

## **Powers and Prospects**

### *Reflections on Human Nature and the Social Order*

*N.Chomsky*

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Apart from some introductory speculations on the nature of human language, this book is a collection of essays constituting an inspired indictment against the ruthless policies of democratic western governments. Of the first part I have relatively little to say, except that the tenor of those speculations certainly has the ring of truth, and that it is a pity that they are not more empirically illustrated than they are. In his discussion of classical philosophy Chomsky also presents an independent and sympathetic account of the thinkers of the past. Unlike most self-respecting philosophers he is not out to deride the dualism of Descartes, and he shows commendable sensitivity as to the problematics of a mechanical materialist point of view. Was not Newton's postulation of a force acting at a distance a thorough rejection of the mechanical worldview? At least Newton was well aware of that, and his natural philosophical forays were just one part of a far grander attempt at unification, much of which has become a matter of embarrassment to later generations. But it is as a political thinker that Chomsky is most concerned in this collection. It is written in the 90's, during the heyday of the Clinton administration, before the spectacle of the second Bush, the Nine eleven. and the subsequent obsession with terrorism and the ensuing adventures in Afghanistan and Iraq. Clearly any reader who had back then taken a dubious view of the Chomskys analysis, must have had much of it confirmed retroactively through the developments in the last ten years.

Still Chomsky writes with a certain shrillness, occasionally getting the better of his grammar as well as his logic. Clearly some attempts at falsification of his own hypotheses might give his project a more scientific legitimacy, as it is, the critical reader is apt to dismiss him as a paranoid clown, who may submit the arguments of his opponents with utmost rigour and sarcasm, but naively harnessing the flimsiest argument in favour of his theories. Is he a clown with a mission just to shame us and amuse us and thus ultimately make us feel more righteous? I believe not. There are inevitable shortcomings in his presentations, many of which he must have become obvious in retrospect<sup>1</sup>, but his essays are not in the nature of scientific treatises, but proposed as provocations and invitations to the reader to ask his own questions and draw his own conclusions, and make him aware of there being a wealth of sources outside those officially sanctioned, and that the established media only covers one part of it which is fit to print, as well as printing much that is not fit at all. A man seized with indignation cannot allow himself the luxury of perfecting his arguments, checking all the sources, deliberately trying to contradict what he is saying. As to the latter too many powerful actors are doing just that. And besides any expression of thought and opinion is offered expressly to provoke contradiction if dared.

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<sup>1</sup> Is it wise to give such appreciation of Ahmed Chalabi, later a temporary darling of the CIA?

Chomsky is a linguist and a philosopher, and as such with immaculate academic credentials. It has long been argued that no one should step across their narrow expertise, and in particular that only experts can be expected to talk with authority and demand attention in their particular disciplines. Chomsky racts against this apartheid of discussion, claiming that too many intellectuals are blinkered their minds too compartementalized. That when it comes to public affairs, everyone, in particular independant intellectuals have an obligation to engage themselves in them. What is needed is not really more than a clear intellect, a natural curiosity and a modest effort to track down relevant information. For all the shortcomings of our western societies they (still) allow us the luxury of open access (although this is becoming more restricted) and forming our own opinions and even given vent to them, however with no guarantee of being attended to. Thus the possibility to orient yourself in contemporary affairs is a privilige available in the west, and one we should not allow ourselves to pass up. And, (here he is acting as a moralist), it is not enough to form an independant view, you also need to form one of relevance and address it to appropraite audiences. Expressing opinions freely is a right, but such expression only becomes a self-indulgence if it is not further directed with the aim of an appropriate action at the end.

Chomsky considers himself not more than a decent, civilized human being, committed to the ideals of the Enlightenment and belonging to a classical liberal tradition, which had the betterment of mankind at their heart, acknowledging people not only their right to existence, but also to a meaningful such, involving a life of intellectual stimulation and contentment. This is a moral view, in no way reducible to naturalistic explanations<sup>2</sup> but assumed as an instinctive truth, which he finds it impossible to deny. Democracy is at its heart egalitarianism, in the sense of having a faith in the good and decent nature of the ordinary man, and a belief that his ultimate visions (of the free and creative intellectual life) coincide with your own<sup>3</sup>.

Basic to the worldview of Chomsky is the one of class. The world consists of an elite on one hand, with almost all the power and wealth (the two for all intents and purposes being indistinguishable) and the masses of the poor on the other. The purpose of the elite is to defend and extend their privileges and power at the expense of the rest. Does this sound very Marxist? (and if so obsolete?) This might be true, but that does not necessarily mean that it is obsolete, it corresponds to our innate sense of justice, and as such intimately concerned with our notions of simple basic decency.

Our Governments are democratic, or at least they pay exalted lipservice to its ideals, which in its modern orthodoxy means resources to free elections and the free market. (What about if the two come in conflict?). At the same time the major players in the so called free market are the corporations. Those are nothing but private tyrannies, in which democracy is literally put on its head. Power does not stem from the base, but comes from above; responsibility on the other hand is ultimately reduced to the base. Is this analysis

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<sup>2</sup> I am sure that Chomsky would find most evolutionary explanations of altruism beside the point and disgustingly instrumental.

<sup>3</sup> This is of course also more or less implicit in the elucidation of democracy given by Popper, although he puts different emphasis. To him everybody is entitled to be listened to, and they should be judged on the worth of their arguments.

correct? It certainly has the ring of truth, and we can safely assume it as a premises for future exploration. However, the issues are thorny, due to the much lauded competition of the market, there ultimately is no consensus, let alone incentive for conspiracy<sup>4</sup>. The blessings of a free market<sup>5</sup> are articles of our modern faith, but nevertheless the notion of a free market is bound to be self-contradictory. The players of a free market have of course an overriding interest for security, of freeing themselves of the vicissitudes of a truly free-market competition, thus they usurp the powers of government to do their bidding. Is this true? It is a theory, and it goes a long way in making sense of what will soon follow; but it is but a theory, and it could be contested or at least modified in its particulars. The upshot is that the government of a nation identifies its interests, or rather the interests of the nation<sup>6</sup>, with those of the corporate organizations. Fair enough. And in this context it is only necessary to consider the function of the military to understand the degree of collusion that is necessary between business interest and those of the government. Liberal economists, how much they resent the government on their backs, do not in general<sup>7</sup> regret the biggest governmental agency - the military complex, which in the words of Chomsky, is a giant well-fare system for the rich, and which needs to be nourished in good times as well as in bad times<sup>8</sup>. Is this true? Does there not lie a basic contradiction in the theory that military expenditure should increase the wealth of a nation? Time and time again in recent history, the sweet way of economic revitalization supposedly provided by armament, has constituted an irresistible seduction. Clearly some very basic economic issues are at play here, such as that consumerism is the engine that drives the economy<sup>9</sup>, which is a paradox of a similar nature. There might very well be a truth to it, which suggest that wealth could indeed be generated in a wide variety of counter-intuitive ways, some of which might be far more compliable with human decency than the present ones.

The central event of the 20th century is the Second World War. It is central in the sense of being the most studied by historians, providing dramatic narratives, fascinating, if mostly repellant personalities<sup>10</sup>, and being pivotal in setting the agendas of the post-war years. One may of course be free to speculate that there are other, even more fundamental changes, that has taken place in the 20th century, which will have repercussions long

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<sup>4</sup> against whom? The consumer? Once again the issues are involved, there certainly is a well-thought out campaign of manipulation through advertisement, usurping a large fraction of the profits; on the other hand the consumer also has some autonomy and hence also some responsibility as a consumer, due to the feedback his consumption generates.

<sup>5</sup> further corroborated by the fall of the wall and the surmised impotence of the so called planned economy

<sup>6</sup> cf. The British primeminister Palmerstons dictum that a nation has no permanent friends only permanent interests.

<sup>7</sup> Of course exceptions are bound to exist, any category of people, sufficiently numerous, is bound to contain independant thinkers, with whose opinions we may not agree, but whose intellectual honesty we cannot but respect and welcome.

<sup>8</sup> Even Eisenhower expressed fears about the growing military-industrial complex, which since his time has increased under both Democratic and Republican control.

<sup>9</sup> Keynes famously suggested that a nation creates wealth by spending.

<sup>10</sup> Including that of Churchill

after the excitement of the Second World War has receded, events that belong to the history of Braudelarian 'longue durée', examples of such may be the vast emigration from the countryside to the city. The Second World War is usually seen as a Black and White contest between the forces of Evil and Good. There certainly is much to that, especially in retrospect, and although many did have the foresight to perceive this even in the beginning, and far more were persuaded by propaganda that this was the case, subsequent behaviour of the kind Chomsky chastises, makes one wonder whether this was actually the case at the level of those who decided to wage war. Their ultimate motivation may not have been a moral one (especially as the full extent of the depravity involved were not revealed until afterwards) but the realization that Hitler could not be contained. Had there been some hope of containment as well as some opportunity to pursue common interests (such as the vanquishment of the Sovietunion) it is not inconceivable that the Western powers might have been content with turning a blind eye.

The Second World War taught us a lesson, but although much was gained by such brutal instruction, ultimately it was a misleading lesson. The Nazi-movement was unique by the brutal honesty of its ideology, which can only be described as an exultant Satanism. While the ideological underpinnings of the West (take Magna Charta, the Declaration of Independence) or the Communist East are impeccable and can serve well as inspiration, those visions provided by a Hitler and a Himmler were parochial and contradictory and would it not have been for their earnest and partially successful attempts at implementation risable. It created the illusion that Evil is always obvious, and that anti-semitism is a crucial component of it rather than an incidental, and above all put an undue importance on rhetorics. The rhetorics involved was obviously offensive, but in isolation impotent, thus the intermittent emergences of neo-Nazi groups have been something of a red herring.

The aftermath of the War created an American hegenomy, the colonial empires of its western allies were being dismantled and the former opponents were being treated generously, in contradistinction from the more primitive reaction of the end of First World War<sup>11</sup>. And it was a hegenomy, which was not founded on conquest, on the contrary the U.S. had come to the rescue, saving the world from itself, and upholding the ideals of the Enlightenment as manifested in human rights, democracy and freedom. The only continuing threat to this triumph of the Good against the Evil, was the prevailing of the Sovietunion, which seemed to have emerged strengthened out of the war as well, subjugating part of Europe and threatening to eventually dominate the world through the spread of its secular religion - Communism. As the spread of religions had been very successful in the past, there was all the reason to take the ideological expansion of the Soviets seriously, as well as their military might, once they too had acquired thermo-nuclear

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<sup>11</sup> The punishment of Germany and the subsequent humiliation may have been somewhat of an exaggeration. True demeaning and counterproductive reparitions were imposed on the losing side, but that was only following an established tradition, Germany itself at the successful Franco-Prussian War saddled France with economical obligations. The territorial integrity of Germany was more or less respected, and the terms of the reparitions were subsequently renegotiated, and by the early twenties it was brought in from the cold. Animosity between the French and the Germans, being of long standing, was of course not wiped away, but the respect of the British had been revived, after a brief pre-war period of reviling.

weapons<sup>12</sup>. The Cold War emerged, and it is generally thought that only the devastating destructive potentials of the modern atomic arsenal prevented it from erupting hot. Instead a policy of containment was formed, one of whose major authors being George Kennan<sup>13</sup>.

The Cold War was strung with crises. There was the Berlin crises, The Korean crisis, the Hungarian crisis, the Berlin crisis again, with the erection of the Wall, the Cuban missile crisis, and then of course the extended one - that of the Vietnam war, a war inherited by the Americans from the colonial extrication of the French. In all of those, with the possible exception of the last, the precarious situation of the world was highlighted (especially during the brinkmanship of the Cuban crisis), as well as the contrast between the free and democratic world, and the darkness of Communist tyranny. In a sense the Vietnam war changed all that. Eventually it became clear that the freedom loving (the Soviets expressed themselves as peace loving at the time) government of the US was in fact a colonial power at heart, set out to dominate the world in its way, in the name of freedom and the freedom to trade and make money. Although there had been some sentimentalization of the Sovietunion in leftist intellectual circles, especially in France, still smarting from the humiliation of the last War, and the American assistance, in which such stands could be seen as an act of defiance, the critical assessment of the States, extended itself significantly, and from having been an extremist point of view, became rather established. However, the critical stance was in many ways rather compartmentalized, and as a large part of its inspiration came from the States itself, it did not really stem the enthusiasm that greeted the world-wide expansion of popular American culture. The reason for the domestic opposition to the Vietnam war is rather interesting. U.S.A. having been a model for democracy and freedom for the world, did still into the fifties maintain a divided society, in many ways as oppressive to the Black minority, as the emerging regime in South Africa. This was an embarrassment, and to the credit of the American Government it took an active stand in trying to dismantle discrimination, at least on a legal basis. Coupled with this was the rise of the Civil Rights movement, out of which the anti-war movement emerged naturally, and eventually the revolt of the privileged young, known by the year of 1968. There was a general radicalization of opinion, a change in clothes and sexual conventions, much lauded and attention getting, but whose impact on the minds of men was in many ways far less than what was initially thought and hoped. One of the ideas of the movement was the corruptedness of western government in particular, and western civilization in general, although most of the proponents had no compunctions of enjoying the fruits of the latter.

Chomsky is a product of the times, heady ones no doubt for anyone of a radical and independant temperament<sup>14</sup>. He also has a vision of the world and its actors, and one in which the American government, irrespective of what President happened to be placed in

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<sup>12</sup> Bertrand Russell, one of the heroes of Chomsky, infamously suggested at the end of the 40's a pre-emptive strike against the Evil Empire, later on his views on the protagonists in this battle for souls, would change.

<sup>13</sup> Not a hero in the pantheon of Chomsky, but one which with commendable honesty articulated the cynism of American aims, according to the author.

<sup>14</sup> One problem though was that radicalism simply became chic, as was inevitable in any mass-movement, and hence not necessarily the sign of an independant mind.

the White House, has pursued a shameless neo-colonial policy of ruthless exploitation, obfuscated by much sweet talk and diverting actions. The cruelties of the Hitler regime were in many ways not anything unprecedented, some Swedish commentators have remarked<sup>15</sup>, it was only employing the same methods that the European had directed against colonial subjects, to Europeans themselves. Thus the modern cruelties of the world, were in fact nothing but those of colonialization, which, provided you were not on the receiving line, affected you almost not at all, and hence were difficult to notice. The Vietnam war was a simple case of neo-colonial warfare, which was waged at many fronts. According to Chomsky the Cold War was a front, the Kremlin, for all its blackbustler, was not a real threat to the interests of the United States, although of course a most convenient excuse for its actions. Containment worked beautifully, reducing the Soviet influence to marginal parts of the world, and in particular not to western Europe, leftist intellectuals notwithstanding<sup>16</sup>. The Vietnam adventure was an embarrassment, but of course as to life far more costly to the victorious enemies, than to the Americans themselves. Indonesia was different, there Suharto and his gang managed to do the dirty job perfectly, exterminating a lot of people, supposedly Communists or sympathetic to the cause, and in the words of Bundy, the success of Suharto in the mid 60's really made the further involvement in South East Asia superfluous. The massacres in Indonesia mostly went un-noticed outside the realm of the victims. The crisis in East-Timor, on which Chomsky spends much time in his book, was a logical consequence of the Indonesian genocide. While westerners were aghast at the excesses of a Pol Pot (although some of course, true to character, extolled the ideological purity of that murderous regime as well) a similar genocide was taking place on the soil of that small Indonesian island, but who cared? And those atrocities, mostly unsung, were actually perpetrated during Carter, the president who more than any other has been associated with 'doing good' and being a selfless champion for Human Rights. In the view of Chomsky, America is indeed a phenomenon which is not controllable by the single individual, be they endowed with presidential discretions: but is in the words of Palmerstone, without any permanent friends or foes, having only permanent interests, which they are pursuing relentlessly.

Now Chomsky's accounts only go up to the mid 90's, in particular there is no mention of nine eleven, nor of the adventures in Afghanistan or Iraq. It does not take much imagination to construe his subsequent views on such events. But those events have more than any else brought about a resentment of American arrogance making it more bitterly hated than ever in its history<sup>17</sup>, graphically bringing home to the naive spectator, what before was only suggested by more sophisticated ones. Yet, the dream of America is apparently so deeply ingrained, that such recent developments have been laid at the door of Bush and his disastrous policies, not to the American phenomenon per se, resulting in exalted expectations of the new President and his ability to turn the empire around to a

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<sup>15</sup> Jan Myrdal and Sven Lindquist separately

<sup>16</sup> A thesis of Hobsbawm, attributes the rise of welfare state in western Europe after the war, as a way of buying the populations, inoculating them to the seductions of Communism, by making them redundant.

<sup>17</sup> Still this is not entirely clear. The Vietnam years made anti-americanism not only respectable in western society, but almost compulsory. Subsequent decades after the debacle, brought along a renewed appreciation, leaving the lessons of Vietnam mostly forgotten

more respectable course.

But why is the government acting so appallingly? Could those atrocities have been avoided, or have they been crucial to the economic standing of the country, and the wealth enjoyed by its citizens, even if that enjoyment is getting more and more restricted to a diminishing elite? Chomsky does not really explain why, his indignation is enough to satisfy him. Who really profits by them? Not even the bulk of the American people, according to the author, the faith in whose common decency, he has not abandoned. So is there only a thin layer of privileged people, captains of great business corporations, and their associates and beneficiaries, who profit from this state of affairs? What can be done about it, except the heroic vigilance, to which he ministers himself, never giving up reporting on the horrible which is going on behind the scenes.

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