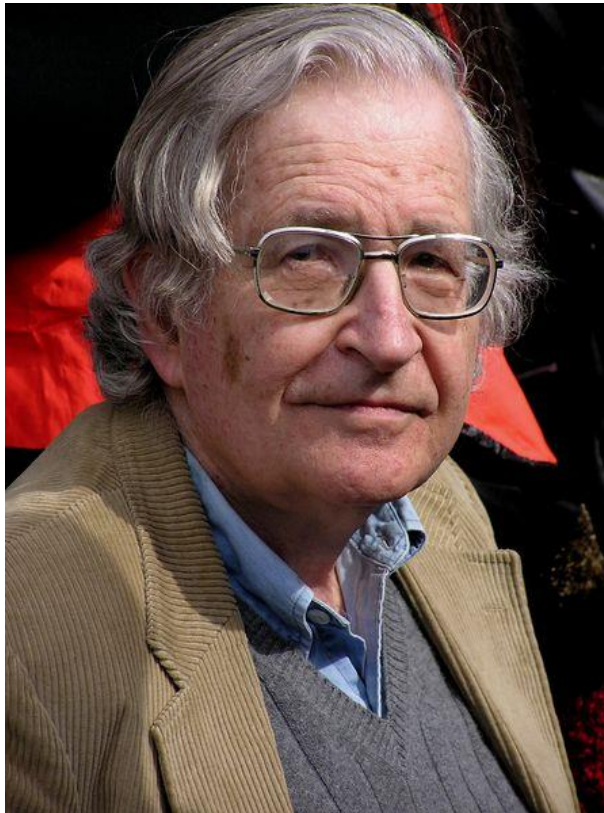


Noam Chomsky:
More than Just a Cunning Linguist



Dillon Welch
CSC 310
Honors Assignment
05/14/13

“One can, of course, take the position that we don't care about the problems people face today, and want to think about a possible tomorrow. OK, but then don't pretend to have any interest in human beings and their fate, and stay in the seminar room and intellectual coffee house with other privileged people.” While Noam Chomsky did great work in linguistics, he did not limit himself to this field. He has been highly active in politics, and as you can see from the previous quote he does not hold back in his opinions. He has put great effort into critiquing the US government. His views have come under heavy criticism, both because of their radical nature and arguable hypocrisy. Finally, his opinions are not limited to politics; he has opinions about the media, religion, and the effectiveness of science in relation to human concerns.

Like with all people ever, the core of Chomsky's views comes from experiences in his childhood and early adult years. He was born on December 7th, 1928 as the child of a Ukrainian and a Belorussian, and both were Jewish. His father first worked in sweatshops after fleeing potential conscription in Ukraine in 1913. Both parents eventually taught at Jewish religious schools, and his father strongly believed in education as it resulted in people that were "well integrated, free and independent in their thinking, and eager to participate in making life more meaningful and worthwhile for all." Both Chomsky and his younger brother were raised in a Jewish environment, were taught Hebrew, and discussed Zionism. Anti-Semitism was commonly encountered in his community, and he has told stories of beer parties after Paris fell to Nazi Germany. While his parents were “normal Roosevelt Democrats”, he was exposed to radical politics by other members of his family. A main early influence was his uncle, who never past 4th grade but owned a newspaper stand in New York City and held discussions with Jewish

leftists. He also visited other leftist bookstores and discovered anarchism at this time. His primary school focused on letting students pursue individual interests in a non-competitive manner. While here, he wrote an article at age 10 on fascism's spread after the fall of Barcelona. At age 12, he started to identify as anarchist. He started college in 1945 and studied philosophy and linguistics. He studied under the professor Zellig Harris, who both was Chomsky's inspiration for his work with context free grammars and an influence on his political views. The work of Rudolf Rocker in the Yiddish anarchist journal *Freie Arbeiter Stimme* introduced him to linking anarchism and classical liberalism. Other influences include George Orwell and Bertrand Russell. Orwell's writings in *Homage to Catalonia* caused him to become enamored with the thought of anarcho-syndicalist communes. He read several communist journals, but rejected Marxism. He married Carol Doris Schatz, a fellow student at the school his parents taught at. They remained married until her death in 2008. For some time in 1953, they lived in a kibbutz, or collective community combining socialism and Zionism, in Israel. While he disagreed with the pro-Stalinist views held by many members, he saw many positive aspects about the experience and felt that it came closest to the ideal of anarchism – claiming that if not for personal issues he would have stayed there. He received his Ph.D. in 1955 in linguistics, soon after joining MIT. In 1961 he was appointed as a full professor in what is now the Department of Linguistics and Philosophy. He has now taught continuously for over 55 years. From this position, he has launched his criticisms with relative safety and support.

One of Chomsky's main targets of political criticism has been the U.S. government. In a speech about the Nuremberg Laws in 1990 he said "If the Nuremberg laws were applied, then every post-war American president would have been hanged" and "If you run through the

whole record, it turns out a war crime is any war crime that you can condemn them for but they can't condemn us for." In this speech, he goes through and argues that each president, whether by explicit decision or implicitly by funding, has committed acts that fall under the Nuremburg Laws as war crimes. Some examples are Eisenhower's overthrow of Guatemala's government and Nixon's carpet bombing of Cambodia. He also criticizes the Nuremburg and Tokyo trials overall, arguing that they are a farce as the actions considered crimes are only the actions that the Allies did not commit. Things like urban bombing were not prosecuted as the Allies used that strategy much more than the Axis (Dresden, Tokyo, etc.). A German admiral was let go as his "crime" was the sinking of merchant vessels; for his defense he called US Admiral Nimitz who testified to the fact that the US did the same thing. Since we had committed these actions, they obviously are not war crimes.

Chomsky chooses to focus his political efforts on the US as he feels that his work will have the most effect on the state in which he is a citizen of. It is easy enough to critique the actions of other countries, especially "enemy" states, but evaluating one's own country is much tougher and many are unwilling to do so. When accused of being a reactionary in 1986, Chomsky responded that the only two countries in which his writings cannot appear are the US and the USSR. He feels that he can actually do something about the actions carried out by the US government, and that therefore he has an ethical duty to do so.

US foreign policy, according to Chomsky, can be described as the business interests that dominate the economy using the government to secure a state capitalist system, in which public resources are used to develop opportunities that businesses then can use to generate profit and therefore control. From this, he argues that US interference in foreign affairs

stemmed from quelling the development of states that could arise as independent from US control, which would then be an example to other countries under US (economic) control. Therefore, Cold War policies were not about fighting Soviet dominance but about asserting ideological and economic control over the world. Fear of communism was merely a tool used to scare the populace into accepting measures they would not tolerate otherwise.

Chomsky has come under much criticism for his views on the US government. In the same response about being a reactionary, he also claims that he has been called pretty much everything else. He has even received death threats for some of his views, and MIT provides undercover police protection at his talks there. Some have accused him of hypocrisy, as he is very critical of military imperialism but much early research at MIT was funded by the military. Chomsky's response to this was that since he has received funding from the military, he now has a greater responsibility to expose its flaws. He has been criticized for not retracting speculations that have been disproven.

To Chomsky, Soviet rule was "fake socialism" as it did not have democratic control of the means of production or resources, nor did it have truly public ownership. He was much more impressed with the ideologies practiced by the various Asian communist states, Vietnam in particular. On Radio Hanoi in 1970 he expressed his admiration for the Vietnamese people's steadfastness and praised their "great strides forward towards the socialist society." In talking about Chinese efforts, he felt that while there were flaws there were also many admirable things – especially at the communal level. This was in contradiction to his criticism of Vietnamese centralized planning. In *For Reasons of State*, he argues that paid labor is unnecessary and people should be free to pursue any job of their choice. People's choices will

inevitably result in work that is both rewarding and useful to society. There would be no state institutions, and work that was considered untasteful would be equally distributed to everyone. When detailing his views, he emphasizes that everything would be based on the actions of community members who lived and worked as part of the community, even when serving as delegates in greater communities. He feels that standard US libertarianism is "the extreme opposite of what's been called libertarian in every other part of the world since the Enlightenment." His position on welfare, which comes from the quote at the beginning of this paper, is that it is not inconsistent with anarchism. He wants, in his own words, "to work, today, to build a better society for tomorrow."

Besides his disdain for the US government, he is also very critical of mainstream media. As the US is a democratic society, openly violent forms of effecting control and public opinion would not be tolerated. Chomsky has stated that "propaganda is to a democracy what the bludgeon is to a totalitarian state," or that instead of using violence to control the populace the US government uses propaganda and the media. In *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media*, written with Edward S. Herman, he outlines a "propaganda model" in which the population is manipulated through mass media to accept the economic and political policies of the government. In this model, there are five main filters that news passes through. The first filter, ownership, means that most media is owned by giant corporations¹. The second filter, funding, means that news outlets derive income mostly from advertisement. Hence, media becomes a profit-driven business instead of a service for the

¹ Note the connection to his criticism that the US government is a state capitalist system.

public good, and beholden to the good will and expectations of their customers. The third filter is the quality of sources. The main sources for their news are the government and major business, which skews bias in their favor. Special interest groups form the fourth filter, in that they put pressure on the media for their biases. Finally, the fifth filter is common conventions and standards of journalism. The model goes on, using these five filters, to describe how the media is a decentralized but powerful propaganda system that is able to frame issues within the context and for the benefit of the elite but still appear to be democratic in nature.

Since Chomsky seems to have opinions on everything, science and religion are included too. He views that science is the search for explanation of events, and is not just a fact catalog. Because of this view, his contributions to science have mostly been in the form of hypotheses or general frameworks. He feels that science is inadequate in strength to apply to human affairs, as they are too complicated and “as soon as things become too complex, science can't deal with them.” I tried to give a witty explanation of Chomsky's religious views, but unfortunately another quote is the only way to properly convey them. In the interview *Science in the Dock*, he stated that “I don't even know what an atheist is. When people ask me if I'm an atheist, I have to ask them what they mean. What is it that I'm supposed to not believe in? Until you can answer that question I can't tell you whether I'm an atheist, and the question doesn't arise. [...] I don't see how one can be an agnostic when one doesn't know what it is that one is supposed to believe in, or reject.” Naturally, given his history, he identifies with liberation theology (interpreting Christianity from the view of the poor, using it as an argument for liberation from unjust economic conditions) and the teachings of the Bible where service to the poor, criticism of the rich, and pacifism are offered as moral conclusions.

Overall, Chomsky is much more than just a cunning linguist. While teaching at MIT, he has been greatly involved in politics, especially in criticism of the US government. He has also developed a model explaining mass media's relation to his views of the government, and holds opinions on the values that science and religion hold for society. On a random thought, I wonder if conservatives view Chomsky like liberals view "that guy" who watches too much Fox News. To end this wonderful paper, here is yet another Chomsky quote that not only summarizes his views but I think could earn a poster next to my Carl Sagan "Pale Blue Dot" one: "Optimism is a strategy for making a better future. Because unless you believe that the future can be better, you are unlikely to step up and take responsibility for making it so."

References

- "Activism, Anarchism, and Power." Interview by Harry Kreisler. *Conversation with Noam Chomsky*, P. 1 of 5. N.p., 2002. Web. 10 May 2013.
<<http://globetrotter.berkeley.edu/people2/Chomsky/chomsky-con1.html>>.
- "Answers by Noam Chomsky' to Questions about Anarchism." N.p., n.d. Web.
<http://www.zcommunications.org/chomsky_repliesana.htm>. ²
- "If the Nuremberg Laws Were Applied..." *The Noam Chomsky Website*. N.p., 1990. Web. 10 May 2013. <<http://www.chomsky.info/talks/1990----.htm>>.
- "Liberation Theology." *Wikipedia*. Wikimedia Foundation, 05 July 2013. Web. 10 May 2013.
<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Liberation_theology>.
- "Noam Chomsky, MIT Linguistics Program." *The Noam Chomsky Website*. N.p., 2002. Web. 10 May 2013. <<http://www.chomsky.info/bios/2002----.htm>>.
- "Noam Chomsky Quotes." N.p., 2013. Web. 10 May 2013.
<http://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/2476.Noam_Chomsky>.
- "Noam Chomsky." *Wikipedia*. Wikimedia Foundation, 05 Oct. 2013. Web. 10 May 2013.
<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Noam_Chomsky>.
- "Noam Chomsky's Political Views." *Wikipedia*. Wikimedia Foundation, 05 Oct. 2013. Web. 10 May 2013. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Noam_Chomsky's_political_views>.
- "Science in the Dock, Discussion with Noam Chomsky, Lawrence Krauss & Sean M. Carroll." *The Noam Chomsky Website*. N.p., 1 Mar. 2006. Web. 10 May 2013.
<<http://www.chomsky.info/debates/20060301.htm>>.

² Several quotes were sourced from this link, but unfortunately it is a dead link now.