

Noam Chomsky on Media, Politics, Action

by Aaron Stark

On December 7, 1998, Noam Chomsky will be 70 years old. Alternately ignored and reviled in much of the mainstream national discourse, Chomsky's critiques of U.S. society address crucial questions of ideology and power; of propaganda and of the institutional roots of our society's ugliest flaws. His prodigious work has inspired several generations of activists, with its high regard for evidence and its power to induce both horror and hope in readers. Much of Chomsky's work has been an examination of the role of intellectuals—their relations with and typical subservience to institutions of state and private capital. Chomsky's more hopeful writings, however, recall old notions of freedom and justice latent within human nature itself. These different aspects of Chomsky's thought are usually not balanced equally within any particular work. But it's necessary to keep them both in mind—horror and shame evoked by crimes committed in our name, and hope in the possibility of a society more worthy of the label 'human'.

Corporate Media

Some of Chomsky's most valuable insights into contemporary society come from his analysis of the role of mass media (major newspapers like the New York Times and the Washington Post) in a democracy. Some praise the media for service to the public, for devotion to truth, and for independence. Some even say the media go too far in their search for truth—one acclaimed review of media coverage of the Vietnam War argued that the media's alleged anti-government bias effectively lost the war for the U.S. (*Necessary Illusions*, p. 6). But if like Chomsky one examines the structure of media institutions and their actual day-to-day performance, a very different picture emerges. Chomsky finds that with few exceptions, the mass media confine themselves to presenting a picture of the world skewed in favor of wealthy and powerful elites. The debate over policies and issues appearing in major media is thus narrowly bounded, with many positions simply unthinkable.

Consider just one of Chomsky's examples: how the U.S. media treated the 1990 Nicaraguan elections. After years of US-sponsored Contra attacks on "soft targets" like health centers and schools, after an economic embargo that had caused millions of dollars in damages, and after a threat by the US government that all this would continue if their favored party did not win, it was clear what the result of the elections would be. Nevertheless, the vast majority of the mainstream press discussed these elections as if they were a free expression of the will of the Nicaraguan people. At the liberal extreme of the mainstream discussion, Tom Wicker of the *New York Times* recognized that the Sandinistas lost "because the Nicaraguan people were tired of war and sick of economic deprivation," but concluded that the elections were "free and fair" and untainted by coercion.

For details on mechanisms that distort media, see the bubble *Propaganda in a Free Press*.

Why is the confinement of discussion within the bounds of elite ideology necessary? Chomsky attributes this to the relative freedom of thought and expression available in Western capitalist democracies: "**Since the state lacks the capacity to ensure obedience by force, thought can lead to action and therefore the threat to order must be excised at the source.**" So typical

thought and opinion (especially among the educated sectors of the public) must be kept strictly in line with the tenets of the state ideology. But what is this state ideology, and how would honest discussion of its consequences "lead to action" that might be a "threat to order"?

Propaganda in a Free Press

The "Propaganda Model" Chomsky has helped develop and defend exhibits several "filters" preventing sustained dissent from reaching the public even in a somewhat democratic society.

Entrance cost into the media market: Labor newspapers and other grassroots media once reached large audiences. But dominant radio and TV licenses have literally been handed over to corporate titans, and 'advertiser strikes' have made independent newspapers more costly to the reader than their corporate competitors. Result: most global media is consolidated in the hands of a few mammoth corporations, an interlocking cartel representing huge armsmakers—like General Electric (NBC) and Westinghouse (CBS)—and labor abusers—like Disney (ABC) [see Reader Action, page 21. And as with most hierarchically-organized businesses, editors and reporters quickly learn what will and won't please the boss.

Media as profitable businesses: To make money, major media outlets have to 'sell' audiences to advertisers; the more privileged the audience the better the advertising rates. Chomsky notes "**It would hardly come as a surprise if the picture of the world they present were to reflect the perspectives and interests of the sellers, the buyers, and the product**" ... the product being audiences willing and able to spend big.

There are other filters, like *the need for a steady flow of news*, which government and business are happy to provide in the form of press conferences and "experts". These interact with instances of *journalistic self-censorship*, and with 'flak' directed towards media elements that fall out of line, to form a sophisticated propaganda system with little overt censorship, yet with an effective range of mainstream opinion and debate as narrow as any totalitarian system.

Chomsky stresses that this model is not a 'conspiracy theory.' Rather, it is an analysis of the behavior of the major media based on their 'automatic' institutional structure in the context of contemporary capitalism.

Free Markets, Democracy & Human Rights

The belief that U.S. power is intrinsically benevolent, motivated by a desire to do good, underlies mainstream discussion of U.S. government policy, both foreign and domestic. From time to time, true believers acknowledge that we do make mistakes, but consider them the products of good intentions. These assumptions are so basic that they usually do not need to be explicitly stated, except in the process of refuting arguments challenging the dominant way of thinking.

As with his analysis of the role of the media, Chomsky examines the actual behavior of the U.S. rather than taking these assumptions on faith. He argues that we can discern systematic patterns in U.S. foreign policy that derive from the pursuit of specific goals deeply rooted in U.S. institutions. Chomsky has sometimes described these specific goals as the "Fifth Freedom", a reference to President Roosevelt's World War II-era announcement that the Allies were fighting for Four Freedoms: freedom of speech, freedom of worship, freedom from want, and freedom from fear. The Fifth Freedom, "**the most important [is] the freedom to rob and to exploit**" (*Turning the Tide*, p. 47). Within regions controlled by enemy powers, violations of the four freedoms bring anguished concern and calls for action. But within the vast regions controlled by the U.S., Chomsky argues, "**it is only when the fifth and fundamental freedom is threatened that a sudden and short-lived concern for other forms of freedom manifests itself**" (*Turning the Tide*, p. 47).

One of Chomsky's sources of evidence for this claim relates to human rights. Conventional wisdom holds that U.S. foreign policy is dedicated to preserving and extending human rights around the world. However, Chomsky and coauthor Edward Herman (an economist at the University of Pennsylvania) conclude that "**the deterioration of the human rights climate in some Free World dependencies [including Brazil, Iran, Guatemala, and Chile; after US-sponsored coups] correlates rather closely with an increase in US aid and support**" (*The Washington Connection and Third World Fascism*, p. 43). These findings build on similar results from earlier studies by Lars Schoultz, a leading academic specialist on the relation between human rights and US foreign policy in Latin America (Schoultz, *Comparative Politics*, 1981, cited in *Turning the Tide*, pp. 157-58). One possible explanation of these patterns is that the U.S. government simply hates human rights. Chomsky and Herman's alternative explanation brings in another factor—the investment climate; related to tax laws of a country, to the possibility of investor profit, and to the nature and scale of government controls on wages and trade unions, among other things. They note "**For most of the sample countries, US-controlled aid has been positively related to investment climate and inversely related to the maintenance of a democratic order and human rights**" (*The Washington Connection and Third World Fascism*, p. 44). To put it crudely, countries with governments that are willing and able to kill union organizers and others who work for the rights of the poor and oppressed, generally offer the prospect of more stable profits than countries with governments concerned about the well-being of their population—the concern is for the Fifth Freedom, not human rights. For a glimpse into what U.S. policy planners tell one another about such things, as opposed to what they tell us, see the sidebar *For Your Leaders' Eyes Only*.

What about the 'communist threat', often raised as an explanation for such policies, when they are at all acknowledged? Chomsky cites a 1955 study by the Woodrow Wilson Foundation and the National Planning Association which concluded that the primary

For Your Leaders' Eyes only . . .

Chomsky calls attention to this 1948 top-secret report (PPS 23) by George Kennan, head of the State Dept Policy Planning Staff after World War II. It emphasizes the importance of the Fifth Freedom. ("50% of the world's wealth" refers to global holdings from colonialism and bounty from WWII.)

Furthermore, we have about 50% of the world's wealth but only 6.3% of its population.

In this situation, we cannot fail to be the object of envy and resentment. Our real task in the coming period is to devise a pattern of relationships which will permit us to maintain this position of disparity without positive detriment to our national security. To do so, we will have to dispense with all sentimentality and day-dreaming; and our attention will have to be concentrated everywhere on our immediate national objectives. We need not deceive ourselves that we can afford today the luxury of altruism and world-benefaction.

We should cease to talk about vague and unreal objectives such as human rights, the raising of the living standards, and democratization. The day is not far off when we are going to have to deal in straight power concepts. The less we are then hampered by idealistic slogans, the better.

threat of communism was the economic transformation of the communist powers "in ways that reduce their willingness and ability to complement the industrial economies of the West" (cited in *The Chomsky Reader*, p. 251). So, according to Chomsky, U.S. anti-communism is not provoked by the real crimes committed by the governments of the 'communist' states, but rather by their unwillingness to subordinate their economies to the industrial Western economies. He notes that the term 'communism', when used in U.S. propaganda, is largely a technical term that has "little relation to social, political or economic doctrines but a great deal to do with a proper understanding of one's duties and function in the global system" as defined by the U.S. (*On Power and Ideology*, p. 10).

Chomsky has taken on another fundamental belief related to the Fifth Freedom—the idea that the U.S. government seeks free markets. He repeatedly points out the importance of military spending to the strength and structure of the U.S. economy, not primarily for the benefit of military industry, but as a system of state intervention in the economy. This intervention, Chomsky maintains, sustains research and development in key sectors of the economy, (such as aircraft, electronics, computers and the internet, and more recently, biotechnology)—paid for by taxpayer subsidy through the Pentagon system, including NASA, the Department of Energy, and other government agencies—until results of the research become profitable. At this point, research "spinoffs" begin to produce revenue for private corporations. He cites articles from the business press in the early days after World War II, when this system of "public subsidy, private profit" was developed in its current form. The business world then recognized that advanced industry "cannot satisfactorily exist in a pure, competitive, unsubsidized, 'free enter-

prise' economy," and that "the government is their only possible savior" (cited in *Powers and Prospects*, p. 122). He also notes the hugely protectionist measures of the U.S. and the other industrial powers that, according to the World Bank, reduce the national income of the Third World by twice the amount of official 'developmental assistance' (*Year 501*, p. 106). Only the weak, both domestically and internationally, are to be subjected to free market discipline; the rich profit through the corporate welfare of Newt Gingrich's 'nanny state' (See *Year 501*, Ch. 4, *Powers and Prospects*, Ch. 5).

What Can Be Done?

It can be unpleasant to learn of crimes committed by one's government and to learn of the apologetics of respected commentators. Reading Chomsky, or listening to him speak, is often an ordeal. Undergone as a course in "intellectual self-defense" (see bubble), however, it can be a helpful means to constructive action.

If Chomsky's philosophy of the mind and human nature is near correct (see "Chomsky on Language" on the next page), there is an innate human nature with separate subcomponents for language and other aspects of cognition. Perhaps another part of the human mind is some fixed system of moral principles (with some principles being variable, in order to accommodate cross-cultural differences). Chomsky's assumption about the value of intellectual self-defense would seem to be made sounder if this view can be supported. If so, one could say that obvious cases of atrocities and oppression are not opposed just because one is taught that they are bad, but also because such crimes go against at least certain aspects of an innate human moral system. And if the actions of the powerful are revealed

for what they are, there is a chance that the better parts of human nature—cooperation, solidarity, compassion; perhaps reflected somewhere in a shared moral system—could come to the fore. (For the record, Chomsky cautions that his remarks about possible connections between the linguistic/philosophical sense in which he speaks of 'human nature', and the political sense of his use of the term, are "speculative and sketchy.")

There is another assumption lurking here, one that Chomsky has referred to as an "instinct for freedom" possibly latent in human nature. Chomsky's conception of this instinct is similar to the 19th-century Russian anarchist Bakunin's idea that "liberty ... consists in the full development of all the material, intellectual and moral powers that are latent in each person; liberty ... recognizes no restrictions other than those determined by the laws of our own individual nature..." (cited in "Notes on Anarchism", Chomsky's Introduction to Daniel Guerin's *Anarchism: From Theory to Practice*, 1970). In Chomsky's view, this instinct for freedom has driven struggles for justice throughout history, and can lead to a more just society today, if social movements undertake concerted action and education, including helping people acquire the means of intellectual self-defense.

How does one know, however, that any of these assumptions are correct? Is it, for Chomsky, simply a matter of faith? He states "I don't have faith that the truth will prevail if it becomes known, but we have no alternative to proceeding on that assumption, whatever its credibility may be." His treatment of the question of human freedom is similar: "On the issue of human freedom, if you assume that there's no hope, you guarantee that there will be no hope." However, if you assume that such a thing as an instinct for freedom exists, then hope may be justified, and it may be possible to build a better world. Chomsky notes, "That's your choice."

Chomsky's work in linguistics, philosophy, political and social analysis throughout the 70 years of his life does not leave readers with many comfortable answers or cherished assumptions about the way the world works. But for those who seriously consider his perspective (with a necessary degree of intellectual self-defense), it is not clear that this is the only way things can be. Chomsky's contribution, perhaps, lies not in an enumeration of exact blueprints for "the" just future society, or for "the" final theory of the mind; but in his elaboration of possibilities that people can—and should—strive for. ☑



Intellectual Self-Defense

We must adopt towards the power of government, media, schools, universities and other dominant institutions in our society "the same rational, critical stance that we take towards the institutions of any other power", even in an 'enemy state.' "It's got to get to the point where it's like a reflex to read the first page of the L.A. Times and to count the lies and distortions and to put it into some sort of rational framework."

Media sources that are somewhat independent from corporate control (often called 'alternative media') can help construct this framework, though of course no source should be embraced uncritically. Challenging the propaganda system is hard work, but can be made easier and more meaningful in cooperation with social movements, if one minimizes the splendid opportunities for isolation that our 'society' provides—each person an atom of consumption alone in front of the TV or computer screen.

Chomsky sees intellectual self-defense as leading normal people to dissent from and resist state crimes. If people really knew what corporate capital and their government were up to, both at home and abroad, they would not stand for it and something would have to change.