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C H O M S K Y
R E A D E R

Noam Chomsky
Edited by James Peck

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INTRODUCTION

To confront a mind that radically alters our perception of the world is one of life's most unsettling yet liberating experiences. Unsettling because it can undercut carefully constructed rationales, liberating because at last the obvious is seen for what it is. However troubling reality may be, human dignity is not affirmed in fleeing it. Rather, dignity lies in seeing reality for what it is—and acting responsibly in the face of it.

In all American history, no one's writings are more unsettling than Noam Chomsky's. He is among our greatest dissenters. No intellectual tradition quite captures his voice; thinking within traditions is anathema to him. No party claims him; he is a spokesman for no ideology. His position is not a liberalism become radical, or a conservatism in revolt against the betrayal of claimed principles. It is an indication of the radical nature of his dissent that it fits nowhere.

Such a radical stance is hard to sustain. Even our most famous dissenters have often turned back from what they saw. Their insights became too painful. Many lapsed into despair, lamenting as did Mark Twain the follies of human nature, or as did Henry Adams the failure of the American promise.

But Chomsky does not turn back. He relentlessly pursues what he sees. No one has exposed more forcefully the self-righteous beliefs on which America's imperial role is based, or delineated more effectively the appalling actions which maintain it. No one has focused more compellingly on the violence of our world, or conveyed more directly the responsibility of the United States for much of it. Few have so carefully dissected how America's acclaimed freedoms mask its irresponsible power and unjustified privilege.

Chomsky's insights, though forbidding in their intensity, bring that sense of relief that comes when someone speaks the truth directly. That relief was palpable among Chomsky's readers in the 1960s and 1970s when the war raged in Vietnam. Bluntly, unsparingly, he marshaled the evidence and described the brutal realities of the war—American aggression, genocide, war crimes, mass murder. He showed us how these realities were carefully homogenized and sanitized on the evening news to make them acceptable to the powers that be. And he asked why this was so.

His answer is shocking at first: there is a pervasive, omnipresent ideological process of indoctrination that permeates American life, makes us immune to the suffering all around us and blinds us to what is all too obvious. In these writings, Chomsky explores logically and methodically how the process works. As he looks at its workings in Vietnam, Central America, and the Middle East, he makes us confront the way in which the very foundations of American civilization and its economic life are at war with the prospects for human dignity and freedom—here and abroad.

His tenacity is extraordinary. It is there in the skillfully crafted logical character of his writings, the careful gathering of evidence, the undiminished ardor over the years to expose

the mystifications so continually used to conceal the truth. It is there as well in his outpouring of writings for even the smallest journals, in his determination through countless speaking engagements to reach any audience willing to listen. In the early days of the antiwar movement, Chomsky willingly came and spoke with just a handful of people, with students from all disciplines—from physics to Asian studies—urging them to use their minds and not just their bodies to oppose the war; to not have illusions about America's aggression in Vietnam or the long-term character of the struggle to end it; to not seek easy alternative faiths in other countries: not in Castro's Cuba, or Ho Chi Minh's Vietnam, or Mao's China.

Today Chomsky draws large audiences of college students never exposed to his writing about Vietnam. But his impact is comparable: his direct portrayal of U.S. policy around the world communicates a sense that people can see if they care to, if they step back just long enough to question the ideological milieu which shapes them.

Now as then, his is not the counsel of despair. True, Chomsky does not believe that the truth by itself will simply win out, given the realities of power he describes. But he refuses to turn from analyzing the reasons for the evils and horrors of our time, for they are neither unknowable nor intractable. They are all too understandable. Otherwise so many efforts would not be undertaken to deflect such realities, much as the psyche deflects painful truths deeply known within, but for that reason consciously denied all the more fervently and irrelevant.

Chomsky's achievement lies in the extraordinary and illuminating consistency with which he uses his rational intensity on any problem he analyzes. His use of science and reason is essentially the same everywhere. It connotes a unity of outlook and mind rare among intellectuals today, a conviction that reason, however limited, should examine everything—from global questions of war and peace to the most intricate questions of human intelligence, creativity, IQ, and language.

To ask the fundamental questions takes one outside prevailing assumptions. And Chomsky has an uncanny ability, as do many great thinkers, to make the unknown ultimately appear obvious. This is as true of his world-famous work in linguistics as of his political analyses. In linguistics, he began by challenging the field's reigning beliefs and ended up revolutionizing them. He started as an outsider, as the interview which opens this book suggests, and in many ways remains so to this day. But his work continues at the center of linguistic debates.

Elsewhere, the story is quite different. Chomsky's political writings are just as central to a understanding of our time as are his linguistic writings to our understanding of language. Yet they are often studiously ignored or angrily dismissed. His rational intensity, so applauded in linguistics, is derided when he turns it upon the United States.

Why this is so suggests something of the dimensions of Chomsky's intellectual achievement and the character of the questions he raises. Chomsky's consistent application of reason exposes the inconsistency of others—and their often active propagation of ideology under the guise of rational analysis and science. His laserlike rationality is so radical, as others' thinking is not, because of its intense anti-ideological ethos. Ideology and science are veritable opposites in Chomsky's thought. It is his acute awareness of this opposition that makes him such a remarkable demystifier of beliefs that cannot stand the light of reason.

Chomsky's writings from the mid-1960s to the present take us into one taboo subject after another. In "Psychology and Ideology," he dissects B. F. Skinner's popular behaviorism and portrays the near total bankruptcy of modern social science. Far from an accurate depiction of human nature, Chomsky finds in social science no scientific basis for the most widely held assumptions of contemporary thought. None for the argument that individuals labor only for gain and wealth, or the belief that people are inherently aggressive or egocentric, or the conviction that humans are so constituted as to feel deprived if others are particularly talented in certain areas and are acclaimed for their accomplishments. And his analysis of "meritocracy" reveals the crude and misleading assumptions about creativity and intelligence upon which it rests. Instead of the comforting rationale that merit breeds success and that the successful have merit, Chomsky suggests, a more rational approach would be to speculate that in our society "wealth and power tend to accrue to those who are ruthless, cunning, avaricious, self-seeking, lacking in sympathy and compassion, subservient to authority and willing to abandon principle for material gain, and so on."

Chomsky is not spelling out a specific theory of human freedom here. His sympathy for anarchist thinkers (he often speaks of himself as a "libertarian socialist") reflects his deep challenge to all comprehensive doctrines about human nature, all simplifying visions of humanity's potential diversity, all unjustifiable restraints. We still have, he writes, only glimmerings of insight into freedom and man's capacities in history and the sciences. Our awareness of them rests "one way or another on intuition and personal experience and extrapolations from particles of evidence." Yet he thinks it possible that there is a deep "instinct for freedom" in man, and he suggests that where ideology thrives, freedom is likely to be under attack. For ideology flourishes where there is a denial of human diversity and creativity. And it finds its most suitable home amid the rationales for the state's power and actions.

The United States has a long history of critical intellectuals, but Chomsky does not quite fit into any American tradition of protest. He is not part of that long line of critics—from Emerson and Thoreau to J. William Fulbright and Martin Luther King, Jr.—who bemoaned America's betrayal of its promise. He does not share the belief that America is a "city on a hill," a nation that operates according to principles radically different from others, or that this is a country in which ideas flow relatively freely and without discrimination, where the truth generally wins out over falsehood. Nor does he accept a vision of America as a well-intentioned, morally inclined power whose ideals embody the best aspirations of mankind. No American dream is part of his beliefs.

Chomsky's analysis of America's most popular and omnipresent self-images is thorough and devastating. His careful scrutiny reveals them to be neither accurate nor rational. Rather, they are part of an ideological ethos whose function is comparable with what all great powers require: an ideological rationale for their wealth and power, whether it be called *Pax Romana*, *mission civilisatrice*, or "the white man's burden." They manifest an adamant refusal to see that the United States secretes its own ways of seeing the world, shaped to the needs of quite specific, powerful interests. Often so noble and inspiring, the rhetoric of American liberalism is quite compatible with an aggressive global policy. Lamentations about America

“innocence” fit snugly with ruthless pursuit of self-interest by powerful institutions and individuals throughout U.S. history. The “free market” involves a freedom for some inseparable from a global system of exploitation and injustice.

What is particular about Chomsky’s perspective is that he does not merely ask why this is so, but why we should ever have expected otherwise given the world we live in. Why expect societies to expose their actual inner workings when suitable rationalizations serve powerful interests far more effectively? Why are we shocked that societies have castes of thinkers who propagate the faith, that great powers manufacture the rationales for their imperial and self-interested pursuits using the most noble-sounding rhetoric? Why are we surprised that nations themselves, rather than powerful, specific interests within them, are depicted as acting for the well-being of society in foreign affairs?

Much of the power of Chomsky’s analysis flows from the detailed ways in which he shows how the United States is not exempt from what is so reasonably expected from others. A rational approach will begin by looking for what is reasonable to expect of all nations. Thus Chomsky expects to find great powers cloaking their aggressive self-interested quests in clouds of inspiring rhetoric, while all along a chorus of its supporters insist that it is uniquely exempt from the aggressive pursuits so easily depicted in its enemies. He suggests that a reasonable way to understand the foreign policy of any state begins by studying the domestic social structure. Who sets foreign policy? What interests do they represent? On what is the domestic power based? The policy that evolves can reasonably be expected to reflect the special interests of those who shape it.

Further, it is only reasonable to expect that the harsh facts of social and political life will be mystified, guarded, enshrouded in complexity if they threaten the faith. In every society groups will emerge to disguise the obvious, to obfuscate the workings of power, to spin a web of mystification through transcendent goals and purposes, totally benign, that allegedly guide national policy. Quite understandably such people will not see themselves as a caste of propagandists or as indoctrinators. They prefer to think of themselves as educators, religious leaders, often as fervent apostles of truths which place them in conflict with the state. Yet to see just what the shared consensus is in a society, Chomsky suggests, look at what the “influential” critics do not challenge. There the extent to which they are submissive and obedient to the state can be expected to reveal itself.

Ferocious debates are not indications that consensus values are questioned. Doves and hawks can reasonably be expected to differ on the exact nature of the evil practices, real or imagined, of current enemies of the state, but the debates will go on within a quite expectable narrow set of patriotic premises. Both speak of “the nation” as the active agent in international affairs, not special groups within it. Both tend to argue that the “national interests” as articulated reflect such common interests as might be generally shared with the society.

Chomsky skillfully demonstrates how this process works. Debates about Vietnam between hawks and doves (or on Nicaragua or El Salvador or numerous other countries) might heatedly dispute whether the war was a “costly mistake,” an “error,” even a great “tragedy.” But “responsible” debate simply excludes from serious consideration that the war was wrong in principle or an act of aggression.

Like George Orwell, Chomsky has an uncanny ability to suggest the ideological message all its blatancy just beneath the apparently objective façade of argument. At first, his statements startle—such as when he calls America’s presence in South Vietnam an “invasion.” But his masterful use of comparisons exposes the ideological character underlying our political debates. Thus Chomsky compares South Vietnam and Afghanistan to show how little difficulty U.S. observers have in spotting a Russian invasion of a country. If a puppet regime in Kabul “requests” Soviet military aid, there is no question that aggression is taking place. But when a puppet regime in South Vietnam “requests” U.S. military aid, no aggression or invasion is even at issue. Quite the contrary.

Or again, if the Soviet Union invades Hungary or Czechoslovakia, such acts are easily seen to involve questions about the basic character of the Soviet system. Yet explanations for America’s role in Vietnam or Nicaragua or countless other lands invite no comparable questions about the basic character of the U.S. system. The focus is on the countless difficulties in Vietnam, the diabolic skills of the Communists, or misguided American idealism. It is acceptable to lament the failure of America’s noble impulses that lead people astray. Or the cultural differences that limit effective action. Or even the corruption, brutality, and ignorance of the people being aided. But should someone focus on the nature of the capitalist system, for example, he will likely be dismissed as “simplistic,” a “vulgar economic determinist.” If U.S. government documents show a preoccupation with just such economic issues, this is explained away by being carefully set within “wider” parameters of concern. Speak of “power drives” of a nation rather than the needs of capital. Speak of the state as distinct from specific social and economic organizations. And remind your audience that in the end America is different—a well-intentioned, uniquely nonimperial, nonexploitative power, ultimately benevolent, and attuned to the aspirations and strivings of individuals throughout the world. Then let the debate rage on: no fundamental level of the American faith will be deeply challenged, and the debate itself can be held up as an example of just how free America really is.

For Chomsky, these debates are shaped by a group he calls the “secular priesthood,” the intellectuals, technocrats, and propagandists whose task it is to make the actions of the state palatable, its lofty, transcendent ideals believable. Chomsky’s analysis of the secular priesthood is among the most suggestive examinations in our time of just how and why ideology and indoctrination are so pervasive in democratic societies. Again, his method is the same. If other societies generate an unchallengeable consensus, the question is not how the United States is exempt from the process, but how the process works here.

Perhaps no other theme of his so bewilders intellectuals or is greeted with such incredulity. That they, the most educated, are described as among the most ideological elements in society is utterly unacceptable to them. However much they see other intellectuals as ideological, they cannot envision this of themselves. Though they attack intellectuals in other societies for endorsing state policies, they rarely see this as part of their function. Societies elsewhere can be seen as having rituals and faiths that constrict the range of debate, but a comparable process in the United States is inconceivable to them.

By examining both the faith and those who propagate it, Chomsky lets us see how the

freedoms that do exist in the United States are used mainly to reinforce rather than challenge the prevailing consensus. He suggests why proliferating numbers of experts and specialists do not breed greater insight into the innermost workings of our society, but obfuscate it, making people feel passive and less able to effectively participate. He explores how our domestic freedoms not unexpectedly are interwoven with the dynamics of empire, instead of being at war with them; why our freedoms and a process of indoctrination can go hand in hand. What Chomsky offers is a radically different approach for thinking about the United States, one in which our freedoms exist within an ideological consensus that limits debate and protects powerful interests in ways all too similar to those in which obviously repressive societies operate.

As Chomsky writes in “The Manufacture of Consent,” the mechanisms of indoctrination in a totalitarian regime are relatively simple and transparent. Its official spokesmen and public intellectuals are expected to parrot the official line. Overt expression of criticism is risky, but internally the critic often grasps quite well the propaganda message and rejects it.

In the United States, the mechanisms of indoctrination are different, but equally omnipresent. There are brutal acts of state violence (as those who have borne the brunt of them know only too well). But the absence of the kind of oppression and coercion that exist in other societies necessitates a particularly virulent ideological dynamic in American life. “Brainwashing under freedom” is a more apt way to understand America, Chomsky suggests, than the comforting shibboleths of “freedom.”

Nor have some of the most perceptive establishment thinkers thought otherwise as they sought to ensure that the “farsighted” insights of the leadership will become palatable to the people. As Chomsky writes, it is what Walter Lippmann was referring to when he spoke of the “manufacture of consent,” or Edward Bernays when he talked about the “engineering of consent,” or Harold Lasswell when he wrote that with the rise of democracy, “propaganda attains eminence as the one means of mass mobilization which is cheaper than violence, bribery or other possible control techniques.”

All these writers have noted the connection between the elitism of the priesthood and the consequent passivity of the people. Chomsky probes many of the actual costs and consequences—moral, political, cultural, and in terms of basic human decency. Indeed, the ways people are desensitized has been a notable theme in his writings beginning with Vietnam. Was it, he asked, a testament to our “free institutions” that some of our war crimes were so publicly displayed—or a graphic illustration of how we have become immune to suffering?

Why is this faith believed so intensely? Why is it necessary for the operations of our society? Why is it so pervasive in the media and in our history texts? Why are the basic facts about the role of corporations in foreign policy not known or, if investigated, relegated to an academic corner or the corporate boardroom, where they will be sure not to enter the mainstream of public debate?

The answer is simple. If the truth is told without ideological varnish, ideologists fear people will not support them: people will not tolerate the way power operates if they see what is actually happening. Possibly they are wrong, Chomsky says, and people will support

the policies anyway. But proponents of the faith do not act as though this is likely.

This is why the secular priesthood, beginning with Vietnam, so often ignores Chomsky's work. The truths he speaks are not admissible in the American terms of debate. The nature of the debate over Vietnam makes this graphically clear. Some people have never seen Vietnam as anything but an aberration; others forswore their earlier attacks on American policy and once again spoke of a more benign America committed to freedom and human rights. But there is none of this in Chomsky, no turning away from the nature of American imperialism or the genocidal character of the war in Vietnam. His analysis leaves no aspect of American history untouched. Vietnam, as Chomsky shows us, was no gross aberration in American life. To understand it fully is to face all-too-standard U.S. operating procedures. A confrontation ultimately with a nation whose foreign policy is a record of ruthless pursuits of its imperial self-interests as violent as any great power in history.

Chomsky's writings about Vietnam will long remain among the most valuable ever written precisely because they show so much of the war's reality at the time, far more than most of the current outpouring of books reassessing the war's meaning today. They suggest as well just how successfully the U.S. political system has worked to digest the war with barely a trace of its deepest implications, why the people who ran it still largely manage national affairs, and why so many critics have lapsed into silence or lack access to the national media.

In one area after another, as this book reveals, Chomsky's writings continue to challenge the orthodoxies of our time. In the Middle East, he has shown how the mystique of Israel, supported by America continues to thwart any resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. No one has more directly confronted the issues involved in Israel's dispossession of the Palestinians ("One land—two nations. That is the essence of the problem of Israel and the Palestinians"), or so well delineated the global interests the United States pursues in the region.

His writings on Central America today are comparable to his essays on Vietnam. Once again, there is the blunt description of the character of the regimes the United States supports, in Guatemala and El Salvador; the war against Nicaragua, and the assiduous pursuit of its imperial interests in the area.

Here, as elsewhere, there are no painless answers for Americans willing to confront what their nation is doing, no easy solution to the arms race, given the interests served by the Cold War and the Keynesian militarism that fuels the American economy; no reason to believe that America any more than the Soviet Union is interested in any peaceful solutions to the world's problems that would challenge its own power.

...

In dissecting the obfuscations it is reasonable to expect in the United States and other societies, Chomsky also focuses in his writings on the American attempt, particularly since 1945, to construct an integrated global economy dominated by U.S. capital. Its operating principle, he argues, is "economic freedom," meaning freedom for U.S. business to invest, to sell, and to repatriate profits. Its two essential prerequisites are a favorable investment climate and specific forms of local stability. Though such "freedom" is lauded (and largely believed compatible with all others by the secular priesthood), its actual consequences are

studiously ignored. For the United States, nothing has been more ideologically useful than anticommunism to accomplish this task. In it is displayed the quite particular shape of the “official enemy” great powers can reasonably be expected to have.

Chomsky’s dissection of U.S. anticommunism is among the most persuasive yet written. Part of its power comes from his lack of any illusions about the Soviet Union or communism. This is quite clear in his depiction of the Cold War as a system of global management in which each superpower invokes the danger of the other to justify terror, violence, subversion, and aggression in its own domains. It is effectively argued in “Objectivity and Liberal Scholarship,” one of his most influential essays, where he reveals the shared elitism of bolshevism and liberalism, their similar attacks on any decentralized, self-organized processes of radical social change.

Precisely this lack of illusion about the Soviet Union adds to the lack of any illusion about the U.S. invocation of anticommunism to justify U.S. foreign policy. Anticommunism’s actual understanding of communism is of limited value, but how it functions ideologically casts a great deal of light on the American faith.

How might we test what anticommunism’s role is? Chomsky’s work suggests various ways. Let’s take official explanations of what the United States stands for at face value. Is the United States anticommunist because it is fighting for political democracy? No, political democracy counts for little if “economic freedom” is challenged. In a typically illuminating comparison, Chomsky shows how U.S. policy usually evolves when political democracy is destroyed in a country while U.S. investment is freed from restraints (as in Chile under Pinochet) and contrasts this with the reaction if American economic investments are threatened, whether or not political democracy is maintained in some fashion (as in Chile under Allende). Such results are startlingly consistent.

Does anticommunism accurately state the dangers the United States faces from rival great powers and explain why it intervened halfway around the world in Vietnam? No. As Chomsky reveals in “The Mentality of the Backroom Boys,” there was little government evidence to substantiate the claim that Russia or China was responsible for “international aggression.” The truth is little different in Central America today.

Is it, then, that the United States opposes communism because it fears its victory will result in terrifying bloodbaths and massacres? Yet the United States does not blanch when they arise in its own interests, as in Indonesia in 1965 or the decades-long support for South Africa’s own diabolic forms of inhumanity.

Is it a commitment to development or to help the poor countries of the world? Again, the key is quite different—whether local practices are compatible with direct U.S. investment. It is unthinkable that Cuba might benefit from capital grants (though invasion, assassination attempts, and blockades are quite acceptable).

But anticommunism is not just a blind faith; Chomsky shows how functional it is. It mobilizes the domestic population for vast war expenditures. It justifies a highly covert, sometimes overt, interventionist policy, conveniently setting aside such principles as nonintervention in the internal affairs of another country. And it practically sorts out friends and foes by their role in maintaining an integrated global economy in which American capital can operate with relative freedom. Any nation’s attempt to extricate itself from the global

marketplace is anathema and is labeled “Communist.”

No fate is worse for the anti-Communist than a nation opting out of such a “Free World market. Should a nation try to opt out, or take significant steps to control its own resources for the native population, the U.S. reaction is swift and savage. Chomsky shows that remarkably consistent means the United States uses to undercut such revolutionary regimes—or even a potential for them. The goal is to create such harsh conditions—as in Vietnam during and after the war or in Nicaragua today—that by the time the conflict is over there will be little left of what is needed to build a better society. No shred of a radical democratic alternative can be tolerated.

The brutalization of the regimes that remain in power is then used to justify the brutalizing actions of the United States. And in the process, United States responsibility slips safely into the background. As in Cambodia, the United States can bomb a nation to pieces. Its population can be driven into a huge urban center, the economic order reduced to ruins. And when the war ends, the United States refuses all aid and trade, and tries to make others do the same. The barbarous contexts which shaped the Khmer Rouge are largely explained away, the reasons for their crimes and the mass suffering decisively shifted onto Communist iniquity. American crimes become “mistakes” by a well-intentioned power. The Khmer Rouge atrocities flow logically and naturally from demonic ideological Communist convictions. A more useful ideological explaining away of U.S. actions is hard to imagine.

Chomsky, in Cambodia as elsewhere, is not making the United States the source of all the crimes and horrors in the world. But he relentlessly insists upon asking just what responsibility the United States bears. He does so because it is our responsibility. He has no illusions about the prospects of revolutionary movements in the world today. Even without U.S. hostility and pressures, even without “capitalist encirclement,” the truly democratic elements in revolutionary movements that he describes—in collectives, in soviets, in cooperative drives of various kinds—might well be undermined by an elite of bureaucrats and technical intelligentsia, by a Stalinist type of organization. Yet this becomes a near certainty considering the fact of capitalist encirclement which all revolutionary movements have had to face.

The odds against them are staggering. And it is the democratic elements in them that America is most at war with today, not the dictatorial shapes they succumb to. The United States can live with brutal regimes, far better than with a regime that might offer a real alternative that would allow for mass participation, freedom, and radical social change. As with the Russians in Eastern Europe, neither superpower is in the slightest degree sympathetic to the emergence of democratic revolutionary forces.

Chomsky never averts his eyes from what happens to them—and why. Nor does his focus waver from the murderous violence and brutality in the world—and its victims. He does not expect the secular priesthood to accept the responsibility of intellectuals to speak the truth. But there is a deep sense of responsibility that pervades his writings—and a strong suggestion of what animates them.

If we had the honesty and the moral courage, we would not let a day pass without hearing the cries of the victims. We would turn on the radio in the morning and listen to the voices of the people who escaped the massacres in Quiché province, and the Guazapa Mountains, and the daily press would carry front-page pictures of children

dying of malnutrition and disease in the countries where order reigns and crops and beef are exported to the American market, with an explanation of why this is so. We would listen to the extensive and detailed record of terror and torture in our dependencies, compiled by Amnesty International, Americas Watch ...

But the radios do not report this. The media are largely silent. And the reasons given, if given at all, are those comfortable to the ease of wealth and power. Chomsky does not provide answers for the world we live in. His demystification draws on no alternative ideology. Yet his writings constitute a way of coming to understand the world without illusion. They offer a stark but not despairing view of the world—a vision without an ideology, a radicalness without blueprints or prescribed structural alternatives.

There is indeed something that resonates throughout these writings that in the end is uplifting. Chomsky is not a cynical man. Nor is he disillusioned. To become disillusioned is to have been illusioned—and this Chomsky is not. There is a deep affirmation in these writings, which cuts through the bleakness, a certain nobility of humanity reaffirmed. This comes not just from the struggles of a single mind refusing to bend to a myriad of ideological pressures in our time, but from the way Chomsky's willingness to stand so outside prevailing beliefs makes him so central to a reaffirmation of a concern with human freedom and dignity, with creativity, and with the commitment to seek their multiple manifestations.

James Pe

P A R T O N E

*I*NTERVIEW



JP: You've rarely written much on the kinds of experiences that led to your politics, even though, it seems to me, they may have been deeply formed and influenced by your background.

NC: No. I've not thought about it a great deal....

JP: For example, I am struck by how seldom you mention literature, culture, culture in the sense of a struggle to find alternative forms of life through artistic means; rarely a novel that has influenced you. Why is this so? Were there some works that did influence you?

NC: Of course there have been, but it is true that I rarely write about these matters. I am not writing about myself, and these matters don't seem particularly pertinent to the topics I am addressing. There are things that I resonate to when I read, but I have a feeling that my feelings and attitudes were largely formed prior to reading literature. In fact, I've been always resistant consciously to allowing literature to influence my beliefs and attitudes with regard to society and history.

JP: You once said, "It is not unlikely that literature will forever give far deeper insight into what is sometimes called 'the full human person' than any modes of scientific inquiry may hope to do."

NC: That's perfectly true and I believe that. I would go on to say it's not only not unlikely, but it's almost certain. But still, if I want to understand, let's say, the nature of China and its revolution, I ought to be cautious about literary renditions. Look, there's no question that as a child, when I read about China, this influenced my attitudes—*Rickshaw Boy*, for example. That had a powerful effect when I read it. It was so long ago I don't remember anything about it, except the impact. And I don't doubt that, for me, personally, like anybody, lots of my perceptions were heightened and attitudes changed by literature over a broad range—Hebrew literature, Russian literature, and so on. But ultimately, you have to face the world as it is on the basis of other sources of evidence that you can evaluate. Literature can heighten your imagination and insight and understanding, but it surely doesn't provide the evidence that you need to draw conclusions and substantiate conclusions.

JP: But it might be very influential in making one sensitive to areas of human experience otherwise not even asked about.

NC: People certainly differ, as they should, in what kinds of things make their minds work.

JP: You seem a little reticent about it.

NC: Well, I'm reticent because I don't really feel that I can draw any tight connections. I can think of things that I read that had a powerful effect on me, but whether they changed my attitudes and understanding in any striking or crucial way, I can't really say.

JP: What kind of schools did you go to as a child?

NC: I was sent to an experimental progressive school from infancy, before I was two, until about twelve years old, until high school, at which point I went into the academic,

college-oriented school in the city.

JP: In New York?

NC: In Philadelphia. That experience, both the early experience in the progressive school and the later experience in the academically oriented high school, elite high school, was very instructive. For example, it wasn't until I was in high school that I knew I was a good student. The question had never arisen. I was very surprised when I got into high school and discovered that I was getting all A's and that was supposed to be a big deal. That question had simply never arisen in my entire education. In fact, every student in the school I had previously attended was regarded as somehow being a very successful student. There was no sense of competition, no ranking of students. It was never anything even to think about. It just never came up that there was a question of how you were ranked relative to other students. Well, anyway, at this particular school, which was essentially a Deweyite school and I think a very good one, judging from my experience, there was a tremendous premium on individual creativity, not in the sense of slapping paints on paper, but doing the kind of work and thinking that you were interested in. Interests were encouraged and children were encouraged to pursue their interests. They worked jointly with others or by themselves. It was a lively atmosphere, and the sense was that everybody was doing something important.

It wasn't that they were a highly select group of students. In fact, it was the usual mixture in such a school, with some gifted students and some problem children who had dropped out of the public schools. But nevertheless, at least as a child, that was the sense that one had—that, if competing at all, you were competing with yourself. What can I do? But no sense of strain about it and certainly no sense of relative ranking. Very different from what I noticed with my own children, who as far back as the second grade knew who was “smart” and who was “dumb,” who was high-tracked and who was low-tracked. This was a big issue.

Well, then I got to high school, the academic high school in the public school system, which was supposed to be a very good high school, and it was a real shocker. For one thing, as I said, there was the shock of discovering that I was a good student, which had never occurred to me before. And then there was the whole system of prestige and value that went along with that. And the intense competitiveness and the regimentation. In fact, I can remember a lot about elementary school, the work I did, what I studied and so on. I remember virtually nothing about high school. It's almost an absolute blank in my memory apart from the emotional tone, which was quite negative.

If I think back about my experience, there's a dark spot there. That's what schooling generally is, I suppose. It's a period of regimentation and control, part of which involves direct indoctrination, providing a system of false beliefs. But more importantly, I think, is the manner and style of preventing and blocking independent and creative thinking and imposing hierarchies and competitiveness and the need to excel, not in the sense of doing as well as you can, but doing better than the next person. Schools vary, of course, but I think that those features are commonplace. I know that they're not necessary, because, for example, the school that I went to as a child wasn't like that at all.

I think schools could be run quite differently. That would be very important, but I really don't think that any society based on authoritarian hierarchic institutions would tolerate such

a school system for very long. As Sam Bowles and Herb Gintis have pointed out, it might be tolerated for the elite, because they would have to learn how to think and create and so on, but not for the mass of the population. There are roles that the public schools play in society that can be very destructive.

JP: What was your college experience like?

NC: I was probably lucky in that respect. I really never went to college. I did finally get a Ph.D, and I did go through the first two years of college, but after that, I did not really attend college in the normal manner.

I attended the University of Pennsylvania, living at home, of course, which meant several hours commuting, and working, mainly teaching Hebrew school afternoons and Sundays, sometimes evenings as well. There was no thought in those days of attending college in any other way in our circles, and no financial means to do so. The first two years of college were pretty much an extension of high school, except in one respect. I entered with a good deal of enthusiasm and expectations that all sorts of fascinating prospects would open up, but they did not survive long, except in a few cases—an exciting freshman course with C. West Churchman in philosophy, for example, and courses in Arabic that I took and became quite immersed in, in part out of political interests, in part out of an interest in Semitic linguistics that derives from my father's work in that area, and in part through the influence of Giorgio Levi Della Vida, an antifascist exile from Italy who was a marvelous person as well as an outstanding scholar. At the end of two years, I was planning to drop out to pursue my own interests, which were then largely political. This was 1947, and I had just turned eighteen. I was deeply interested, as I had been for some years, in radical politics with an anarchist or left-wing (anti-Leninist) Marxist flavor, and even more deeply involved in Zionist affairs and activities—or what was then called “Zionist,” though the same ideas and concerns are now called “anti-Zionist.” I was interested in socialist, binationalist options for Palestine, and in the kibbutzim and the whole cooperative labor system that had developed in the Jewish settlement there (the Yishuv), but had never been able to become close to the Zionist youth groups that shared these interests because they were either Stalinist or Trotskyite and I had always been strongly anti-Bolshevik. We should bear in mind that in the latter stages of the Depression, when I was growing up, and even in subsequent years to an extent, these were very lively issues.

I intended to drop out of college and to pursue these interests. The vague ideas I had at the time were to go to Palestine, perhaps to a kibbutz, to try to become involved in efforts at Arab-Jewish cooperation within a socialist framework, opposed to the deeply antidemocratic concept of a Jewish state (a position that was considered well within the mainstream of Zionism). Through these interests, I happened to meet Zellig Harris, a really extraordinary person who had a great influence on many young people in those days. He had a coherent understanding of this whole range of issues, which I lacked, and I was immensely attracted to it, and by him personally as well, also by others who I met through him. He happened to be one of the leading figures in modern linguistics, teaching at the University of Pennsylvania. His interests were very broad, linguistics being only a small corner of them, and he was a person of unusual brilliance and originality. I began to take his graduate courses; in fact, the first reading I did in linguistics was the proofs of his book *Methods in Structural Linguistics*.

which appeared several years later. At his suggestion, I also began to take graduate courses in philosophy—with Nelson Goodman, Morton White, and others—and mathematics—with Nathan Fine—fields in which I had no background at all, but which I found fascinating, in part, no doubt, thanks to unusually stimulating teachers. I suppose Harris had in mind to influence me to return to college, though I don't recall talking about it particularly, and it seemed to happen without much planning.

Anyway, it worked, but I had a highly unconventional college experience. The linguistics department consisted of a small number of graduate students, and in Harris' close circle, a very small group who shared political and other interests apart from linguistics, and was quite alienated from the general college atmosphere. In fact, our "classes" were generally held either in the Horn & Hardart restaurant across the street or in Harris' apartment in Princeton or New York, all-day sessions that ranged widely over quite a variety of topics and were intellectually exciting as well as personally very meaningful experiences. I had almost no contact with the university, apart from these connections. I was by then very deeply immersed in linguistics, philosophy, and logic, and received (highly unconventional) B.A. and M.A. degrees.

Nelson Goodman recommended me for the Society of Fellows at Harvard, and I was admitted in 1951. That carried a stipend, and was the first time I could devote myself to study and research without working on the side. With the resources of Harvard available and no formal requirements, it was a wonderful opportunity. I did technically receive a Ph.D. from Penn in 1955, submitting a chapter of a book that I was then working on—it was quite unconventional, so much so that although pretty much completed in 1955–56, it wasn't published until 1975 as the *Logical Structure of Linguistic Theory*, and then only in part. But I hadn't actually been there since 1951 and had no contact with the university apart from Harris and Goodman. So my college experience was unusual to say the least.

JP: Was it after college that you went to live on a kibbutz in Israel?

NC: I went for a few months while I was at the Society of Fellows, in 1953. The kibbutz where we lived, which was about twenty years old, was then very poor. There was very little food, and work was hard. But I liked it very much in many ways. Abstracting it from context, this was a functioning and very successful libertarian community, so I felt. And I felt it would be possible for me to find some mixture of intellectual and physical work.

I came close to returning there to live, as my wife very much wanted to do at the time. There was nothing particularly attractive here. I didn't expect to be able to have an academic career, and was not particularly interested in one. There was no major drive to stay. On the other hand, I did have a lot of interest in the kibbutz and I liked it very much when I was there. But there were things I didn't like, too. In particular, the ideological conformity was appalling. I don't know if I could have survived long in that environment because I was very strongly opposed to the Leninist ideology, as well as the general conformism, and uneasy—less so than I should have been—about the exclusiveness and the racist institutional setting.

What I did not then face honestly was the fairly obvious fact that these are Jewish institutions and are so because of legal and administrative structures and practice. So, for example, I doubt if there's an Arab in any kibbutz, and there hardly could be, because of the land laws and the role the institution plays in the Israeli system. In fact, even the Orient

Jews, some of whom were marginally at the kibbutz or in the immigrant town nearby, were treated rather shabbily, with a good deal of contempt and fear. I also visited some Arab villages, and learned some unpleasant things, which I've never seen in print, about the military administration to which Arab citizens were subjected.

Now I had some fairly strong feelings about all of that at the time. In fact, as I mentioned, I was very strongly opposed to the idea of a Jewish state back in 1947–48. I felt sure that the socialist institutions of the Yishuv—the pre-state Jewish settlement in Palestine—would not survive the state system, as they would become integrated into a sort of state management, and that would destroy the aspects of the Yishuv that I found most attractive.

But, if we abstract away from those factors, the external environment, it was a kind of anarchist community.

JP: What did you do on the kibbutz? Did you find the intellectual life stimulating? And why did you leave?

NC: Remember that I was only there for about six weeks. I was completely unskilled, so I was doing only unskilled agricultural work, under the guidance of kibbutz members. I actually enjoyed the work very much, though for how long I would have, I don't know.

As for the intellectual life, this kibbutz was Buberite in origin, mainly German Jews who were quite well educated, though one of the people I came to know best was a Christian immigrant who had left a large farm he owned in Rhodesia out of hatred for the racist society there, and who was really a first-class agronomist with many interesting ideas. There were very interesting people there, but it was surreal in some ways. This was 1953, at the time of the Slansky trials in Czechoslovakia and the last stages of Stalinist lunacy. These late Stalinist purges also had a strong anti-Semitic element, but people there actually defended them. They even defended the trial of a fellow kibbutz member who was an emissary of the kibbutz movement there and was charged with being a spy, which they knew to be false. Not all did, of course. Those who thought about these things—many did not—were orthodox Marxist-Leninists, and I could discern no visible departure from a fairly rigid party line, though there may well have been much that I never saw.

It was a short visit, and I returned to Harvard, planning to come back, maybe to stay, in a few years. My term at the Society of Fellows was supposed to end in 1954, but I had no job prospects and asked for a year's extension, which I received. My wife, meanwhile, went back to the kibbutz for a longer visit. We planned then to return to stay, but by then I had obtained a research position at MIT and was very much involved in my own linguistic work. For one reason or another, without any particular conscious decision at any point, we never did return.

JP: Were you active in political organizations in earlier years in the United States?

NC: I didn't have any affiliation to any group, the Zionist left or elsewhere. Partly it was that I'm not much of a "joiner," I guess. Furthermore, every organization that I knew of, on the left at least, was Leninist, either Stalinist or Trotskyite. I was always very anti-Leninist, and I simply didn't know of any group at all that shared my views. This was true of the Zionist left, and of much of the American left at the time, as far as I knew. This was the early forties that we're talking about. Quite frankly I didn't see any significant

difference between the Trotskyites and the Stalinists, except that the Trotskyites had lost. They of course saw a big difference. There are some differences, but basically I thought they were exaggerated. That's what I felt at the time, and I still do feel that essentially. So there was no group that I knew of that I could have had any affiliation with. But I was personally very much involved in lots of things that were happening.

JP: Did you come out of a political family? Was politics something that was discussed within the family?

NC: Well, my immediate family, my parents, were normal Roosevelt Democrats, and very much involved with Jewish affairs, deeply Zionist and interested in Jewish culture, the revival of Hebrew, and generally the cultural Zionism that had its origins in the ideas of people like Ahad Ha-'am, but increasingly, in mainstream Zionism. The next range of family, uncles and cousins and so on, was in part Jewish working-class, or around that kind of social group. A number of them were Communists, or close to such circles, very much involved in the politics of the Depression period. In particular, one uncle who had a lot of influence on me in the late thirties and later, at that time had a newsstand in New York which was sort of a radical center. We'd hang out all night and have discussions and arguments, there or in his small apartment nearby. The great moments of my life in those years were when I could work at the newsstand at night and listen to all this.

JP: What part of the city was that in?

NC: That was at the kiosk at Seventy-second Street and Broadway, if it's still there. There used to be four newsstands there. There were two on the way that most people left the subway station, which was to Seventy-second Street. And there were two on the other side, where few people ever left. He had one of those. It was very exciting intellectually, but I guess they didn't make much money selling newspapers. In the late thirties, it became a center for some European émigrés and others, and it was quite lively. He had been through a lot of the Marxist sectarian politics—Stalinist, Trotskyite, non-Leninist sects of one sort or another. I was just beginning to learn about all of that. It was a very lively intellectual community.

The Jewish working-class culture in New York was very unusual. It was highly intellectual and very poor; a lot of people had no jobs at all and others lived in slums and so on. But it was rich and lively intellectual culture: Freud, Marx, the Budapest String Quartet, literature, and so forth. That was, I think, the most influential intellectual culture during my early teens.

JP: Were you also brought up in certain aspects of the Jewish cultural tradition?

NC: I was deeply immersed in that. In fact, I probably did more reading in that area than any other until I was maybe fifteen or sixteen.

JP: You rarely draw on it in your public writings. Are there reasons for that?

NC: No, it didn't seem to be particularly relevant. It's there, I mean, it certainly had a good amount of influence on me. For example, the brilliant nineteenth-century Yiddish-Hebrew writer Mendele Mocher Sfarim, who wrote about Jewish life in Eastern Europe, had tremendous instinct and understanding. It cheapens it to call it proletarian literature, but it gave a kind of understanding of the lives of the poor with a mixture of humor and

sympathy and cynicism that is quite remarkable. I also read fairly widely in works of the nineteenth-century Hebrew renaissance—novels, stories, poetry, essays. I can't say what long-term effect this reading had on me. It certainly had an emotional impact.

JP: There seem to be in your thinking certain insights about society and intellectuals that span the course of your adult life. So much so that you are not surprised by what often seems to shock others. You are not shocked when intellectuals perform certain ideological functions—you expect this of them. You are not surprised when American power operates by cloaking itself in an idealistic garb to conceal its pursuit of various interests—you expect it of such power. And so on. Your insights seem less derived initially from prolonged historical observation than a sense of how things can be expected to operate.

NC: I guess I just always assumed it. It seems to me to follow from the most simple and uncontroversial assumptions about motivation and interests and the structure of power.

JP: And yet in some ways those assumptions are at the heart of what outrages individuals about your thoughts and writing. They have to be dismissed because if people were to confront them, they'd have to write differently about the United States.

NC: Well, it's interesting that it doesn't enrage anyone when I say this about enemies of the United States. Then it's obvious. What outrages them is when I try to show how these patterns also are exhibited in our own society, as they are. If I were talking to a group of Russian intellectuals, they would be outraged that I failed to see the idealism and commitment to peace and brotherhood of the Russian state. That's the way propaganda systems function.

JP: But do you wonder why so many share such assumptions—and you do not?

NC: Well, maybe part of the reason is that in a certain sense I grew up in an alien culture, in the Jewish-Zionist cultural tradition, in an immigrant community in a sense, though of course others reacted to the same conditions quite differently. I suppose I am also a child of the Depression. Some of my earliest memories, which are very vivid, are of people selling rags at our door, of violent police strikebreaking, and other Depression scenes. Whatever the reason may be, I was very much affected by events of the 1930s, the Spanish Civil War, for example, though I was barely literate. The first article I wrote was an editorial in the school newspaper on the fall of Barcelona, a few weeks after my tenth birthday. The rise of nazism also made a deep impression, intensified perhaps because we were practically the only Jewish family in a bitterly anti-Semitic Irish and German Catholic neighborhood in which there was open support for the Nazis until December 1941.

JP: Yet the “New York intellectuals” have become prime exponents of a virulent anticommunism that denies almost all the insights you start with as “common sense.”

NC: In part, I think, age maybe was a lucky accident in my case. I was just a little too young to have ever faced the temptation of being a committed Leninist, so I never had any faith to renounce, or any feeling of guilt or betrayal. I was always on the side of the losers—the Spanish anarchists, for example.

JP: Do you look back and see this as exceptional?

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