

# Noam Chomsky

## An Interview

**RP:** In the 1950s and '60s, the bridge between your theoretical work and your political work seems to have been the attack on behaviourism, which then dominated not only psychology but the various social sciences as well, which were often used to justify capitalism and imperialism. But now, partly because of Artificial Intelligence, behaviourism is no longer an issue. Or so it seems. How does this leave the link between your linguistics and your politics?

**CHOMSKY:** I've never really perceived much of a link, to tell you the truth. I do believe that behaviourism achieved its popularity and its prestige on the basis of its utility, or presumed utility (probably false), and that its presumed utility is as a technique of manipulation. But if you look back at the critique I did of behaviourism in the '50s, I didn't go into that. There was just the analysis of Skinner, and that sort of thing was strictly internal. I basically argued that there's an interpretation of it in which it is vacuous, and there's an interpretation in which it's false, and there's nothing else. In the back of my mind it was a political critique, but it didn't come out there. Later, I did introduce a broader context. But that was when they were making broader claims. So in the discussion of Skinner's *Beyond Freedom and Dignity*, I did go into the broader claims. But that's because that's what he was discussing. My feeling was that whatever my own political thoughts on the matter were, they were not relevant to the analysis of the material. As far as there are links between my own political interests and my linguistic work, they're extremely tenuous, and always have been. I've never even discussed them except in response to questions. I mean, obviously one can't infer anything about politics from what you know about universal grammar, or conversely.

**RP:** But there are *some* links?

**CHOMSKY:** Yes. You can imagine links, which are mostly hypothetical. They would come from the fact that any attitude that one takes towards social issues or towards human relations – if it's not just random – must be based on some conception of human nature, some conception of how social arrangements or interpersonal relations ought to be conducted in such a way as to be conducive to human needs. That means you're presuming something about what human needs are, what human properties are, what ought to be optimised, and so on. To the extent that you make these articulate – which is not a very great extent – you can perhaps expand upon the moral basis for your positions. But at that point you move into the area of hopes and expectations, rather than knowledge and understanding, since there isn't enough knowledge and un-

derstanding to offer a firm grounding. At this point one can begin to draw together ideas from various areas, in a rather classical way. I've tried to relate it to the more libertarian strains that developed during the Enlightenment; the libertarian strains – there are others, but those in particular – which have Cartesian roots, strictly Cartesian roots in my opinion, and which develop into classical liberalism and into libertarian socialism.

The roots are a conception of human nature which emphasises as essential to it the need for creative work under one's own control, solidarity and cooperation with others: the idea expressed in classical liberal thought that if a person produces something under external compulsion we may admire what he *does*, but despise what is *is*; whereas if he produces the same work under his own internal direction part of the humanity of the person is being realised. This is a classical liberal view which goes back to assumptions about human nature which have a family resemblance to ideas about creativity and the roots of development of human capacities (cognitive capacities) for which one finds some evidence, a lot of evidence in fact, in the study of particular cognitive capacities like language. At that point you can draw connections. But they are so far short of inferential connections that I've always been extremely hesitant to draw them. They're suggestive connections maybe.

Now, as far as the manipulation and control is concerned: that's another issue. One question that I've been interested in for a long time is why empiricist ideology – empiricist beliefs, to be less tendentious about it – why empiricist beliefs, though so plainly false, and so plainly lacking in any conceivable merit on intellectual grounds, have been so popular. As I read Hume, it seems to me that Hume presented a solid case. He said, 'Look, here's a real empiricist basis for the acquisition of knowledge and belief', and as soon as you look at it you see that it's instantaneously refuted, just instantaneously. It doesn't even take an argument. Well, the natural conclusion would be: 'Okay, he made a try, it's false, let's do something else.' But that's not what happened. What happened is: 'He made a try, it's obviously false, let's accept it.' And from then on it's accepted, and you get one or other variant of it. That requires explanation.

When plainly false beliefs are overwhelmingly dominant it becomes fairer to ask questions about what function they serve. Usually that's not a fair question. But in this case it is. Here of course you speculate. But it seems to me that the plausible speculation is that it's related to the social role that intellectuals play. They're basically ideological and cultural managers, or other kinds of managers. We don't call them intellectuals when they manage corporations, but that's just terminology. Trained people are one or other kind of man-

ager: a state manager, a corporate manager, an ideological manager, whatever. The ones who don't want to play that role aren't considered intellectuals. They're called carpenters or something else. They may be doing just as much intellectual work – but that's a different story. So the ones who are called intellectuals, who make it to that status, are people who are playing the role of manager. And of you want to play the role of management, and you want to have a moral basis for it, you have to eliminate any moral barriers to compulsion and control. If you see moral barriers you can't be an effective manager and controller. The picture of human beings here is that they are completely malleable and lacking in characteristics. Except for us of course. We somehow have them, but the rest of the slobbs out there.... This eliminates the moral barriers to manipulation and control because you can control them for their own good. You don't let infants run across the street, and you don't let people think, basically. Locke said that in fact. I think that could very well be the reason for the appeal of these doctrines. It's more complex, because in an earlier period they had a progressive content in opposing the hierarchical structures of feudal society which were based on conceptions of fundamentally invariant individual difference. That could have been a reason for their early success, but not by the 18th or 19th century. So at this point there's a connection between the various sorts of work I do. But the lines of argument are so independent that I hesitate to draw them together, except when asked.

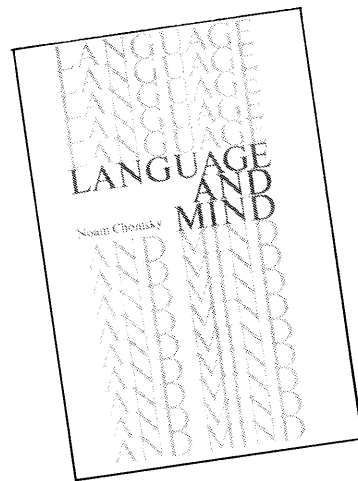
**RP:** In *Language and Mind* you said (with reference to Lévi-Strauss): 'the problem of extending concepts of linguistic structure to other cognitive systems seems to me, for the moment, in not too promising a state, although it is no doubt too early for pessimism.' Now, in various fields – most notably semiological and cultural studies and Lacanian psychoanalysis – the project is still under way, with a special and perhaps rather surprising emphasis on Saussurean linguistics. Is it still too early for pessimism?

**CHOMSKY:** I think we've passed the point when we even have to speculate. By now the pessimism is established. The tendencies that you have described are driving the nails into the coffin. I should say that I don't know very much about them. And the reason I don't know very much about them is that when I try to find out something about them all I see is complete nonsense, and so I don't pursue it any further. In the case of Lacan, for example – it's going to sound unkind – my frank opinion is that he was a conscious charlatan, and was simply playing games with the Paris intellectual community to see how much absurdity he could produce and still be taken seriously. I mean that quite literally. I knew him. If you took him seriously it was just embarrassing, so you had to assume something else was happening, some other level that you don't quite understand. That's the impression that I get from a good deal of this Paris-based intellectual pop culture which is, I understand, fairly popular in England and certainly is in the United States, in literary circles. But if anyone can detect any intellectual content in that, I'd like to see it. It's a different kind of phenomenon: the French version of Hollywood. Why do they do it? That goes back into modern French culture and all sorts of reasons. But I don't think it makes sense to deal with it on intellectual grounds.

As far as the resurrection of Saussurean ideas goes, we should bear in mind that what's drawn from Saussure is actually extremely trivial. What does it mean to say that there are structures and there are oppositions, and that there's a *signifiant* and *signifié*, and so on? I mean, yes, obviously.

There are words and there are things they refer to, and any finite system is going to have some kind of structure. Yes, there will be things that are opposed to one another. Something is black or it's not black. These things can't be false, and they tell you nothing. Just about any imaginable system could have these properties – unless it's continuous or probabilistic or something. It's not going to happen in that case. But any discrete system that isn't just a set of random dots on a tachistoscope or something like that is going to be able to be described in these terms. It tells you nothing. What's been drawn from linguistics in this work from, say, Jakobson and later Saussureans, is only the most trivial part – the kind you might teach somebody in the first half hour of the first introductory course, then you go on and do something else. Plainly, nothing from that is going to have any significance.

In *The Savage Mind* Lévi-Strauss tried to develop what he regarded as Saussurean ideas. And there are a lot of interesting things in the book. But the structuralism just reduced to the fact that there are categories. Okay, I agree that there are categories. Now what? There just isn't enough richness in the material that they're drawing from for there to be any consequences. The harder parts, the more intricate parts of the study of language, are just not going to have any applicability in these other fields. Why should they? There's no earthly reason to believe that the structure of myth uses the same prin-



ciples as the structure of language. At some level it falls together. Humans are doing it. But for all we know that level may be cellular biology. If you study the intricate structure of the liver, you don't expect to learn from it how the kidney works. You may learn, indirectly. You may learn something. It's all human cells. But the specific structure of the system is going to be what it is.

There is a background myth here. It relates to the first question. The background myth is that the human brain is radically different from any other object in the physical world: namely, it's diffuse and unstructured. There's nothing else in the physical world like that. Everything we know in the physical world, certainly in the biological world, is highly specific and structured and has components and intricate arrangements, etc. Nothing is just some big amoeba. Well, a standard picture is – and it's the same as the picture of human malleability – that the brain is different. Even though it is (or maybe because it is) the most complicated object that we know of in the universe, somehow it's unstructured. That means every aspect of it is the same as every other aspect, and it's malleable and pliable and so on. Well, that just cannot be true. Everything we know is completely counter to it. Everything we know points to the fact that it's like other physical objects that develop in the natural world. And if it is, we're

not going to find that one system has the same structural properties as other systems. You don't expect to find it in the other parts of the body. Why should it be true above the neck?

## LANGUAGE

**RP:** In your recent writings you talk of a major shift taking place in your thinking about language in the last few years, from a rule-based framework to a principles-and-parameters based framework. What do you take to be the significance of that?

**CHOMSKY:** It's not something which happened in a minute. It fell together around 1980 or so. There were a lot of different things that somehow coalesced. The early work in generative grammar was extremely traditional. It looked very much like traditional grammar. That's one reason why traditional grammarians didn't have much trouble with it. Structural linguists had a lot of trouble with it. But it had a kind of traditional cast to it. The rules were in a sense more precise versions of the kinds of loosely formulated intuitive rules of standard grammars. They dealt with other areas. They went into syntax which nobody had looked at much, but they had that kind of look. Take a look at the transformational grammar of the 1960s. There's a chapter on passives, and there's a chapter on interrogatives. There's a chapter on relatives and the rule system, and you try to show how they interact, etc. Over the years it gradually became clear in parallel ways in every aspect of language that this was inaccurate. Ultimately, I think, it turned out to be totally inaccurate. There really weren't constructions for particular rules. There just aren't any rules for passive, or for relative, or for interrogative, or for a noun phrase, or whatever. There also aren't any particular rules for particular languages. Rather, what we call constructions are just taxonomic arrangements, taxonomic *conveniences*. It appears that there are just invariant principles which interact in all sorts of ways to yield arrays of structures that have a certain similarity, which you can give a taxonomic overlay to, but without any particular significance. It's an epiphenomenon. There's no particular reason to say that a raising construction such as, say, 'John seems to be tall' is a different construction than a passive construction, such as 'John was killed by Bill'. The same operation produced them both from different structures. And it did it because of fixed properties of language which are invariant and require that that happen. The same would be true of a passive construction (what we call a passive construction) in Italian, where the object never moves at all. It just stays where it was. Well, it's just because of some minor fact about case that these operations work in some different way. Anyway, to get to the end of the story: by about 1980 or so a lot of different tendencies in this direction came together and it turned into a different picture. The picture was that universal grammar (the structure of the initial state of the language faculty) is itself highly modular. It consists of sub-systems of principles. The principles are pretty abstract. They interact to yield intricate arguments, intricate deductions or derivations, and the end result of them is that you get sentences with meanings.

**RP:** Deductions or derivations you said ...?

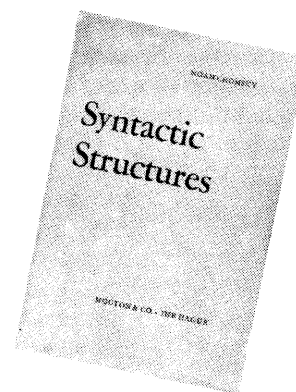
**CHOMSKY:** Well, they're not really deductions. They're computations, computations which have a derivation-like, deductive-like character. They're not deductions, of course.

**RP:** You talk sometimes of the phenomena of language

being literally deduced ...

**CHOMSKY:** Well now, the *phenomena* of language can be. That's another respect in which deduction shows up. But deductions which we [linguists] do, not that the system does. Principles interact to yield 'computations', and these computations assign to expressions structural descriptions which determine their meaning-potential and their sound-potential. The constructions disappear as epiphenomenal. Now of course there's some difference among languages. It can't be that there's very much difference among languages, because there's got to be some deep sense in which there's only one of these things – otherwise you couldn't learn any of them. But the differences are there. Obviously you don't understand somebody speaking Swahili, so you've got to figure out what it is. But it seems that the areas of variation are quite limited. Basically, a language is a computational system and a lexicon, and I think there's good reason to believe that the computational system is in fact invariant. With one, the computation is in fact completely invariant. The possibilities of variation lie in the lexicon.

It looks as though the lexicon has two different types of elements: traditional substantive elements (nouns and verbs and adjectives, etc. – things that have reference or whatever) and functional elements (inflections and complementisers and determiners, etc.). This suggests three possible ways in which the lexicon can differ from language to language. It can differ in the functional elements, in the substantive elements, or just in the properties of the lexicon as a whole. Well, we know of examples, strong good examples, of differences in functional elements. Some languages have a lot of inflection and others not much inflection, and so on. These things seem to matter. In fact, they matter in very intricate ways. If you have strong inflections or weak inflections the effect of that on a computational system is to yield outputs which do not seem to match at all. But once you have decoded what happened, you find they match very closely. They just don't match superficially. So if, say, English has weak inflections and French – which is a very similar language – has relatively stronger inflections, you get radical differences in the kinds of expressions you get. But that just follows from a trivial difference at one tiny point in the language – how strong the past tense is. It's the same with more remote languages, like



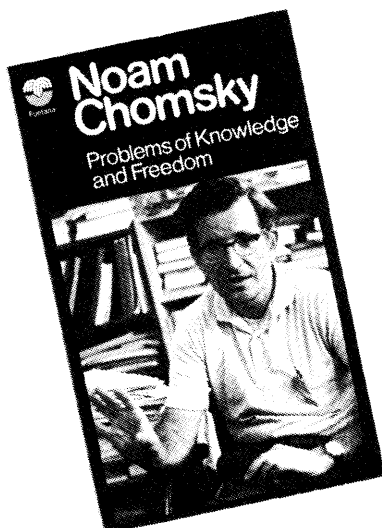
Japanese. It's been argued that a lot of the differences between Japanese and English just turn on the fact that Japanese does not have the functional elements that English has, and from that follows what looks like a lot of superficial differences. In any event, it's pretty clear that there are differences among the functional elements.

There are also global differences across the whole lexicon,

familiar ones in fact. So in English – take say English and Japanese again – English is what’s called ‘head-first’. If you look at the relation between a substantive element and the syntactically related parts – ‘hit’ and ‘the boy’ in ‘hit the boy’ – the so-called head (‘hit’ is the head, ‘the boy’ is its object, its traditional syntactically related complement), the head precedes the object. That’s true across the board for English: ‘hit the boy’, ‘in the room’, ‘proud of Bill’, ‘claim that John is here’. It’s true for everything. Japanese is exactly the opposite. It’s the mirror image of English. The heads are always last. It’s English backwards to a certain extent. That’s a typical directional property which is found in almost all languages. It’s global across the lexicon. Heads are either first or last. There’s a little more complexity, but not much. And there are other global properties like that.

What about the substantives? Here we get into pretty subtle questions, and I think it’s more obscure. But at the moment I think it’s at least plausible to say that there’s no variation in the substantives across languages. There is of course trivial variation. They have different sounds. So ‘table’ has one sound in England and the same concept has some other sound in Japanese. But that’s rather trivial. That’s just a matter of how you link up the concept to some phonetic output. There are also differences as to whether a substantive is an affix or an independent element. So in English the causative element ‘makes’ is an independent verb, but in Japanese, it’s an affix. That difference yields a lot of differences in the way things look. It means that in Japanese, in a sentence like ‘I made him leave’, the verb ‘leave’ has to have the causative element attached to it because it’s an affix, and that causes all sorts of rearrangements of the structure. In English there’s very good reason to believe that it also attaches. You just don’t see it attach. It’s happening in the mental computation, but it’s not moving, so the sentences look different. At the level of logical form though, they probably look identical. So there are those kinds of differences, but beyond that, with regard to the explicit nature of the concepts that are identified, it’s possible that there’s no variation at all; that acquisition of a language is just selecting out of a fixed store. If that’s correct, there are a lot of consequences. Let me give some of the reasons why I think it is correct.

One reason to believe that it’s correct is qualitative. Children learn substantives too fast. In fact, they learn them on one exposure, pretty much. The rate of vocabulary acquisition in peak periods of language growth is maybe a dozen a day. If you think about the statistics of exposure to language, this means they’re picking up the word, with its meaning, in one



shot. Now that’s a hopeless problem – you can’t raise the question of induction. We all know what it means to try to define a word. The *Oxford English Dictionary* doesn’t even come close if we try to define ‘table’, or ‘person’, or something like that. We’ve had a couple of centuries of philosophy devoted to trying to figure out what ‘person’ means, and it’s very hard. Think of the things you have to understand, the thought experiments you have to make up, to figure out what you mean by a person. Would it be a person if its arm was cut off? Or if it showed up in some other place? All this kind of business. We know answers to these things. We have a concept which gives us answers. But although we have the concepts that give us answers on a huge range of cases, and everybody seems to do it about the same way, most of these things are being picked up on one or two exposures, without anyone paying attention, and without any reinforcement or anything like that. It’s extreme. It’s hard to see how that could be done – aside from some miracle or act of God or something – unless the concept was just sitting there, and what was required was to find out how you produce it from your mouth in this language. If that’s the case, then you can explain all this.

**RP: Surely it can’t be true of individual concepts?**

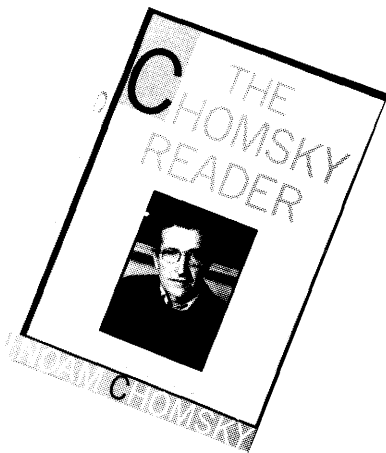
**CHOMSKY:** I think to a large extent it is. How do we identify an individual person, and decide it’s the same person the next time we see them?

**RP: I suppose we have a general format for developing a concept on presentation of an example of it.**

**CHOMSKY:** You need to have the notion of a person first. So when you see the person from a different profile, or wearing different clothes or whatever, you know it’s the same person. That’s already got to be there. You also have to know that names go with people. There would be no way of figuring that out from language usage. Once you know what a person is – so you can identify the same one from radically different looks – and you know that those things over there (some very abstract entities called ‘people’) are supposed to have words that refer to them, then all that’s left to figure out is what’s the sound. From this point of view, it’s a real triviality. And it’s got to be a triviality, because it’s done too easily. So it does tend to be individual concepts as well. In fact, when you look at the developmental patterns for some of the more complicated ones, like pronouns, they’re very constant.

Everybody who has a three-year-old kid knows that ‘I’ and ‘You’ are very tricky to pick up. A child will typically use ‘You’ for ‘Me’ and ‘I’ for ‘You’, because it’s just the way you see people doing it. And then it fixes itself up at some point. But it’s rather striking that the same thing is done with sign language – deaf children using sign language. Exactly the same thing happens at exactly the same time. That’s particularly striking because the usage in the earlier period is counter- iconic. These are sign languages in which ‘You’ means you point at you, and ‘I’ means you point at me. But at the period when a speaking child, a hearing child, is inverting the two, for obvious reasons – you hear the mother refer to you as ‘You’, so you think ‘You’ is your name – the deaf child is also inverting the two, counter- iconically. There are similar things with regard to colour. Sighted children pick up and use colour words early. But they use them as randomly referential adjectives, up to some age like three. Then at that age they all fall into place almost at once. An interesting question is what happens to blind kids. Well, what happens to blind kids is that

in the earlier period they also use the adjectives, what's called 'dressing-up' the speech. They use them, they know they're adjectives, but they don't know what they apply to. At the point when the sighted kids begin using them referentially, the blind kids stop using them. The only plausible explanation is that they're at the stage of maturation when they know they've got to be used referentially, but they haven't got the cue. Later in life, using other kinds of information, they begin to apply them. They learn that grass is green, and that sort of thing. To the extent that we know anything, this is the way it works everywhere. And it's very hard to imagine an alternative. Well, if that's correct, it means that the semantic connections among concepts have got to be fixed, yielding, in particular, *analytic* connections.



The debate over analyticity is another point where it seems to me that a deeply irrational move has been made in modern philosophy, similar to the acceptance of empiricism in the first place. For example, if I say 'John persuaded Bill to go to college', then it follows that Bill decided to or intended to go to college, otherwise John didn't persuade. There's supposed to be an analytic connection. Well now, there's a big debate about that: Is it a truth of meaning? Does it come from deeply held belief? Is it central to inference? Well, it's very striking that since Quine's original critique it's been almost universally assumed that it's not a connection of meaning, but that it's a matter of deeply held belief, or something like that. There's a holistic story, and you go in and debate it, and so on and so forth. But the evidence is overwhelmingly against this. Just overwhelmingly. If you look at the debate, people say 'Well, I can imagine ... and it didn't apply', and so on. But that's not any help. What you have to ask, if you think it's a matter of deeply held belief is 'What's the theory of belief fixation?'. Tell us your theory of belief fixation, and show us how that theory will make this connection between 'persuade' and 'intend' to be a matter of deeply held belief. Just try that. It's hopeless. There's no theory of belief fixation which even *begins* to deal with that question. So that's just vacuous. We can throw it out.

A person who believes that there are conceptual connections also has a problem. Tell us what the conceptual connections are. But that's very easy. As soon as you look at the internal semantic structure of 'persuade' you can give an account of it in terms of 'decide' and 'intend', and in terms of meanings of infinitives and so on, which makes most of it fall straight out. It's no use for Quine to come along and say, 'I can imagine something else.' Yes, it's an empirical subject. You can always *imagine* an empirical claim is wrong. You could say the same thing about quantum physics. I can imag-

ine something. That's not relevant. If you want to show that an empirical claim is wrong, either you find some error in the reasoning or you give a better claim from some other point of view. But there's no use just saying, 'Let's imagine this hypothetical case.' That tells you nothing. So here's another striking example where philosophers who were supposed to pride themselves on the clarity of their thinking have uniformly done something extremely irrational. This is not a small point. It's been alleged over and over by Richard Rorty and Donald Davidson and all sorts of others that this is the same fundamental move in modern philosophy: the fundamental insight in modern philosophy is the recognition that the analytic/synthetic distinction is untenable. But absolutely nothing has been shown. Everything that we know is exactly the opposite.

## POLITICS

**RP:** We'd like to switch the area now, to ask you to what extent you think there's some kind of transfer of cultural authority going on between your international status as a linguistic, and your status as a political thinker and critic of the US State. I realise that you are to a large extent excluded from the mainstream US media. But given that, there's no doubt that you do have a very high political profile, not just internationally, but in the US as well.

**CHOMSKY:** It depends what community you're talking about.

**RP:** Well, it's the *New York Times* which is quoted as calling you 'arguably the most important intellectual alive'.

**CHOMSKY:** That's the kind of quote that publishers like to take and put on books. But that's only because they don't look at the context. If you go back and look at the context of that remark, the sentence was: 'arguably the most important intellectual alive, how can he write such nonsense about international affairs and foreign policy?'. They don't put that sentence on the cover of a book. I always get a kick out of it when I see that line quoted. Within the intellectual community, anybody who is a dissident is not going to have any status. If they have any status they are just a fake dissident, or they've given up being a dissident. If I was to quit and to become an elder statesman, to stop criticising what goes on and to just make judicious comments, then everything I've done in the past would be somehow legitimised, because you wouldn't have to pay attention to it anymore. I could be a figure. I'll give you an example. Take Izzie Stone.

About 1971 Stone quit. He wasn't young any more and he just couldn't carry it off any longer. He wanted to do some other things, and he stopped writing the newsletter and began working on Socrates, and learning Greek, etc. Well, right at that point he became a hero. Up until then he was just an anathema. He was never mentioned. He was vilified, marginalised and so on. As soon as he quit they started making movies about him, giving him journalism awards, and talking about him as the conscience of our time. You can do that. The other thing you can do, which is even easier, is to play the God that Failed game. That's even more highly valued, and that's a transition that many people go through. What actually happens is that you get people who have acted on the belief that there are popular forces which will create a revolutionary situation through which they can become the red bureaucracy and run everything with a whip – Leninism, basically – and



then they learn that it's not going to happen. So they move to the other side, and say 'Okay, I can't do that, so I'll work for the people who do have power'. That's the God that Failed. What you have to do then is two things. You have to create a fraudulent past for yourself, and then you have to denounce it. So you write an article in the *Washington Post* about how you used to cheer Kim Il Sung and denounce Martin Luther King, and blow up libraries, but now you see the error of your ways, and you're going to work for Reagan. (This is a real case, incidentally.) And all the people who haven't made their change are tarred with the brush. They're still cheering Kim Il Sung and so on. That's very popular. You immediately get to be a big-shot for obvious reasons. But apart from that, a dissident should begin to worry if he or she gets accepted into the mainstream. They must be doing something wrong, because it just doesn't make sense. Why should institutions be receptive to critique of those institutions? It makes no sense. It doesn't happen. If it's happening, it's not a real critique. It's a supportive critique. Take any case you like. Take, say, Russell.

There's probably no human being more vilified than Bertrand Russell. Now why is he vilified and, say, Einstein honoured? Go back to the 1950s. Russell and Einstein, both extremely prominent people, held more or less similar views on nuclear war. They both regarded it as an enormous catastrophe that we had to do something about. Well, Einstein made some statements about it, platitudes in fact, and then went back to work on the Unified Field Theory. So he's a hero. Russell went into the streets and carried out civil disobedience. He thought you had to do something to stop this impending catastrophe. So he's a maniac. You write books denouncing him, and the reviewers all love it. He also had the bad taste to criticise the Vietnam War before it was popular to do so. In the Stalinist literature, it's called being a premature anti-fascist – the guys who were anti-fascist before June 1941. That's the worst crime. Later it became okay to criticise it because it was costing too much and so on. But he did it when it wasn't okay, when we could have still stopped it. For that he's practically Hitler. And that's what you'd expect. You can detect when a person is doing something serious by the intensity of the vilification that's launched against them. Unless they can just be ignored. Russell couldn't be ignored.

**RP:** You have argued in *The Culture of Terrorism* that there has been a growing current of radical dissent in the United States since the 1960s, and that it was the strength of this current which forced US state terror underground in the '70s, thereby creating the conditions for the foreign policy scandals of the 1980s. We'd like to ask you a few questions about the character of this movement. Firstly, what organisational forms does it take? Secondly, what do you think its connection is to the movements of the '60s? (What's its generational profile? Is it the same people, or is there a new generation active here?) And finally, what do you think the prospects are for it developing a durable political base which could make a serious intervention into mainstream American politics?

**CHOMSKY:** Well, with regard to the first question – what's the organisational base? – the answer is 'none'. This is the United States after all. The United States is an advanced industrial democracy, an advanced capitalist democracy, and a capitalist democracy has a problem it has to solve. The problem is one that actually began with the Glorious Revolution of the 17th century, which ended with the destruction of democracy. That's what we're celebrating now. The problem is that effective power is in one place, but there are formal

structures around which allow people, theoretically, to participate in making policy. This is a real tension inside the system, and it can be dealt with in one or other of a number of ways. One approach would be to eliminate the authoritarian structure and the concentration of power: social revolution. You democratise control over investment decisions and you eliminate hierarchy and institutions. Another way is to eliminate the popular forms: military coup or something. That's what we do in Latin America. If the thing gets out of control, you send in the death squads. But the advanced capitalist countries don't do either of those things. What they do is figure out various ways to eliminate any substantive content from the political forms. And the United States is more advanced than any other, so it does it in a more advanced way. One of the ways you do this is to eliminate any form of organisation, because isolated individuals are completely powerless.

If people are isolated from one another you can let them vote. Nothing's going to happen. They're going to be complete victims of the system. There's absolutely no way for an isolated individual even to have ideas. You sit in front of a tube and something comes, and you don't know what you think, and you go and push a button in a voting booth. It's all meaningless. Most people know it's meaningless. That's why in a really advanced industrial society like the United States people don't even bother voting. It's obviously a waste of time. So you get what's called a landslide victory for Reagan. He won 28% of the electoral vote. It's also supposed to be a landslide victory for conservatism. But when you look at the polls it turns out that 1% of the electorate voted for Reagan because he was a conservative. That's a landslide for conservatism. In the 1984 election, again a big landslide, of the roughly half the population that voted, 3 out of 5 were opposed to his policies. The non-voters were even more opposed. But of the ones who voted 2 to 1 for him, they were 3 to 2 opposed to his policies. And all of this is progress. This is sophistication. England is moving the same way. England is a little more backward so it takes another couple of generations. They're only just getting to the point where they're eliminating the Labour movement in England. In the United States it was done a long time ago. England had a labour press, a big labour-based press up till the 1960s, which presented a different view of the world. It sustained a different culture. Well, that obviously can't exist. You don't have to kill it by force, you kill it by market pressures. That was understood by British capitalists in the 19th century. There's no need to censor the Labour press. It will be destroyed by normal market pressures. It won't get advertisers, and can't get capital. It's just a matter of time. In the United States this happened a long time ago, with some intrusions of State force I should say, but basically even without the State force it's going to happen. The United States has a huge public relations industry, and they work hard, and they tell you what they're going to do. It's very open. Everyone says exactly what they're doing. Eighty years ago they said that the main problem facing corporations is the public mind. You've got to control the public mind. There are a lot of ways of controlling the public mind, and a lot of intelligence is put into it. This is one of the main jobs of intellectuals in fact.

**RP:** But what about the oppositional forces?

**CHOMSKY:** People have lots of ways to resist, even in death-squad countries like El Salvador. It's hard to understand, but people somehow resist. It's a pretty tricky business to resist when you've got these death-squads going after you,

but people do it and they do it for a long time, and with an astonishing resilience. The same is true of people who are subjected to the softer forms of control. The organisations are gone, the media are gone, the interactions are gone, but somehow they find ways of resisting. There are a lot of different ways of doing it. One way of doing it is what's called unsocial behaviour: crime. Why is all the crime in the ghettos? It's a kind of resistance. Or take, say, the schools – the thing we're most familiar with. Take the elementary schools. The school system from kindergarten to university very largely has the effect of selecting people for obedience. That's one of the reasons why school systems are so stupid. It's an institutional necessity. They wouldn't be playing their role if they weren't stupid. You've got to have a method to ensure that only people who are willing to follow stupid orders get ahead. People like us. We were willing to follow stupid orders, so we got to the good schools. Think about your own



education. The way you get good grades is that some idiot up there tells you to do something, and you see that it doesn't make any sense, but you do it anyway, because you want to get to the good college. People who do that tend to be pretty obedient. But there are people who aren't obedient, and they become discipline problems, behaviour problems, and they're out on the streets selling drugs and so on. Very often they're just independent-minded people.

**RP:** But is there really *no* political organisation?

**CHOMSKY:** That's not the kind of thing that leads to political organisation. It's the negative side of resistance. The positive side of resistance shows up in other ways. Most organisations have been destroyed in the United States, but people find other ways to organise. One of the very dramatic

things about the United States is the role of religion. Take a look at people's commitment to religion. There are cross-cultural studies of religious fanaticism – people who believe in the devil and all this kind of stuff – and it's different with different cultures, but you can get comparable measures, and it correlates pretty well with industrialisation. As societies become more industrialised the level of religious fanaticism goes down. It's almost a straight line, it's a very close correlation. But there are two countries that are off the chart. Canada's a little bit off, a lot off in fact. It's about at the level of a middle developing society in terms of religious commitment. The United States is off the chart. It's at the outer edge of industrialisation, but it's at the lower end of religious commitment. It's at the level of Bangladesh. I think that's related. People find ways of associating themselves, and if they can't do it politically, and they can't do it in unions, and they can't do it in any other way that has social meaning, they do it in religious fanaticism. It's a very complicated thing. It can be extremely dangerous. It can be a mass base for fascism. But it's also Witnesses for Peace. In England, if you want to have a political meeting you go the Union Hall. In the United States, you go to the church. And the only reason is that the church exists. Nothing else exists.

**RP:** Do you think this is why Jackson has been so successful?

**CHOMSKY:** Partly. He's church-based. He comes out of the black community, and in the black community that's the only thing there is. The black community are even more demoralised than the white community, by a long shot. There are the criminal syndicates, and there is the church. Just about everything in the black community comes out of the church. To a surprisingly large extent that's true of the white community too in fact – the affluent white community. Most of my contacts in political work are with churches. When I started there was a lot of dissonance in this. But then you see that it makes sense in this society; that it's another way of resisting. And there are other things. There are evanescent organisational structures. You know how hard it is to keep them together, for reasons that everybody knows and which I don't have to explain. You're going to have six people and five ideological splits. Nevertheless, they're always around. They regroup when something happens, and by now they're substantial.

As far as the generational profile goes: in part it's people who came out of the '60s, but in part it's much broader. The '60s was basically a student youth movement. Now it's not. You get a lot of people in colleges interested, but it's much more broadly based. Take Central America solidarity work. The places where that's strong are straight Middle American communities, places like central Kansas. These are very dedicated people, very honourable people, really committed. They're totally apolitical in our sense of the word, no politics at all. But they're morally dedicated people and they really work. Attitudes have changed on a lot of issues. It's subtle but you can see it. The most obvious example is feminist issues. They've expanded over the whole society. Notice: that's the '70s, not the '60s. That began in the '70s. There were germs of it in the '60s, but it really became something significant in the '70s. The ecological movement is the '70s, and that's big, very big. The anti-nuclear movement, as a popular movement, is the '70s – the '70s and the '80s. It's just a more civilised place. A striking index of this is the attitude towards the native Americans.

We went through hundreds of years of history with abso-

lutely no recognition that there had been mass genocide. None. It was cowboys and Indians. Until the 1970s the anthropological profession simply denied all the facts, literally denied them. They had ample evidence that there was a very substantial native American population (current estimates are maybe 10 to 12 million north of the Rio Grande), and that it was culturally advanced. It had organisational forms, it had stone houses, it had advanced agriculture, it was a settled population, much more advanced than the colonists for the most part – except in violence. It wasn't as advanced in that respect. All this was denied. Up until the 1970s you could take an anthropology course at Harvard and the picture there was of a scattered population of hunter-gatherers. That's crucial, because according to English common law if they are hunter-gatherers they don't have any land. So when we take their land we're not taking anything. But the fact of the matter is that it was all a lie. They had to kill them, and drive them out. They had to massacre them. Only since the 1970s has it been possible even for scholarship to look at these facts, and it gets into popular attitudes. All of these things are results of the 1960s.

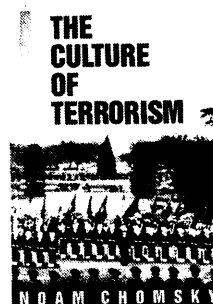
So you can see why the educated elites are so frenzied about the 1960s. The histories of the period that people write, especially established people, are almost insane. They describe the 1960s as a period when there were raving maniacs burning libraries and tearing down the bastions of civilisation. What they mean is that all of this elaborate mythology was collapsing because people were asking questions about it, and it was so fragile that as soon as you looked at it, it just totally collapsed. That's very threatening. That's the whole structure of order. So while there's a definite right turn among elite elements, for perfectly good objective reasons, on the other hand, among the general population, there's one or other form of resistance, sometimes constructive, sometimes extremely dangerous. As I've said, the rise of religious fundamentalism is very threatening. According to the polls there are about forty million American adults who say they've gone through some kind of born-again experience. That's scary. That's the kind of thing you get in places like Iran. The United States is very much like Iran.

**RP:** No prizes for guessing who is the Ayatollah. Noam, can I ask you a question about foreign politics? Gorbachev. What do you think of Gorbachev and his Perestroika? And how, if at all, does it affect your analysis of communist and global politics?

**CHOMSKY:** What Gorbachev is doing at the moment is concentrating authority even more narrowly than before; turning himself into Peter the Great. To whatever extent there was a collective leadership among a narrow bureaucracy, that looks as though it's being even more centralised. He's trying to be a benevolent despot: more despotic than before, but also more benevolent. And the benevolence appears to come from a rather rational conception of what Soviet society is facing. We have to go back to the Bolshevik revolution, at least, to understand it. In my view the Bolshevik revolution was a counter-revolutionary coup. It wasn't a revolution, it was a coup, and it was a coup which destroyed socialism. Those guys were totalitarians. It's not a big secret. They said it. They were going to take the club and whip people into line for their own good. That's what a vanguard party is, after all. The public, especially the working class, are too stupid to know what's good for them. We know what's good for them, so we're going to whip them into line. That's a very authoritarian movement. You can give all kinds of explanations for it in

Russian history, but I don't think there's any doubt what it was.

Right before the revolution, for about seven or eight months, you get a kind of libertarian Lenin: *State and Revolution*, every cook can be a governor, all that kind of stuff. But I think that's all fraud. I'm not saying it was a conscious fraud. There was a popular revolution going on, and like anybody who's trying to take power you adapt yourself to the currents that are going on and you try to shape them. But as soon as they did take power, they reverted to form. The first thing that was done was to destroy the Soviets, the next thing was to destroy the factory councils and block the constituent assembly. Anything that could have involved any form of popular involvement in control of work or decision-making was eliminated. The basic mechanisms of totalitarianism were established. They allowed popular organisation to go on in the peasant areas, when they needed the peasant armies to fight



off the whites: Makhno's army, for example. There were still libertarian movements in the Ukraine. As soon as that was over though, they just crushed them. The idea that this was called socialism is a devastating blow to socialism. It also turned out to be extremely inefficient. It's efficient in some ways, like a lot of totalitarian systems, and it creates a kind of a safety net. The population won't starve to death. You're better off as a Russian peasant than as a Guatemalan peasant. There's not much doubt about that. But that just doesn't get anywhere. The only things that can be produced are things that are beneficial to the people with power. So it's not going to be a productive economy in the modern sense. And I think Gorbachev understands all this. He wants to move it into the modern world, and he's using the mechanisms that are available: authoritarian mechanisms. At the same time, you can't control everything. Other forces are being set in motion. As you begin to liberalise, people start reacting. It's a pretty lively place right now. There are a lot of interesting currents developing, and they may not be so easy to control. In fact, I think what could happen could be pretty ominous. Let's take the worst case.

The Soviet Union is an empire, internally. You've got forty million Muslims and Ukrainians who don't want to be under Russian rule. That's big stuff. The large majority of the population would probably just as soon be out of the empire. But loosen the chains and they revert to form, and form in that region of the world is pretty ugly. We're already seeing pieces of it in Armenia and Azerbaijan. These are the kinds of things that have almost no solution: ethnic conflicts among groups of people who have hated each other for hundreds of years because of religion and persecution, mutual persecution, etc. It's not clear how it can be accommodated.



There are other problems too. Every industrialising society has done it by imposing a tremendous burden on the poor. That's the way you industrialise. Somebody pays the costs, and the people who pay the costs are the poor, the workers. Ultimately, the idea is that you get to the point where they get something out of it. But you've got to force them to do it. In the United States they forced them to do it because they were immigrants. In England, you can still see how they did it. In South Korea the way they do it is by force. They bring the women in from the fields and they work eighty hours a week in a plant until they can't see any more, at the age of 35, and then they throw them out. If you do that kind of thing you can get an industrialised society. But how do you do it in a society that already has a safety net? It doesn't produce much, but people don't have to work very hard either. They're not going to starve to death. There's a system that keeps them from starving. Most of that will have to be given up, if it follows the normal course of industrialisation. It's going to be very vicious, and a lot of people are going to have to accept the viciousness. But it's not clear that they will, because they aren't going to get very much out of it, for a while.

**RP:** You don't think that the process of industrialisation has already gone a fair way under the authoritarian regime?

**CHOMSKY:** Well, even by 1917 the Soviet Union was pretty industrialised. It wasn't a Third World country. It was, I think, the fifth largest industrial power. But it's very skewed. It's not like an industrial society. It has heavy industry, but it's basically pre-industrial. What's going on there is to the good, for the moment. I would certainly like to see the society get liberalised. But it's got some pretty ominous effects. And as far as the West is concerned, it's a double-edged sword. Take Europe first.

European capitalists and political elites see some good things in it. The good thing is they can restore the traditional colonial relationships with Eastern Europe. If you go back before the Bolsheviks the relations between Eastern and Western Europe were colonial. They think they can reconstruct that. So German bankers will invest in the Soviet Union, and extract resources, and maybe put factories in there for cheap labour. That's all to the good. To the bad, however, is the fact that you lose a technique for controlling your own population. The cold war conflict has been the method by which elites control their own populations, and that's always the main problem for any state. The first problem is to control the domestic population. If that's resolved you can start worrying about foreign enemies. NATO is extremely reluctant to respond to the Russian initiatives because once they start responding to them the techniques of internal control begin to erode. This is very dangerous in Europe because Europe, being more backward than the United States, still has organizational structures. There are still labour-based parties, socialist journalists, that sort of thing. It may not amount to very much but it's there, and it can reconstitute. So there's some ambivalence among European elites over this. As far as the United States is concerned the ambivalence is even greater.

There was a very revealing example of it in the *New York Times* at the end of the year. It was written by an East European emigre named Dmitri Simes who's a senior fellow of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace – as soon as you hear the title you know what's coming. He talks about the Gorbachev problem, and the way he talks about it is very reminiscent of a whole strain in elite American literature going right back to the 1940s. It's in the framework of a

'peace scare'. In the late 1940s they were concerned about Stalin's peace plots. Is he really going to do it? If so, how are we going to react? The nice thing about this article, and about a lot of the current discussion, is that it's tearing away the rhetoric. It's making the difference between rhetoric and policy very clear. If anybody wants they can see exactly what's always been going on. The rhetoric is that we deter the Soviet Union, that we contain the Soviet Union. The reality has always been the opposite. The only known cases of deterrence are Soviet deterrence of the United States. The only reason the United States didn't invade Cuba, and just launched a terrorist war instead, was deterrence. The Cuban missile crisis showed that the thing might blow up if they invaded Cuba, so they were deterred. The same is true of the oil fields in the early '70s. We didn't invade the oil fields when they were raising oil prices beyond what we wanted, because we were deterred. There was the concern that it might lead to a conflict with the Russians. It's near the border, it could get out of hand. The same is true of Indochina. Part of the reason why the United States didn't go farther was that they were worried. What if the Chinese send down millions of troops and the Russians start shooting off missiles? The United States is a global power. It's fighting wars in places where it doesn't have a conventional force advantage. That's one of the reasons why it has to maintain such an overwhelmingly intimidating nuclear posture. It's much more important for the United States than Russia. They exert violence around their own borders, but the United States is the only truly global power.

One of the things Simes points out is that if Gorbachev is serious this won't be much of a problem, because we'll be able to forget about the deterrence. He gives three advantages that might compensate for the loss of techniques of internal control. One is that we'll be able to shift NATO costs to Europe. That's important because the big growing conflict in world affairs is between Europe and the United States. It's been true for years, and it's now becoming pretty serious, especially with the common market. They really want to stick it to the Europeans. Nobody is going to give up the NATO expenditure, obviously. That has other reasons, nothing to do with the Russians. But we can shift it over to the Europeans so it will be harmful to them, which is good. That's one advantage. The second major thing that can be achieved is that the United States will no longer be so easily manipulated by Third World nations. They used to play off the Russians against the Americans. But if the Russians are gone, you don't have to worry. Simes gives two examples of this. One is the debt. They're not going to be able to start backing off on the debt thinking that they can get support from the Russians. The Russians aren't going to be there, so we're going to make them pay the debt. The other thing is the oil fields. In earlier periods we were afraid to invade, but this time if those guys get out of hand we'll just send in the marines, and we won't have to worry about the Russians. The third point is just a generalisation of the second. In general, military force will become a more viable instrument of American foreign policy. If the Sandinistas continue their mischief they'll have to be concerned that Gorbachev may not rescue them. We can send the B52s and we don't have to worry about Gorbachev. This is the picture from the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, and it's a pretty widely held picture.

So that's good. What's bad is they can see as well as anybody else that detente might lead to closer relations between Eastern and Western Europe. That's the ultimate nightmare for American planners. They've got to prevent the Eurasian contingent from being unified. If you read guys like

Nicholas Spikeman, all these big geo-political thinkers, that's the main principle. If the Eurasian land-mass gets unified the United States is really in bad shape. And if the colonial relationships can be re-established between Western and Eastern Europe that's pretty much what's going to happen. Europe is threatening to construct a closed trading area with North Africa and the Middle East, from which the United States will be excluded, and that's not the way the game is played. The way the game is played is that other powers have regional interests which they can supervise within the overall framework of order managed by the United States. That's the

way the game is played. So Europe can play around with its regional interests, but remember who the boss is. That's the line, but the relations of power are shifting. Europe now has a bigger, richer economy than the United States, a bigger population, and a more educated population. If it can get its act together the United States will become a second-rate power. It's the kind of thing which in the past led to global war. Whether it would now it's hard to say.

**Interviewers:**

**Roy Edgley, Peter Osborne, Jonathan Rée, Deirdre Wilson**

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