the intelligibility of a language is not so much determined by peculiar rules which vary according to the language being considered, as by a deeper structure, a «universal grammar» (Chomsky: 1957; Smith a 2005: 21 f). Raskin thinks that Chomsky's theory on generative transformational grammar and his political view share the common principle of «universality»:

*one side of the Chomsky strip is innateness which presents humanity with the gift of language and therefore of communication. Follow that strip of universality, you will note that there is imprinted on the strip a capacity that allows for rationality and moral action that can catalyze humanity's benign social purpose (Raskin 2014: 9).*

In other terms – according to Raskin – as a linguist, Chomsky theorizes a «universal grammar», as a political militant and thinker he writes and discusses about a universal entity, i.e. mankind who tries to find and carry out a better and just form of society. Raskin's interpretation is – in my opinion – acceptable not only because it catches the ultimate intellectual affinity between the two 'souls' of Chomsky's work, but also because it allows us to better grasp another remarkable aspect: from Chomsky's viewpoint, the creation and consolidation of a just society requires a totally renewed way of communication, an alternative way of delivering information to the people, which should not be conditioned and determined by those with economic and political power, i.e. «the élite domination» (Chomsky 1988). From Chomsky's perspective, an active role in delivering truth instead of manipulated information should be played by intellectuals who therefore should be independent from power. Intellectuals' responsibility should be to «speak the truth and expose lies». It is exactly the idea – clearly inspired by the Enlightenment tradition – Chomsky elaborates in his first relevant work on political theory, published in 1967, entitled *American Power and the New Mandarins*<sup>2</sup>, in which the intellectual is called to speak the truth for those without power against the privileged (Chomsky 1967).

In all of his writings Chomsky uses different terms to describe and indicate the existence of small groups detaining any form of centralized, unaccountable, undemocratic power (economic, political, social): «prosperous few», «the minority of the opulent», «the privileged élite», «the privileged minority», «aristocrats», «masters of mankind»<sup>3</sup>, «established power». Objectively, Chomsky does not provide a fully satisfactory and precise definition of the terms above mentioned; in my opinion, he tends to use them as synonyms. Even if, scien-

<sup>2</sup> This book made Chomsky popular as a representative of the American libertarian Left, involved at that time in a harsh opposition to the Vietnam war.

<sup>3</sup> Chomsky derives this term from Adam Smith's *The Wealth of the Nations* (1776).

tifically speaking, Chomsky fails to delineate them in a more substantial way, we can see that all of them are related to a core political issue to him: what he thinks is the gap between the minority holding the power and the majority cut off from it.

Chomsky refers to the concept and word of pluralism (social, media and political) but never openly to those of monism and political or social models. Yet, I will seek to show how, from Chomsky's work, a discourse emerges not only on pluralism but also on what I call true monism and how this discourse fundamentally includes Chomsky's opposition to the American political and economic model. Such a model, in his opinion, unjustly depicts and represents the U.S. as a Nation of economic, civil, political freedom and plurality, a land of pluralism (social, economic, political, media), while concealing, in his view, the «*élite domination*» over the people. The latter, which as we are going to see takes different shapes, is what I define true monism. I decided to use the adjectives “true” and “fake” in order to better stress Chomsky's opposition to the «*élite domination*» and to a state of things (social, economic, political) that – as I am going to argue – is, in his opinion, only seemingly free and pluralist. With the purpose to comprehend in what sense Chomsky develops a discourse on fake pluralism and true monism, it is necessary for me to sketch out his ideological and political profile.

Chomsky has been defined as libertarian, a supporter of anarcho-syndacalism or simply an anarchist, engaged in the frontal critique of an *élite* monopolizing both wealth and means of communication, and therefore capable, in his opinion, of influencing the content of information (Edgley 2015: 45 f; Call 2002: 10; Ragona 2013: 118-120; Smith-Allot 2016: 186 f). Regardless of these many ‘labels’, it is relevant – in my opinion – to make Chomsky himself speak about his political and ideal identity, because I think that his self-perception turns out to be useful and important in developing our thesis. Chomsky states about himself:

*I was attracted to anarchism as a young teenager, as soon as I began to think about the world beyond a pretty narrow range, and haven't seen much reason to revise those early attitudes since. I think it only makes sense to seek out and identify structures of authority, hierarchy, and domination in every aspect of life, and to challenge them; unless a justification for them can be given, they are illegitimate, and should be dismantled, to increase the scope of human freedom. That includes political power, ownership and management, relations among men and women, parents and children, our control over the fate of future generations (the basic moral imperative behind the environmental movement, in my view), and much else. Naturally this means a challenge to the huge institutions of coercion and control: the state, the unaccountable private tyrannies that control most of the domestic and international economy, and so on (Chomsky 1995).*

Generally speaking, if we look at his vast intellectual production we can observe that he has always defined himself as a libertarian socialist and anarchist (Otero 1982: 245 f; Peck 1987: 22). One of the major points of reference for delineating Chomsky's political ideals and identity is his *Notes on Anarchism*<sup>4</sup>, an essay originally written as introduction to the English edition of the French anarchic intellectual Daniel Guerin's *Anarchism: from Theory to Practice* (1968) and afterwards republished in 1970 in the «New York Review of Books». Most of the concepts, ideas, principles elaborated in the Notes would be entirely or partially re-proposed by Chomsky in all of his further books from *Manufacturing Consent. The political economy of the mass media* (1988) to the recent *Power Systems* (2013). In his *Notes on Anarchism* Chomsky seems to be driven by one chief purpose: explaining what he means by libertarian socialism, anarchism and anarchic spirit. There is a core idea underpinning the whole essay: Chomsky uses the term anarchism and libertarian socialism as perfectly synonymous. To understand the reason behind this, it is necessary to take into account that he traces a sort of fil-rouge connecting part of liberal tradition to socialism and anarchism. He does so by mentioning and discussing a series of characters who played a relevant role in his intellectual formation. First of all, he recalls Bakunin and in particular a self-portrait of the Russian anarchist, who said he was a «fanatic lover of liberty, the unique condition under which intelligence, dignity and human happiness can develop and grow». These words represent to Chomsky the «leading idea within the anarchist tradition» (Chomsky a 2005 [1970]: 121).

The truly interesting aspect to us is to observe how Chomsky relates just this «leading idea» to the Enlightenment, to the philosophical and political tradition embodied by Rousseau, Kant and above all to Wilhelm Von Humboldt. The latter, who set on one of the most important intellectual highlights of liberalism (Gray: 19952), has always been a thinker particularly significant in Chomsky's eyes and frequently quoted by him (Chomsky 2005 [1970]: 121-122). It was Von Humboldt (1767-1835) who – as we read in *Notes on Anarchism* – was able to tie up the critique of State's interference with humanist principles and values, in a coherent. Von Humboldt is in fact the main character of another of Chomsky's major works dating back to 1970: *Knowledge and Freedom* (Chomsky b: 2005 [1970]). Here Chomsky recognizes two great merits in Von Humboldt, who actually was also a pioneer of general linguistics.

<sup>4</sup> Obviously this is not the only work where Chomsky defines himself as libertarian socialist and anarchist. Important references are also included in Peck (1987: p. 22 f), where Chomsky also explains why he has been focusing primarily on European Anarchists rather than American ones: «the American anarchist tradition at least the more articulated part of it, is composed of writers in an individualist tradition who are thinking about [...] What attracts me about anarchism personally are the tendencies in it that try to come to grasp with the problems of dealing with complex organized industrial societies within a framework of free institutions and structures. And the American anarchists rarely dealt with these questions.»

tics. The first is the condemnation and refusal of an unlimited State power – as this key-principle was elaborated in Von Humboldt's *The Limits of State Action* (1792) – and the second is the emphasis on the concept of *Bildung*, the idea that the man should express and fully develop all his potentials and skills (Chomsky b 2005 [1970]: 108).

In Von Humboldt Chomsky sees a defender and representative of «libertarian values» who was able to harmonize political theory with a particular vision of human nature. In doing so, it seems to me that Chomsky is not illuminating us only about his idea of Von Humboldt's intellectual legacy but also about his own most intimate beliefs. In *Language and Freedom* Von Humboldt is portrayed as that thinker who saw in unlimited power into the hands of the State, one of the major obstacles to the development of human intellect, diversity, dignity, freedom, plurality. By emphasizing, for example, Von Humboldt's belief in man «as a fundamentally spontaneous and creative, self-perfective being», whose development and intellectual enrichment can be reached through an education capable of stimulating «self-fulfillment», Chomsky is providing us an insight to his own idea of education and the relationship existing, in his opinion, between the latter, freedom and social progress (Rai a 1995: 1-18; Rai b 2005: 232-239).

It is just in this sense that we can better comprehend the reason why Chomsky highlights a major affinity between Von Humboldt's idea of education and that professed by another thinker truly relevant to his formation, John Dewey (1859-1952). Chomsky has always praised the American social philosopher's model of education aiming at a truly democratic society of «anti-dogmatic» minds and citizens (Chomsky a 2005 [1970]: 119-120).. Yet, if we limited ourselves to considering these aspects, we would have a partial view of Chomsky's intellectual formation. In *Notes on Anarchism* Chomsky sees in Von Humboldt's ideals – as well as those professed by Rousseau and by Kant – a humanist and libertarian message which after the degeneration of classical liberal principles «perverted into an ideology to sustain the emerging social order» was inherited by libertarian socialism. The latter – Chomsky states – should be considered «as the libertarian wing of socialism» because it «is properly to be regarded as the inheritor of the liberal ideals of the Enlightenment» (Chomsky a 2005 [1970]: 122)<sup>5</sup>.

In his portrayal of anarchism as the meeting point of liberalism and socialism Chomsky is far from being original. He openly recalls to the work of

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<sup>5</sup> In his interpretation of liberalism, «perverted» by the logic of capitalism, market-system etc. Chomsky seems to forget (or simply not to know) that historically speaking, from the mid 19th century, the liberal tradition of political thought encountered and embraced the democratic principles and progressively reformed itself – chiefly from the late 19th century – in a more pro-social reforms direction: a good example for that might be T.H. Green's work.



another major intellectual point of reference to him: the anarcho-syndacalst Rudolf Rocker (1873-1958) and his *Anarcho syndacalism* published for the first time in 1938. If it is true, according to Chomsky, that libertarian ideals are an integrative part of anarchism, it is also true for him that in its socialist connotation anarchism opposes the «private ownership of the means of production and the wage slavery»<sup>6</sup> in favor of a new form of society where – here Chomsky is quoting from Marx – «labor [...] will become the highest want in life» (Chomsky a 2005 [1970]: 122-124). In *Notes on Anarchism*, Chomsky openly refers to Marx and particularly to the connection established by the latter between «the detailed worker of today reduced to a mere fragment of a man» and the existing «capitalist relations of production» (Chomsky a 2005 [1970]: 123-124).

Generally speaking, Chomsky's work is characterized by several references to Marx' political and economic thought – interestingly the main references are to Marx as author of *La Commune de Paris* – even if – as Chomsky himself states – his own political work substantially reflects «a little engagement with classical marxist tradition» (Chomsky 1995). Instead, much more frequent and detailed are his references to Rosa Luxemburg, Anton Pannekok, Paul Mattick, Herman Gorter, Rudolf Rocker. After criticizing the «capitalist relations of production» and the «specialization of labor», all «degrading human beings» Chomsky concludes that «a consistent anarchist, then, should be a socialist, but a socialist of particular sort» (Chomsky a 2005 [1970]: 125). He emphasizes how the anarchist opposes the system which reduces man to an instrument for fulfilling specific goals established by economic and political authority, in support of a new kind of society where «individuals' purposes» – a term he openly derives from Von Humboldt – can be carried out. The reference to Von Humboldt proves and again testifies the relevance of this thinker to Chomsky's eyes but it should not make us forget that in Chomsky's view the fulfillment of «individuals' purposes» must be pursued and enhanced according to a perspective of cooperation, solidarity and creation of free workers' associations. In my opinion it is precisely in these principles (solidarity, cooperation, free workers' associations) that Chomsky identifies what makes the anarchist «a socialist of particular sort». More specifically, in supporting the implementation of «free associations of free producers» Chomsky declares to draw inspiration again from Rudolf Rocker (Chomsky a 2005 [1970]: 124). Chomsky's recall to anarcho-syndacalism has a huge implication in grasping the meaning of his political and ideal identity better: if it is true – as he states – that anarchists refuse any form of «alienation», and «specialized labor», it is also true for him that they strongly support the «appropriation of capital by the whole body of workers». Chomsky heavily insists on the fact that the

<sup>6</sup> Chomsky is quoting from Marx' *Capital*.

appropriation must be «direct» rather than a process led and controlled by an élite of politicians acting «in the name of the proletariat» (Chomsky a 2005 [1970]: 125).

In this sense, it is worth quoting a passage from Chomsky's *Preface* to the English edition of Rocker's *Anarcho syndacalism*, vividly highlighting how this book and his author influenced Chomsky's political identity and thought:

*In Rocker's [...] conception, people must take their lives and their work into their own hands. Only through their own struggle for liberation will ordinary people come to comprehend their true nature, suppressed and distorted within institutional structures designed to assure obedience and subordination. Only in this way will people develop more humane ethical standards, "a new sense of right", "the consciousness of their strength and their importance as a social factor in the life of their time" and of their capacity to realize the strivings of their "inmost nature". Such direct engagement in the work of social reconstruction is a prerequisite for coming to perceive this "inmost nature" and is the indispensable foundation upon which it can flourish (Chomsky 1989 a: VII).*

It is evident how Chomsky is profoundly critical – as libertarian socialist and anarchist – towards any form of «State-socialism», and «bureaucratic centralism», denounced, for example, by Bakunin. In that light, we can also better understand and situate Chomsky's frequent references to Rosa Luxemburg's critique of the Bolshevik tendency towards the primacy of bureaucracy, i.e. the absolute power and control concentrated in the hands of the Bolshevik Central Committee (Chomsky c 2005 [1969]: 41). Chomsky identifies the same critical and anti-centralist perspective in the British Communist William Paul – author of *State, Its Origins and Functions* (1917) – who, in his opinion, stresses how so-called State-socialism has hindered true democracy. Its implementation will always be negatively influenced and «limited» as long as – Chomsky states – «the industrial system is controlled by any form of autocratic elite» (Chomsky a 2005 [1970]: 128).

His insistence on those thinkers criticizing «red bureaucracy», State-socialism, bureaucratic control – all considered as forms of despotism – is clearly finalized to stress what he thinks is the fundamentally libertarian and humanist content of anarchism. This aspect of Chomsky's political reflection represents an important premise to his critique of «élite domination» and any form of power concentration in the contemporary U.S. political, economic and social system.

To Chomsky – libertarian socialist and anarchist – the creation of a true democracy implies a totally new form of social organization, which would allow the full development of human potentials by overcoming traditional power systems. By reading Chomsky's works, we can observe how he has sub-

stantially remained loyal to his political ideals emerging, for example, from his *Notes on Anarchism*. A majority of the beliefs, ideas and ideals discussed so far are included in the writings I am going to analyze. Here he denounces what he thinks are the obstacles on the road to a true democracy and to a just society of fully developed individuals. Two of these obstacles are, in my opinion, what I called at the beginning of my paper true monism and fake pluralism.

### 13.2 CHOMSKY AS POLITICAL THINKER: TRUE MONISM AND FAKE PLURALISM

The thesis I am going to propose and develop, basically consists of two elements: firstly that in Chomsky's work a political and economic American model can be identified. In his *Storia del pensiero politico europeo*, Salvo Mastellone recognized three different meanings and types of political model: 1) those elaborated and designed on the basis of a specific, existing and functioning political system («modelli politici funzionanti») with the general purpose to use that model as an example to follow and imitate; those based on a past political system («modelli politici storici») and those created on the basis of a utopian project («modelli politici utopici») (Mastellone 1993: 9).

Part of the first definition fits into Chomsky's work: in my opinion, Chomsky's political reflection – although not explicitly – identifies an American political and economic model which, in his opinion, emphasizes a series of merits and positive aspects supposed as belonging to the U.S., i.e. free market, pluralism (social, economic, political, media), solid democratic institutions, which actually – in his opinion – do not correspond to reality. I think, as I am going to show in the following pages, that the problem of true monism and fake pluralism in Chomsky's political work can be situated ideally within the discrepancy he establishes between what he thinks is the true American political and economic system and the American political and economic model spread in and out of the national borders. Both severely criticized by him. Having said that, the point for me is to seek to answer the following questions: *How and to what extent can we talk about the problem of true monism and fake pluralism in Chomsky's political thought?, And why is it relevant to discuss about it?*

I think that the problem of true monism as well as of fake pluralism, interconnected with Chomsky's critical attitude towards the American political and economic model, develops and articulates on three specific macro-levels of reflection: 1. the critique of the American free market system; 2. the in depth critique of American mass communication system; 3. the reflection on what

Chomsky defines as the gradual impairment of American democratic institutions and life. In his *The Prosperous Few and the Restless Many* (1993), Chomsky poses the problem of free market principles in the U.S. In his view, there is an evident but unmentioned gap characterizing the American economic system: that between the rhetoric of a true free market, free competition among different subjects all sharing equal opportunities, economic pluralism – all elements praised by the official American political and economic model – and the reality of a growing predominance (economic and even political) of multinationals that – in his view – has been fostered by the U.S. government itself by means of special protectionist measures (Chomsky 1993). I think that exactly this contrast emerging from Chomsky's work of 1993, can be read as between fake pluralism and true monism. Not only in his book of 1993 but in all of his writings we can observe that Chomsky is as much in favor of a clearer and more effective governmental role in promoting good public education and social insurance<sup>7</sup> as he is against government support to the interests of the «prosperous few»: i.e. the multinationals and their managers, by subsidizing specific industrial fields often, according to Chomsky, closely linked with the Pentagon:

*Internationally, the Pentagon was an intervention force, but domestically it was a method by which the government could coordinate the private economy, provide welfare to major corporations, subsidize them, arrange the flow of taxpayer money to research and development, provide a state guaranteed market for excess production, target advanced industries for development, etc. Just about every successful and flourishing aspect of the US economy has relied on this kind of government involvement (Chomsky 1993: 346)..*

Chomsky emphasizes how this kind of government involvement has turned into a great opportunity for the «prosperous few» to increase their wealth:

*So you could say that one alternative to the free market system is the one we already have, because we often don't rely on the market where powerful interests would be damaged. Our actual economic policy is a mixture of protectionist, interventionist, free market and liberal measures. And it's directed primarily to the needs of those who implement social policy, who are mostly the wealthy and the powerful (Chomsky 1993: 346).*

In this sense, the U.S. government involvement would show how the true American economic system is – according to Chomsky – far from being based on a coherent free market mechanism:

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<sup>7</sup> See for example: Chomsky (1969).

*For example, the US has always had an active state industrial policy, just like every other industrial country. It's been understood that a system of private enterprise can survive only if there is extensive government intervention. It's needed to regulate disorderly markets and protect private capital from the destructive effects of the market system, and to organize a public subsidy for targeting advanced sectors of industry, etc (Chomsky 1993: 346).*

In Chomsky's critical analysis the American economic system emerges as being characterized by what I would define as a truly monist logic covered up by the supposedly pluralist free market principles. His reflection on the power of multinationals should be correctly situated within the context of a general critique of neo-liberal policies, which represent the backbone of current globalization (Ritzer-Dean: 2015). The latter, in Chomsky's opinion, contributed to extend «the Third World model to industrial countries» which means the growing gap between «prosperous few and the restless many». It is just the prosperous élite who – in his view – has found a major point of reference and support in the main International Governance institutions such as MIF, Nafta, G-7, and even the EU Bank which, according to Chomsky, «answer basically to the transnational corporations, international banks, etc. All these structures raise decision making to the executive level, leaving what's called a “democratic deficit” – parliaments and populations with less influence» (Chomsky 1993: 347).

The international institutions above mentioned should correspond to a logic of pluralism (pluralism of voices, interests, international actors), whereas they conversely embody and exercise what we could define a monist kind of economic and political power. Monist because, in Chomsky's view, these institutions concentrate in their hands a huge amount of power in contrast with the interests of the many (Chomsky 1993: 344). In the U.S as well as on a global scale Chomsky denounces thus the existence of that «autocratic elite» he opposed in his *Notes on Anarchism*.

His critique of multinationals' power and that of international governance bodies can be related to the second macro-level of Chomsky's reflection. His repeated critical statements on how profoundly distorted the American free market system is and on the role played by government intervention seem to imply, according to Chomsky that, the American political and economic model, as it has been designed and promoted inside and outside the U.S, is based on a fake form of pluralism hiding a true state of monism. This might be, in my opinion, one of the keys to interpreting Chomsky's attack on the U.S media system which he defines a refined and sophisticated mechanism whose purpose is to indoctrinate people and change citizens into consumers, convincing them that a government of the people or for the people cannot and must not

exist (Chomsky: 2013 a [2011]). To this end, in my opinion, Chomsky's focus on the U.S. mass media communication system directly connects the second level of our reflection to the third one concerning the impairment and weakening of American democratic life.

In Chomsky's view, the process of indoctrination has taken place through what he defines as a «propaganda model» based on a systematic manipulation of language and people's critical ability and skills. He elaborates the connection between media-indoctrination and power in one of his most important works, where he also employs his knowledge and understanding of linguistics, *Manufacturing consent* (1988) (Chomsky-Hermann: 1988)<sup>8</sup>.

Starting from the idea that «mass media serve as a system of communication [...] in order to integrate (the populace) into the institutional structure of the larger society and to fulfil this role requires a systematic propaganda» (Chomsky-Hermann 1988: 61), Chomsky states that such propaganda serves to strengthen the «élite domination», while weakening democracy. More precisely, he thinks that the «propaganda model» set up in the U.S. has distorted and altered democratic principles because, while pretending to support and nurture a state of freedom and pluralism, it would be actually based on a precise strategy (economic and political). I would define this monist because its main purpose would be, in Chomsky's view, to preserve the power in the hands of a very small group of people. Hence, according to Chomsky's interpretation, the U.S. media system can be considered an integrative part of the true American political model. In other terms, a contrast seems to take shape in Chomsky's pages: on the one hand, a mass communication and media system supposedly pluralist, open, free, articulated, far from any form of censorship, as depicted by the official American political model, on the other a mass communication and media system monopolized and controlled by a small élite of power. A contrast, in my opinion, between fake pluralism and true monism. In *Manufacturing Consent*, it becomes of great relevance for Chomsky to understand and explain how concretely the «propaganda model» works. In doing so he identifies five special «filters», by means of which the «élite domination» reinforces and imposes itself on the people, neutralizing dissent (Chomsky-Hermann 1988: 62-63).

It is Chomsky to stress how ancient and deep the roots of the propaganda model are. With regard to this aspect, he relates the failure of many British late 19<sup>th</sup> century working class newspapers to «various taxes designed to drive out radical media by raising the costs» (Chomsky-Hermann 1988: 63)<sup>9</sup>. A strategy

<sup>8</sup> Chomsky wrote the book in collaboration with Edward S. Hermann (1925-): Professor Emeritus of Finance at the University of Pennsylvania and media analyst.

<sup>9</sup> Chomsky and Hermann refer to *Power without Responsibility* (1981) by J. Curran and J. Seaton as one of their major sources for the history of the British news media from the Eighteenth

created and implemented by the «autocratic élite» whose major purpose was to strengthen its social, political and economic control over the people («élite domination»).

Yet, the use of State intervention to eliminate specific targets, such as radical media, proved to be unsuccessful. That was the reason why it was replaced by a market-oriented kind of media resulting in the «industrialization of the press» which – as Chomsky states – means that over time the media has needed a growing amount of financial investments and only those receiving them have been able to survive. This situation shows, according to Chomsky, the ever-closer connection between two realms that should be independent from each other: the media, on the one hand, and the «corporate power», on the other. As for this aspect, Chomsky identifies a third subject playing, in his opinion, a major role in the media industry, i.e. the government. All media companies require «government licenses and franchises» and they can obtain them as long as they are able to foster and promote their ties with the government, through a lobbying strategy. These ties in Chomsky's view, are also functional to media corporations, which would use their relations with government actors to influence a series of key-aspects for their business: «interest rates, labor policies, business taxes, enforcement or non-enforcement of anti-trust laws». But just this complex and multi-level interdependence, depicted as an integrative component of the U.S. media system and that of the major Western countries, has contributed, in Chomsky's opinion, to erode any form of true media pluralism. In doing so it has hindered ever-more, any form of dissent and critical skills, dealing a serious blow to American democratic life (Chomsky-Hermann 1988: 73-74).

To Chomsky, another aspect – corresponding to the second «filter» of his «propaganda model» – should be carefully taken into account: the massive role played by «the advertising license». Parallel to the aftermath of big media corporations, the number of media companies whose publishing success is largely determined by their ability to attract ads has increased, resulting in an increasingly inevitable «marginalization» of those newspapers, Tv, radio etc. whose survival is actually based on the «revenue from sales». According to Chomsky's analysis, the strong (economic) influence exercised by advertising is another means by which the «élite domination», imposes, preserves and strengthens its interests and in doing so it impacts people's mentality and attitude by fostering a kind of business-oriented media system rather than «cultural-critical programming» (Chomsky-Hermann 1988: 74-78).

Besides the prominent role played by media corporations and ads in shaping the media world, Chomsky identifies a third element (the «third filter») which, in his opinion, works on an even more subtle and complex level, i.e.

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century to the present (Chomsky-Hermann 1988).

the problem of «sourcing the media». So far, Chomsky has explained what he thinks are two major (negative) forces drastically limiting and distorting true media and information pluralism by means of an essentially economic and financial strategy, which punishes marginal and often dissident newspapers, TV, radio. However, in Chomsky's opinion, the first two identified «filters» would be nothing without the ability of finding the 'right' and 'proper' sources of information:

*the media need a steady, reliable flow of raw material of news. [...] they cannot – Chomsky writes – afford to have reporters and cameras at all places where important stories may break. Economics dictates that they concentrate their resources where important rumors and leaks abound and where regular press conferences are held (Chomsky-Hermann 1988: 79).*

The 'where' to which Chomsky is referring is a group of places and locations that we might define representative and highly symbolic of the «élite domination», i.e. «The White House, the Pentagon, the State Department» along with «business corporations», whose chief point of strength – Chomsky states – is their ability to grant a regular flow of news (Chomsky-Hermann 1988: 78-79). If the first three «filters» deal with a market-oriented strategy, the remaining two («flak and the enforces»; «anticommunism as a control mechanism») are more openly driven by ideological factors. With «flak» Chomsky refers to «negative responses to a media statement or program. It may take the form of letters, telegrams, phone calls, petitions, lawsuits, speeches and bills before Congress and other modes of complaint, threat, punitive action» (Chomsky-Hermann 1988: 86). According to Chomsky, the fourth «filter» corresponds thus to a deliberate, direct, intentional, open attempt to drastically discourage and even eliminate that media programming perceived as dangerous by the «established power». The last of the five filters has been recently updated by Chomsky. When *Manufacturing consent* was published for the first time, the Cold War did still exist and therefore he identified in «the ideology of anti-communism» a vital and strategically relevant target for the U.S. (Chomsky-Hermann 1988: 86-89). In the new edition of the book (2001) following to the end of bi-polarism, «anti-communism» was replaced by «anti-terrorism» and the War on Terror as one of the major current social control mechanisms (Chomsky-Hermann: 2001)<sup>10</sup>.

In the light of this reflection, Chomsky states that, through a series of special and well-working «filters», the «autocratic élite» has not just been able (in the U.S. and outside) to become the main source of information but also – or even mainly – the subject manufacturing what people must and must not

<sup>10</sup> As for the updating of the propaganda model theory, see also: Chomsky-Hermann (2008).



know, while using this huge power to protect its own interests (Chomsky-Hermann 1988: 79 f)<sup>11</sup>.

It seems to me that in *Manufacturing consent* the élite monopolizing economic and political power creates an actual state of true monism (in terms of media system and not only) covered and hidden by fake pluralism. As I have tried to show, Chomsky insists greatly on how the people are manipulated and indoctrinated by the «media-industry». It is the indoctrination created through the «propaganda model» and more precisely through the above-mentioned «filters» that, in his opinion, has increasingly weakened democratic sovereignty and the principle that the people rule. To this end, «the manufacture of consent is the antithesis of democracy» because, in Chomsky's view, it generates from the «attempts at the control and manipulation of democratic politics» (Wilkin 1997: 4; Catanzaro 2013: 194 f).

When the dominating few use their material power to condition, lead and determine information, the space of democratic freedom is severely harmed: according to Chomsky, the weaker the principle of democratic sovereignty is, the stronger the «domination élite» is. In his perspective, this kind of mechanism has reached such a refined, subtle and complex form that the people themselves, who are the main target, paradoxically change into an integral part of it: he stresses how the people internalize it, without being conscious of it. The conclusions he draws are pessimistic the most perverse outcome of the situation he delineates in *Manufacturing Consent* is *Consent without Consent*. This is the title of another popular work of Chomsky's, relevant for me in order to elaborate my thesis. *Consent without Consent* was originally published in 1996, during the primary season for the American presidential elections. Chomsky identifies what he thinks is one of the most striking aspects of that season: «money and publicity were present in abundance, but not voters or much difference in outcome» (Chomsky 1996: 417). Yet, his primary interest is not so much to focus on 1996 primary season as to reflect on the state of American democracy. Recalling one of his intellectual points of reference, David Hume, according to whom «the governors have nothing to support them but opinion», Chomsky introduces the concept of «consent without consent».

<sup>11</sup> The topic of manufacturing consent is a long-term problem in Chomsky's intellectual production; a problem he has largely discussed either in many of his public speeches. In 2013, he held a speech at the East Stroudsborough University in Pennsylvania, where he addressed the issue of «global warming and common good», while referring to how, in his opinion, almost any kind of information, including that about global warming would be heavily conditioned and distorted. In particular, he criticized the recently enforced Environmental Literacy Improvement Act, whose major objective would be to promote environmental education in American schools, and supported by the American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC), which is financed, as Chomsky states, by «lobbying organizations of the fossil fuels». See: Chomsky (2013 b). As for the manufacture of consent see also: Chomsky (1989 a).

Not only, in my opinion, is this one of the chief components underpinning both true monism and fake pluralism, but it also allows us to deepen and better grasp his idea of democracy, and more precisely, what Chomsky thinks democracy is. Like in most of his writings, Chomsky uses many specific and detailed examples to elaborate his critique. Firstly, he refers to the Sixth Circuit Court of Appeals which «denied an appeal by workers who lost their job when Ohio plants were moved to states with cheaper labor» by noting «States and counties in the U.S. compete with each other for companies contemplating relocation» (Chomsky 1996: 429). According to the Court, the labor laws could neither «discourage such relocations, nor bar closing unionized plants in favor of a nonunion plant in another part of the country or in a foreign country as contemplated by the NAFTA» (Chomsky 1996: 429-430). Chomsky relates the judgment of the Sixth Circuit Court of Appeals to that on *Allen vs Diebold Inc.*,<sup>12</sup> dating back to 1994 and noting that:

*Congress and the Courts have made the judgment that [...] our capitalistic system, Darwinian though it may be, will not discourage companies from locating on the basis of their own calculations of factors relating to efficiency and competitiveness. The rules of marketplace govern. By so reflecting commercial interests, the institutions of government serve – according to current legal and economic theory – the long-term best interests as a whole. That is the basic social policy the country has opted to follow (Chomsky 1996: 429).*

Chomsky provides further examples with a more specifically political nature. On the basis of *United States and World Court U.S. Department State Bureau of Public Affairs* of 1985, he mentions, for example, the U.S government decision in 1980 to withdraw «its compulsory jurisdiction of the World Court» as a response to the fact that a growing number of U.N. Member states were no longer aligned with the American leadership and began to openly oppose U.S. international conduct (Chomsky 1996: 428). More precisely – as Chomsky stresses – one of the most important international questions regarded the American interventions in Nicaragua, condemned by the World Court as «illegal». Chomsky interprets these events as a means to the preservation and empowerment of what he calls «traditional structure of power» (Chomsky 1996: 428). This «structure» can take a variety of different shapes: it might be embodied by the U.S government which, thanks to its military, economic and political power, can withdraw from World Court jurisdiction, or by the U.S. Courts whose judgments, according to Chomsky, are actually against workers although they seem to be justified on the basis of a (fake, to him) respect for

<sup>12</sup> The case concerned the employer's decision to replace «two unionized Ohio manufacturing plants with the two new non-unions plants in Virginia and South Carolina». [www.justa.com](http://www.justa.com)

pluralism of interests and demands (companies, workers, commercial interests). The point is that, in his opinion, in both cases we are dealing with decisions justified and supported in the name of national interest or, specifically like in the case of the Ohio workers, in the name of a market-oriented economy, which actually – as Chomsky states – seems to be applied only to lower classes or, like in the case of *Allen vs Diebner*, in the name of a social policy considered good and just for the whole society. To Chomsky all this becomes excellent proof of how relevant, even vital economic and political decisions actually reflect the «*élite domination*» based on alleged understanding of what is objectively right and wrong for the people, for those who have no power, i.e. through a practice that Chomsky defines the undemocratic «*consent without consent*». (Chomsky 1996: 428-429).

To Chomsky, the issue of «*consent without consent*» is a long-term American problem that he traces back to a substantial and persistent fear of the people, perceived as threat to the *élite*. An historically relevant example for that comes, in his opinion, from the thought, work and political engagement of one of the American Founding Fathers, James Madison. Despite his frequent references to the Constitutional values and the principle of freedom, Madison's primary objective – in Chomsky's opinion – was to serve the «*opulent minority*» with property rights and whose interests were identified with «*the common good*». Showing his sensitivity for linguistic matters, Chomsky criticizes Madison's defense of «*rights of property*» by observing that technically «*[this] formulation is misleading. There are no rights of property, only rights to property, which are rights of persons standing alongside other rights (to freedom, to speech etc.)*». In the use of «*rights of property*» instead of «*rights to property*» Chomsky identifies what he thinks was Madison's true, final purpose, i.e.: «*provide special and additional guarantees for the rights of one class of persons, property owners, thus protecting the minority of the opulent against the majority*» (Chomsky 1996: 432). It is in this sense that, according to Chomsky, we should interpret Madison's emphasis on the importance of providing political rights on the basis of property rights and economic wealth. In his *Consent without Consent* Chomsky is decisive: he sees the backbone of the entire true American economic and political system in Madison's defense of private property rights. Yet, according to Chomsky, a relevant gap does exist between Madison and the current American ruling class. He reminds how to Madison, the country had to be ruled by men who had to be not only wealthy and economically independent but also wise, well educated, capable of defending public interests and ready to sacrifice their own for the good of the nation (Chomsky 1996: 432-433). In contrast to this view, the contemporary American political and economic system is depicted by Chomsky as ruled by «*huge, uncountable private tyrannies*». Chomsky's comment is harsh:

*they largely dominate, have gained substantial control over the domestic and international economy as well as the informational and doctrinal systems, bringing to mind another Madison's concern: "that a popular Government, without popular information or the means of acquiring it, is but a Prologue to a Farce or a Tragedy, or perhaps both (Chomsky 1996: 433).*

In Chomsky's view, the post-Madisonian America has gradually turned into the cradle of what I would define a true monism, whose development and aftermath seem to be connected, in his analysis, with the centralization of economic power as well as of media and information systems into the hands of the few. It is not by chance that in *Consent without Consent* Chomsky refers to Jefferson and Tocqueville sharing, in his view, the same concern for the establishing of a new form of tyranny in the U.S., led by an «opulent minority»:

*Thomas Jefferson, who warned of the rise of a "single and splendid government of an aristocracy, founded on banking institutions and moneyed corporations" which would enable the few to "riding and ruling over the plundered ploughman and beggared yeomanry", destroying democracy and restoring a form of absolutism if given free rein [...] Or Alexis de Tocqueville, who like Jefferson and Adam Smith, regarded equality of condition as an important feature of a free and just society. He saw the dangers of a "permanent inequality of conditions" and an end to democracy if "the manufacturing aristocracy which is growing up under our eyes", "one of the harshest that has ever existed in the world", should escape its confines. (Chomsky 1996: 420).*

Most of Chomsky's critical reflections on his country, which we have tried to read and interpret in terms of true monism and fake pluralism, have been stimulated and inspired not only by his own political and ideal beliefs but more concretely by concrete historical events and changes: the Vietnam war, the Free Speech Movement, the birth of the U.S. as global power, the outbreak of international tensions due to Islamic terrorism and 9/11, global warming and last but not least the massive financial crisis of 2008-2009. The latter, in particular, was seen by Chomsky as an opportunity to revitalize and re boost American civil society, making positive forces emerge. Chomsky's focus on the recent American economic breakdown shows how we can identify another major issue in his thought, that is, true pluralism as opposed to the fake one and true monism.

It seems to me that in Chomsky's thought true pluralism is linked to the principle of popular sovereignty, solidarity, cooperation, i.e. ideals that, as we read in *Notes on Anarchism*, Chomsky traces back to libertarian socialism and anarchic tradition. Looking at American society, he identifies a series of forces and groups whose major merit – in his opinion – is to make these principles

circulate again. To his eyes, the best example for that is the birth of the Occupy Wall Street movement, established as reaction to 2008–2009 financial crisis. Chomsky has devoted great attention to it in recent years as witnessed in the book *Occupy* in 2012 and in many lectures and interviews he has held on this topic across the U.S (Smith–Allott 2016: 307 f)<sup>13</sup>. Chomsky’s interpretation of the Occupy movement becomes comprehensible if we take into account all we have discussed about his political thought so far. Behind his analysis of the Occupy activism there is again a critique substantially similar to that of the *Prosperous few and the Restless Many*. In the movement, he sees a force capable of regaining public attention to the problem of rising economic inequality:

*one of the really remarkable and almost spectacular successes of the Occupy movement - Chomsky states – is that it has simply changed the entire framework of discussions of many years. There were things that were sort of known, but in the margins, hidden, which are now right up in front of – such as the imagery of the 99% and the 1%; and the dramatic facts of sharply rising inequality over the past 30 years, with wealth being concentrated in actually small fraction of 1% of the population (Chomsky: 2012).*

Although Chomsky thinks that the movement has to tackle with many different challenges on many different fronts, he is also convinced – as libertarian socialist and anarchist – that it should capitalize what he considers as its major point of strength, i.e. its ability to:

*create communities – real functioning communities of mutual support, democratic interchange, care for one another, and so on. This is highly significant, especially in a society like ours in which people tend to be very isolated and neighborhoods are broken down, community structures have broken down, people are some kind alone (Chomsky: 2012).*

Chomsky’s suggestions about concretely what the movement should do and what methods it should employ to spread are objectively too general and not fully satisfactory in strategic terms but what is really relevant to me is how his comments can be read in the light of the contrast between fake and true pluralism. In fact, the «real achievement» of the movement is, according to Chomsky, the creation of «bonds» and «associations» being formed by people

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<sup>13</sup> Occupy collects a series of Chomsky’s writings, public speeches and intersections with the Occupy Movement: 1. the lecture he gave at Occupy Boston in 2011; 2. an interview about the meaning of Occupy; 3. a conference call with militants of the Occupy Movement; 4. the speech on Occupying Foreign Policy at the University of Maryland; 6. a tribute to his friend and co-agitator Howard Zinn (1922–2010), historian, author of *A People’s History of the United States* (1980), political activist for the civil rights movement and militant against the war in Vietnam.

and which «should be brought into the wider community» (Chomsky: 2012). In his public speech at the Boston Occupy Movement (October 2011) he particularly emphasizes the relevance and the revolutionary potential of the movement in terms of creating associating structures, «cooperative communities» (Chomsky: 2011). In doing so he directly relates to the ideals expressed, for example, in his *Notes on Anarchism* when he opposed the truly anarchic and libertarian spirit to any form of centralism.

To the fake pluralist American political and economic model, Chomsky seems to oppose the truly pluralist component of the Occupy movement (as a new political and social model), just because the latter has been able – in his opinion – to create a network of groups and associations working horizontally rather than vertically, i.e. democratically, giving voice to a variety of ideas, proposals, adopting principles of solidarity and direct participation to public life. Regardless of the progressive marginalization of the Occupy Movement, it is relevant to me to stress Chomsky's interpretation of it: he sees in it an attempt to carry out true democracy. This is particularly clear if we take into account his lecture at Columbia University (December 2013). On that occasion Chomsky defined the idea of *Common Good* (Chomsky: 1998), as the search for finding «social arrangements that are conducive to people's rights and welfare, and to fulfilling their just aspirations» (Chomsky: 2014).

In his opinion, these «social arrangements» can be set up within a truly democratic system which he defines using the words of Rudolf Rocker: «an alliance of free groups of men and women based on cooperative labor and a planned administration of things in the interest of the community». It seems to me that, in part, it is through Rocker's words Chomsky sees the Occupy Movement and relates to it. Chomsky's political thought is based on the trust that a true libertarian, just, democratic society can be established only from the bottom-up. In this sense, we can identify a direct link to the ideals and beliefs professed in his *Notes on Anarchism*. From his critical analysis of the media system as well as from his open support to the Occupy movement, his idea of pluralism (true and fake) and monism (true) takes shape. In my opinion, in his work, true pluralism is where people come together with their ideas, potentials, variety of aspirations and search for a just society, a true democracy and regaining the public sphere in the name of a shared political and social project, whereas monism (true) and pluralism (fake) are where a small group of the privileged concentrate all the power in their hands, to the detriment of the people and therefore democratic principles, imposing their view and interests from top to bottom.

Yet, regardless of the righteousness (or lack thereof) of Chomsky's critical reflection (Collier-Horowitz: 2004), Chomsky seems in fact to outline an American political and economic model in which fake pluralism becomes

functional to the preservation of a power he considers profoundly monist, i.e. vertically based and controlled by a «prosperous few» with the purpose to cut off and neutralize the majority: 1% vs 99% (Chomsky: 2012); in other terms, a profoundly undemocratic system to his eyes.

Fake pluralism becomes – and is depicted by him – as the ‘mask’ of true monism and true pluralism turns into one of the chief ‘antidotes’ against the first two. An antidote in favor of what he thinks should be a well-functioning democracy, i.e. a social and political reality based on freedom and solidarity, on people’s ability to associate, give voice to their ideas and demands.

Chomsky’s political vision – regardless of its objective legitimacy or lack of it – contributes, in my opinion, to showing how problematic and complex finding a univocal, one-sided meaning of pluralism and monism can be. This especially if we address both – as all the authors of the essays here collected have done – in relation to the political thought of single and specific authors who inevitably bring their own intellectual formation, specific historical-political influences and sensitivity into their work. In this context a question arises again: *what monism and what pluralism in the history of political and social models?*

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