“Who Drank the Hemlock?”
An Interview with Noam Chomsky

Cassandra Atherton

The name ‘Chomsky’ is magic. People listen when you invoke his name, wanting to know what he is like, if his intellect is overwhelming, if he is intimidating.

I was one hour early. I had been told to go to the eighth floor of the State Building in Vassar Street at MIT, in the Dreyfoos Tower. And you don’t keep someone like Chomsky waiting. My hands were so sweaty that the pages of my notebook were wavy and crinkled. Was I intimidated? Absolutely.

I was told to sit and wait outside since I was early and he was busy with a videoconference. A few minutes later he strolled past me, casually dressed — for an intellectual giant he was smaller than I imagined. He asked me to give him a moment and then invited me into his office. Piles of books rose up like stalactites from every available space. He had a cup that he moved around the desk as we spoke.

Was I overwhelmed by his intellect? Yes. Was he intimidating? Only because of his intellect and integrity. What was he like? He was gentle and very softly spoken. In fact he said that his voice didn’t often record well and listening back to the interview, his voice often drops to a whisper. But it is his eyes that I remember most. They sparkled when I asked a question. The joy of answering questions about things for which he feels some kind of passion is obvious from the twinkle in his velvet eyes.

WOE: What are the responsibilities of the public intellectual to himself and to the public?

CHOMSKY: That is really two questions—one is what they are, and the second is what they should be. They are what Hans Morgenthau, the founder of realist international relations theory, said: conformist subservients to those in power. That is basically true throughout history. You can trace this back to the Bible or to classical Greece. So who drank the hemlock? In Athens it wasn’t somebody who was praising the gods, it was someone who was corrupting the youth. In the Bible there were people who we would call intellectuals—they’re called prophets but that’s a bad translation due to the obscurity of the word—but they
were what we call intellectuals. The prophets were criticising the acts of the evil kings, they were carrying out political analysis, they were calling for mercy and justice for the suffering people. That is what an intellectual should do, but how were they treated? They were driven into the desert and imprisoned and they were called haters of Israel. Anti-Semites, they were called.

There were intellectuals who were treated very well; they were the ones who centuries later in the gospels were called the false prophets, the flatterers of the court, the conformists, those committed to conformist subservience to those in power. They were the ones who were well treated, praised and lauded and so on. And so it goes in history. You can find some exceptions, but not a lot. If you look through history you will find that it is the conformist intellectuals who are respected and honoured. In the old Soviet Union, it’s the commissars and not the dissidents; dissidents could be praised in the west but not in the Soviet Union. It’s the same, of course, in the United States—dissidents aren’t sent to the gulag, but we have other ways for marginalising and silencing the voices that aren’t liked. Orwell wrote about that in his introduction to Animal Farm. He said that in free countries like in England, unpopular views could be suppressed without the use of force. He went on to talk about this, but his voice was suppressed—his introduction wasn’t published.

WOE: What are the benefits and the drawbacks of being a public intellectual working at a university?

CHOMSKY: Should Marx not have worked in the British museum? The British museum is the symbol of empire. It stole everything from all around the world, so should Marx have refused to use the resources from the British museum? It is an extremely irrational attitude and it is also a deeply immoral one. We should be concerned about what people do, not where they are working or who is paying them. We’ve have had this debate around here for the past sixty years for obvious reasons. MIT is theoretically a private university, but basically a government university. Until the 1970s it was close to one hundred percent supported by the Pentagon. But did that mean that we should not have organised resistance against the Vietnam War in a lab that was one hundred percent supported by the three armed services?

WOE: Is it hard, though, to stay true to your roots when you are in a privileged environment?

CHOMSKY: Just take a look at the few dissidents scattered around—many of them are privileged Americans, because Americans have opportunities. Privilege confers opportunity. People can use it to be
subservient to those in power if they want, but they have other options. Take MIT again. In the 1960s when I was actively involved in resistance and in and out of jail, facing all sorts of charges, there was no reaction from the University or the Pentagon. And there is good reason for that, which a lot of people don’t know, including most economists. We don’t have a free market economy, nothing like it. We have an economy that relies very heavily on state sectors. MIT is kind of like a funnel into which the population pours money, thinking that it is for defence or something (which of course it isn’t), and out of the funnel comes high technology that can be handed over to private corporations for profit; that’s the economy. That’s where you get computers, the Internet, telecommunications, biotechnology. These areas are mostly publicly subsidised under one pretext or another through institutions like this.

You have to ask the real question, what is the consequence of the work that you do? And if you are working on biological warfare with a grant from the NIH, it’s no better than if you’re working on biological warfare with a grant from the Pentagon. The source of the funding is essentially irrelevant, unless the source of the funding controls what you do, then the question arises and then simple questions of honesty arise. But other than that, the universities are probably the freest institutions in the country, so why not work there? Why not have a student movement at a place where students and young people can actually do something, instead of being controlled by their parents or have to work in a fifty-hours-a-week job that doesn’t put food on the table? They are lucky here, they are privileged, they are free, they should use the opportunity. To tell them to leave their freedom and opportunity is irrational and immoral.

WOE: Can you discuss the impact of teaching and writing on each other? Do you see one as informing the other?

CHOMSKY: Most of my writing is in fact something that came out of class talks, discussions. I just spent an hour on a videoconference with Pakistan where they asked me to give a talk on a topic that I hadn’t expected. It happens that I have to write an article on a similar topic and I think what I will do if I can remember what I said is take the talk and use it for the article. Professional work—everything I have written—has come out of class.

WOE: How important is it to share your political views with your students?

CHOMSKY: I’m very scrupulous about that; I never do. They bring it up, but I don’t like to talk to captive audiences. It’s one of the reasons why I don’t give commencement speeches. I’m constantly asked to do
commencement speeches, and I used to do them years ago, but I don’t do them now. The reason is straightforward; the audience is not coming to hear my political views. If I give a talk in one of the towns around here, I can say whatever I want because people come and want to hear what I have to say. But if I give a commencement speech I am talking to the parents of students, and they don’t want to hear what I have to say, so what right do I have to force them to listen? It’s the same when I am talking to students in class. I do sometimes talk about my views to students on my own time, not in class time. I did for about twenty-five years teach undergraduate courses on political and social issues, and there, of course, I did discuss my thoughts since the students were coming because they did want to hear them.

WOE: Do you think public intellectuals can shape government policy or are they always on the back foot having to discuss policy that is already out there?

CHOMSKY: Again, we have to ask which public intellectuals. If you are talking about the ones who can publish in the press and the journals and are respected, then yes, they can shape and in fact design public policy and they can try to manipulate the public into accepting it since this is a part of their role. If you are talking about dissident intellectuals, the only way they can shape government policy is by addressing the population and the population can then one or another way affect public policy. Even in totalitarian states governments have to pay some attention to dissidents. In freer societies they can have a substantial role. But only through indirect means.

WOE: How do dissident public intellectuals get their ideas across if the media is filtering everything they say? For instance, don’t you write letters to newspapers and journals that aren’t published?

CHOMSKY: I rarely write letters—I know that they won’t publish them. I do it out of curiosity sometimes, to see how low they can sink. Like if the Wall Street Journal or the New York Times publishes pure lies and slander, will they let me respond? That is where my curiosity lies.

If I look back over fifty years, there are times when I have had access to the media and that is because they are capable of misunderstanding what I am saying and these have been very specific times, like towards the end of the Vietnam war. The intellectuals, the business community, turned against the war after 1968, and once the business conglomerate took a stand, that opened up lots of things in the corporate media. At that point it was possible for people like me to write and publish in the public media, giving a principled critique of the war, saying that it was wrong, not because it was costing too much or it was failing,
but because it was aggression. That criticism was possible because it could be misunderstood as joining the mainstream public intellectuals in their unprincipled critique of the war. It’s like the Nazi generals after Stalingrad who could say to Hitler that we should never have opened a two-front war; it was stupid. We should have taken out Britain first or something.

It’s the same with Iraq. Take a look at the discussions today—they are all about how we can win and whether the war is costing too much money. Sometimes the discussion is overly dramatic. In the *New York Times Magazine* Michael Gordon discussed the war and the election, and he used the various options that the United States had in Iraq. He put the candidates, the government officials, military people, and the liberal critics in a potentially serious article. There was only one voice missing and that was the Iraqis’ voice. It is not that journalists don’t know what the Iraqis think, they do.

In fact a spectacular report came out recently from the Pentagon. The Pentagon carries out regular inquiries into Iraqi opinion (probably the Nazis did the same). If you want to control or dominate a population, you have to know what they think. Well, they released a report that was very enthusiastic. They said there is good news—most people think that with sectarian violence and ethnic conflict the Iraqis will never get together, but we have discovered from our study that Iraqis really have shared beliefs. From all over the country and from all walks of life they agree on important trends. And this is good news. So what are the shared beliefs? It turns out the shared beliefs are that the United States is to blame for all the atrocities that have taken place and that it should get out and then maybe the Iraqis could have national reconciliation. That is what the Iraqis think, but that doesn’t enter the discussion.

The British diplomatic historian Mark Curtis (who is a serious public intellectual, so he can’t be quoted or referred to) has written books on Britain’s horrendous crimes, often very candidly. He has a book called *Unpeople*, meaning just people, the general population, but not us guys with the brains and the guns. So the Iraqis are unpeople, their voices don’t matter. Just like the voices of Americans don’t matter either because most American voices also get dismissed—they are unpeople.

And the role of public intellectuals is to make sure that people and unpeople are never heard and that the only thing that is heard is the voice of those with power and privilege. Of course they think of themselves as very critical and dissident. So Anthony Lewis, who I have quoted, will be outraged to hear that I think that he was kind of like a Nazi after Stalingrad. But is it true? Yes, it is true.
WOE: Communication is a really important part of connecting with the public and I wanted to ask you about post-modernism and what you think about postmodernism and its effect on writing and analysis.

CHOMSKY: Postmodernism is a very useful invention to keep intellectuals in their preferred status of conformist subservients to those in power. It is mostly unintelligible gibberish. I look at it, but mostly out of curiosity. It falls into two categories as far as I can see, unintelligible and truism. The truism is said in very inflated rhetoric, polysyllables and so on, and what it turns out to be is a way for intellectuals to be more radical than thou, but do nothing except talk to each other in academic seminars and not get involved with the general public in real activism. That is very attractive—it is a lot of fun to sit around having conversations with one another as Richard Rorty put it, and it is really wonderful to want to get involved in the nitty gritty of organising workers or illegal immigrants. But it is a cocoon, almost impenetrable, impossible to understand what they are talking about.

Have you read *Intellectual Impostures* by physicists Jean Bricmont from Belgium, and Alan Sokel from the U.S.? They went through what leading French intellectuals had written about science, and it was so outlandish, you couldn’t believe that human beings who went to junior high school could write things like that. But when you write this stuff in very inflated rhetoric with codicils and pomposity and so on, people take it seriously.

One of these post-modern French guys, Bruno Latour, who has a background in science, wrote about the discovery that one of the Pharaohs had died of tuberculosis. Latour wrote a very cynical article about this discovery and how ridiculous it was to think that this Pharaoh had died of tuberculosis because tuberculosis was only discovered in the nineteenth century. Since we all know that there is no truth, there is only social construction, isn’t it silly they claimed he died of tuberculosis? You think that people are parodying themselves. My own personal view, but I can’t prove it, is that he was trying to see how ridiculous he could be.

When that stuff is picked up by western intellectuals, it doesn’t matter much—they just play their games. But where it is really lethal is in the third word. Because third world intellectuals tend to stand in a certain awe of western culture, especially of Paris. I see all over the third world intellectuals aping the latest Paris nonsense, and there it is serious because the popular movements really need great participation with educated people. I think we owe an apology to the third world when the United States and literature departments want to discuss nonsense.
WOE: I spoke with representatives of the Teamsters recently, and they were discussing the difficulties in organising people and the declining number of people joining unions. Do you think unions can ever return to the glory days of the fifties? What will happen to working people in the future?

CHOMSKY: It's not that they're declining, it's that they are being smashed. It started right after the Second World War. It's pretty well documented. Some of the best work done on it was by an Australian, Alex Carey, a good friend of mine. His was kind of disdained and marginalised in Australia because his work was too important for people to pay attention to. Finally after he died they started paying attention. He opened up the subject of corporate propaganda and then it was picked up by others. The depression and the Second World War radicalized the public all over the world.

In Europe that had to be crushed by force. One of the first things the British and the Americans did was what they called 'liberating Europe,' and that was to destroy the resistance, particularly targeting the resistance in Italy. Italy probably has been the recipient of more CIA intervention than any other country. They were trying to subvert Italian democracy since it was too radical. And it was the same everywhere. In the United States, which was also pretty radical at the time, the government started a major propaganda campaign to undermine and destroy unions—they were the main target since they were a democratising force. They not only defend workers' rights, but they also provide a way for people to get together and pool their limited resources, educate each other, and act political. That is extremely dangerous because few things are hated as much among Western elites as democracy. So major corporate offences against unions started, and the scale was unbelievable—all the way from businesses running programs in factories where you had captive audiences forced to study economics to sports groups, churches, school curriculum.

Right now in Massachusetts, which the most liberal, progressive educational system in the country, my daughter's son is in a high school in a progressive suburb that has a curriculum given to them by the Objectivist Foundation. Their beliefs are based on those of Ayn Rand, who indoctrinated people into the belief that altruism is the worst sin, that you should be out for yourself and nobody else. They provide curriculum to schools and they teach it. It is shocking but that is one part of this massive effort to drive out of people's heads the normal human instincts of solidarity, support, and sympathy.

The government was at its worst under Reagan. He was a murderer abroad, a terrorist, and at home he was just a brutal thug. That is why
he is so honoured now, so revered. He wanted to destroy the lives of the working people and he was also the most protectionist President in post-war American history, but he was revered with the popular free market. It is all propaganda!

It’s possible to beat subservience into people’s heads. Perhaps the most striking example of that is the women’s movement. Women accepted subordination, beating, abuse—that is the way they thought it was supposed to be. If I had asked my grandmother if she was oppressed, she wouldn’t have known what I was talking about; she would have thought that’s the way that the world is, it’s been that way for thousands of years. The women’s movement began by raising women’s consciousness. Small groups of women would get together and talk and realise what they had been accepting. Then it changed. It is very different now. If you ask my daughter if she is repressed, she’d laugh. Try to recover, or gauge or hold onto your consciousness, your own instincts, let them come out, into battle. That has to be done before you can revise things. And of course it has to be done right with sharp, significant, political changes.

WOE: I was recently in Las Vegas, and it is an incredible place, really interesting. It is full of working class people and yet it seems to be beneath the contempt of academics who talk about Las Vegas in a derogatory way. Given that it is the fastest growing city in America, what does that say about America?

CHOMSKY: When our kids were little we used to go to an inexpensive restaurant nearby where we knew all the waitresses, the working people. Once a year, these people would get together, go to Las Vegas, and blow all the money they had saved on the casinos. There are ways of ripping off workers that the government is involved in directly. Massachusetts has a state lottery. A state lottery is simply a way of cheating people; it’s a way of developing a regressive tax system. If you look at the communities where people buy lottery tickets, it’s inversely related to the level of education. And the reason is obvious—if you think about it when you buy a lottery ticket, you realise you are throwing away your money. If people thought this, the state wouldn’t run them. It is the same in Las Vegas. But poor people, partly out of desperation, think, “Maybe I’ll be like that guy on television who won a million dollars.”

But I don’t think gambling should be illegal. I think it should be illegal for the state to do it—the state should not be involved in robbing people—but if the waitresses at the restaurant want to blow their money in Las Vegas, that is their choice. They are victims of a propaganda system that glorifies gambling. Take a look at TV shows set in Las Vegas. It
looks smart. The poor people who watch this stuff think, “I don’t live like this so it must be my fault.” These are hard perceptions to break.

Take the election. The elections are basically run by the public relations industry, the same industry that sells toothpaste and lifestyle drugs on television. And they do it the same way. When you look at an ad on television, you don’t expect to learn anything. If we had anything remotely like a free market, General Motors would show an ad in which they’d say, “Here is my product, here are its characteristics”—thirty seconds and you’d be informed. That would be creating informed consumers making rational choices. But they don’t want that, they want uninformed consumers making irrational choices for the purpose of advertising, to undermine markets. You can undermine democracy in the same way. You don’t want people voting on the basis of issues, that is one reason for the big disparity between people and policies. You want them to vote on the basis of image and poor quality.

George Bush created an image of the kind of guy you’d like to meet in a bar who has to get back to the ranch. I am convinced (though I can’t prove it) that he was taught to mispronounce words—he was taught to say “misunderestimated”; I’m pretty sure he didn’t say things like that at Yale. It makes sense, then, that the liberal intellectuals ridiculed him and they wrote books about Bush’s mispronunciations. But Bush’s strategists considered the population and said to the people, “It’s easy for the elitists who are drinking French wine and eating feasts to ridicule ordinary guys like us, like George Bush and you ordinary guys who just want to have a drink at the bar. We have to get rid of these bourgeois elitists.” Then the strategists go and kick the ordinary guys in the face. If you watch campaigns, that’s how you undermine democracy.

Cassandra Atherton teaches at Melbourne University.
Copyright of Writing on the Edge is the property of Writing on the Edge and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.