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## Preface

Noam Chomsky is one of the most recognized names of our time, and in 2005 he was voted the most important public intellectual in the world today, the result of his winning 4,827 of 20,000 votes cast in a poll conducted jointly by a British monthly called *Prospect* and the Washington-based journal *Foreign Policy*.<sup>1</sup> This result is hardly surprising; his contributions to linguistics and his theories regarding the workings of the human mind have rocked the intellectual world for more than fifty years, beginning with the critical reception of his early work on syntactic structures and his appeal to what he called the Cartesian approach to language. His crusade against the Vietnam War and his on-going critique of American foreign policy, his analyses of the Middle East and Central America, his long-standing local and international activism, and his assessment (sometimes with Edward Herman) of how media functions in contemporary society have made him a darling of political dissenters around the world who take from Chomsky both useful analysis and, moreover, a whole approach that is valuable in the struggle against oppression. He is at once a beacon to the downtrodden, and, as much of the world witnessed on September 20, 2006, from a televised speech delivered at the United Nations General Assembly, he is also an inspiration to the likes of President Hugo Chavez of Venezuela, who recommended to representatives of the governments of the world that they read Chomsky's recent book *Hegemony or Survival*.<sup>2</sup> Chomsky's vicious and persistent attacks against "Stalinist" politicians, "commissar" academics, greedy members of the managerial classes, poser liberals, "scientific" Marxists, self-aggrandizing social scientists, authoritarian pedagogues, lackey media types, and fanatical sports fans has also created a vicious

set of adversaries who commit remarkable amounts of effort to discredit, admonish, critique, or ignore Chomsky's approach. In the face of it all, Chomsky stands forth, now eighty years old and yet as energetic, fearless, and courageous as ever, perhaps even more so as the years bring him new kinds of experience, optimism and disgust; he is indeed, as U2's Bono has called him, the "rebel without a pause." As a consequence, most everyone has strong feelings (positive and negative) about Noam Chomsky, and the effect that he has upon people extending across national, social, and institutional lines is a fascinating phenomenon, and is a remarkable testament to what an intellectual can accomplish when engaged beyond the ivory tower.

One realm in which he has found himself alienated from the majority, particularly in his own country, is spectator sports, and this single example is illustrative of the complexity of his effect. Noam Chomsky is the Niles from the popular sitcom *Frasier* in regard to contact sports, gloriously and also willfully disconnected. This has had a remarkably negative effect upon many people from all walks of life, a testament to the importance of sports not only in this society, but more generally, and it may be an example where the application of a general principle finds itself counterproductive in the overall objectives. For him, the basic social role of sports is diversion aimed at "Joe Six Pack," rather than, say, relaxation, aimed at forming and sustaining families, communities, and friends. In the film *Manufacturing Consent*, for example, he suggests that there is a range of ways in which popular culture seeks to divert people, to "get them away from things that matter," to "reduce their capacity to think." From this standpoint, sports is for him "an example of the indoctrination system," "something to pay attention to that's of no importance," which keeps people from worrying about things that matter to their lives that they might have some chance to do something about. A scene recorded in the film is as follows:

You know, I remember in high school, already I was pretty old. I suddenly asked myself at one point, why do I care if my high school team wins the football game? [laughter] I mean, I don't know anybody on the team, you know? [audience roars] I mean, they have nothing to do with me, I mean, why I am cheering for my team? It doesn't mean any—it doesn't make sense. But the point is, it does make sense: it's a way of building up irrational attitudes of submission to authority, and group cohesion behind leadership elements—in fact, it's training

in irrational jingoism. That's also a feature of competitive sports. I think if you look closely at these things, I think, typically, they do have functions, and that's why energy is devoted to supporting them and creating a basis for them and advertisers are willing to pay for them and so on.<sup>3</sup>

I think that in terms of the negative "effect" that Chomsky can induce, sports has been at or near the top of the list for the naysayer, just below his views on Israel and his unpatriotic and ungrateful attitude toward his country. But careful examination of what he says, even in this short quote, reveals a basic attitude one can discern and probably admire outside of the example that he provides: he hates arbitrary authority and submission thereto, he has scorn for irrational beliefs and jingoistic replies to complex issues, and he looks for ways in which corporate America abusively incurs into our lives in search of new ways to make profit. He doesn't look to the ways in which such diversions help bridge generation gaps between parents and kids, how attention to strange rituals like NCAA tournaments teaches us about communities and individuals far from home, the virtues of kids who might not otherwise be interested in reading suddenly gobbling up sports pages written by quite creative and often humorous journalists. What he sees instead is submission and rituals that recall the horrors of what nationalism or patriotism have led to this century. That's one side. Another side is the unadulterated humor of the quote, as indicated by the audience reaction, which is laughter and uproar (followed, perhaps, by much more divisive discussions after the talk among people who took the comments personally). This humor both drives the point home and also allows him to make the move from the example to the deeper message:

But the point is, this sense of irrational loyalty to some sort of meaningless community is training for subordination to power, and for chauvinism. And of course, you're looking at gladiators, you're looking at guys who can do things you couldn't possibly do—like, you couldn't pole-vault seventeen feet, or do all these crazy things these people do. But it's a model that you're supposed to try to emulate. And they're gladiators fighting for your cause, so you've got to cheer them on, and you've got to be happy when the opposing quarterback gets carted off the field a total wreck and so on. All of this stuff builds up extremely anti-social aspects of human psychology. I mean, they're there; there's no doubt that they're there. But they're emphasized, and exaggerated, and brought out by spectator sports: irrational competition, irrational loyalty to power systems, passive acquiescence to quite awful values, really. In fact, it's hard to imagine anything that contributes more fundamentally to authoritarian attitudes than this does, in

addition to the fact that it just engages a lot of intelligence and keeps people away from other things.<sup>4</sup>

Still another aspect is his noting from the example of professional sports the real creativity, intelligence, and concentration that people devote to their assessment of sports, which leads them to call into radio stations and grill with carefully articulated approaches the erroneous assessments made by coaches and “authorities,” a point he reiterates:

In fact, I have the habit when I’m driving of turning on these radio call-in programs, and it’s striking when you listen to the ones about sports. They have these groups of sports reporters, or some kind of experts on a panel, and people call in and have discussions with them. First of all, the audience obviously is devoting an enormous amount of time to it all. But the more striking fact is, the callers have a tremendous amount of expertise, they have detailed knowledge of all kinds of things, they carry on these extremely complex discussions. And strikingly, they’re not at all in awe of the experts—which is a little unusual. See, in most parts of the society, you’re encouraged to defer to experts: we all do it more than we should. But in this area, people don’t seem to do it—they’re quite happy to have an argument with the coach of the Boston Celtics, and tell him what he should have done, and enter into big debates with him and so on. So the fact is that in this domain, people somehow feel quite confident, and they know a lot—there’s obviously a great deal of intelligence going into it.<sup>5</sup>

If only, he thinks, people would do the same with their politicians, if only they’d stand up to their “commander in chief” when he lies to them, or if they’d call their “leaders” when the strategy they are using is leading to obvious failure. Some people admire Chomsky for his consistency, finding in this assessment the basic values that guide all of his work, while others find in him a haughty disregard for rituals held most dear to the population. And never the twain shall meet.

I am concerned with such issues that display the range of reactions to Chomsky’s arguments because, taken together, they contribute to what I have come to think of as the “Noam Chomsky Approach.” This approach, and the effect that it has, is important not only for those interested in understanding Noam Chomsky as a person, but also for those who hope to change the current situation of systemic inequality in the direction of the “good society” he describes. Positive change is not going to come about thanks only to Noam Chomsky or others whose work has led to ethical and responsible action beyond the ivory tower; indeed any such suggestion would be worrisome since it implies either a quest for a personality to revere, or a high level of adherence to some

preconceived dogma. If society is to change, then attitudes toward it must change, hopefully in response to rational and informed decision making effected for the good of the individual and the associations into which she or he freely enters. Chomsky plays a role here not solely on account of his specific analysis of particular events but, moreover, the attitude that he brings to his work, the approach that he applies to issues he considers important, and to the catalyzing effect that he has upon others who are witness to his behavior and knowledgeable about his approach. From this standpoint Noam Chomsky may seem to some people to be a guru or an ideologue, but the fact is that he scorns such an image in favor of the idea that he tries to help infuse energy or support to work that is or could be done to improve society. If he could just serve this purpose, the catalyst who encourages peoples' curiosity and willingness to be the "dangerous" people they can be by fostering interest in matters that should concern them, his self-assigned role would undoubtedly be easier to fulfill. But any dissident or dissenter comes up against power, and interests, and, accordingly, considerable resources dedicated to the maintenance of status quo power relations, so it is incumbent upon him to offer up credible sources, "indisputable" facts, and convincing rhetoric to guide people along the path to understanding not only the world but even their own self-interest. We ought to be concerned about how the government is spending our money, that is, the rationale for spending a huge percentage of the federal budget on military and Pentagon expenses rather than upon the kind of social projects and programs that promote a higher standard of living for the majority of the population. This is self-interest, and informed involvement in political discussions by that measure is the exercise of our individual interest, in the same way as figuring out how our monthly income is being spent is in our interest. But given that such self-interest conflicts with a power elite interest, because government officials like corporate managers would generally prefer to act with impunity (the cloaks of secrecy that surround our own government's actions on a range of fronts is testament to this), it's likely that attempts to become engaged in our own affairs will be met with resistance or scorn. As regards Chomsky, this produces a large contingent of retractors, particularly among those who possess significant resources or power, and therefore who have a lot to lose. Many of them

are eager to jump on any miscue that could be used to undermine their power, creating, shall we say, a “self-interest effect.” For this reason, there is likely to be a range of reactions against Noam Chomsky, depending upon where one sits on the power spectrum, which are in fact in evidence in reviews of his books (or books about him) or in the commentaries that one hears about his importance, the accuracy of his work, his ongoing legacy, or the value of his contributions to the range of fields his work impacts. These conflicting assessments are evident on a range of fronts but come together around particular debates, which is why I will discuss in some detail certain key moments that come up when people talk about Chomsky’s work, which variously include his views on why the United States was in North (and South) Vietnam, the false pretensions of much of the research in the “social sciences,” Robert Faurisson’s denying the Holocaust, why East Timor was downplayed in the Western press in favor of Cambodia, the U.S.-supported militarization of Israel, and so forth.

In short, this book attempts to answer some of the questions most frequently asked about Chomsky’s work by assessing how he approaches the various subject areas to which he contributes, notably language studies, media, education, law, and politics, and by noting the references he makes, implicitly and explicitly, to the precursors from whom he draws. The reception of this approach is discussed as well under the rubric of the “Noam Chomsky Effect,” which speaks of his positive and negative popularity, and the impact he has on both accounts. I begin, therefore, with a discussion of Chomsky’s popular appeal, the use made of his persona in popular culture such as rock music, film, and theater, and the links that exist between him and other popular academics/social thinkers. In the second chapter, I discuss the resistance to Noam Chomsky from various standpoints, including contemporary Zionists, mainstream political thinkers, and certain communities of scholars (especially in linguistics), and I also undertake an in-depth assessment of the Faurisson Affair and the Pol Pot Affair. Chapter 3 is a systematic survey of the individuals and movements that have influenced Chomsky’s work: from the “Cartesian” thinkers (Descartes, von Humboldt, Montesquieu, Rousseau, Voltaire) to the Scottish Enlightenment (notably Hume and Smith); from American classical liberals (Dewey, Jefferson, Madison,

Thoreau) to anti-Bolshevik Marxists (Gramsci, Korsch, Luxemburg, Mattick, Pannekoek); from anarchists (Bakunin, Goldman, Kropotkin, Rucker) to anarcho-syndicalists (notably the Spanish example from the 1930s); from Zellig Harris to Bertrand Russell. I focus somewhat unevenly upon certain precursors who have been more subject to neglect in our culture, (Zellig Harris, Rudolph Rucker, and Wilhelm von Humboldt) because in my opinion Chomsky's personal and intellectual traits are best understood and contextualized with reference to these figures.

The second half of the book assesses Chomsky's approach to specific domains and milieus that are crucial and often misconstrued in discussions about the value of his work. Chapter 4 is a discussion of the legal side and legal implications of his political work, and therein I undertake a sustained assessment of his approach to ethics, classical liberalism, international law, human rights, and the function of law in the "good society." Chapter 5 is an overview of his views of education, including its role in contemporary society and the role it should or could play in the good society. This chapter also contains a survey of the education theories from which Chomsky draws inspiration, or about which he has commented, including those of Michael Bakunin, John Dewey, Emma Goldman, Wilhelm von Humboldt, Bertrand Russell, as well as contemporary efforts on the internet (ZNet, etc.). Chapter 6 assesses Chomsky's approach to the study of language and discourse and focuses upon the basic questions he asks in his own linguistic work, followed by an assessment of how his work on language has been appropriated outside of the linguistic domain, media studies, and various approaches to language research. Chapter 7 discusses creative discourse, with the specific example of literature and its associated questioning and refusal of knowledge claims. This rebelliousness on the part of the fiction writer, who often seems the type who might show up drunk at a party and tell everyone there that they really don't know what they're talking about, leads naturally into a meditation on the role of humor, in the broad sense and in Chomsky's work and in the many talks he gives. And in the end, I offer a survey of approaches to the "public intellectual," historically and contemporaneously, with an eye to assessing how Chomsky came to mean so much to so many and, therefore, what he may mean to the generations to come.

One of the reviewers of the manuscript for this book suggested that I reflect upon the voice, or more accurately the voices, that narrate the different chapters in this book. I admit to being conflicted as regards this issue, in part because it's doubtlessly clear to those who have read my work that I am extremely sympathetic to "Chomsky's approach," and the ten years I have devoted to this book is as tangible a sign of this as I could possibly produce. On the other hand, when I finished the final revisions it struck me that this book, which was originally entitled "People are Dangerous," is on the one hand a book about Noam Chomsky, but on the other hand is not, or not solely: *The Chomsky Effect* is a reflection, sometimes critical, of what Noam Chomsky has taught me and others, that is, it is a very tangible example of the "Chomsky Effect" in a whole series of registers and realms. So what I think has emerged as the compendium of ideas that Chomsky has inspired or promoted is a reflection upon how people relate to each other when placed into relationships of all kinds—loving, fearing, hating, admiring, loathing, desiring—via Noam Chomsky. For this reason the reviewer was absolutely correct and very helpful in drawing attention to the fact that there isn't a single "voice" in this text but rather a collection of assertions, analyses, attacks, defenses, explanations, and, moreover, an array of thoughts that are situated between two lives, Noam Chomsky's and my own, which meet and diverge in ways that I hope are inspiring, not necessarily in themselves, but in other venues and spaces between the voices, that is, in worlds not yet imagined. In short, this is a dialogue, a "dialogic" text, to invoke the oft-mentioned work of Mikhail Bakhtin, which tries through a range of speech genres to provide more than just the background for a system of ideas by showing the tangible imprints that these ideas have upon an array of people in all sorts of fields and worlds.

This work follows in the line of studies undertaken, primarily, by Carlos Otero, and works within a similar framework as the one he articulates in his introductions and excellent footnotes for books like *Critical Assessments: Noam Chomsky, Radical Priorities, and Language and Politics*. It also follows from the inspiring corpuses of work on anarchists by Paul Avrich and George Woodcock, the wonderful writings and publishing work of those associated with AK Press and Black Rose Press,

and the range of excellent works about Chomsky's approach to society by his friend David Barsamian, by Mark Achbar and Peter Wintonick through the film and the book called *Manufacturing Consent*, Fred d'Agostino's *Chomsky's System of Ideas*, Milan Rai's *Chomsky's Politics*, Raphael Salkie, *The Chomsky Update: Language and Politics*, and, of course, the truly astonishing work that Michael Albert and his collective have undertaken on Znet and in *Z Magazine*. I owe debts of gratitude to a range of persons who have generously commented on various versions of this text or on ideas presented herein, indeed way more than I can possibly even recall at this point. I would like to say, however, that Sam Abramovitch, Saleem Ali, Stephen Anderson, Marc Angenot, Marion Appel, Jill Brussel, Karl Brussel, Murray Eden, Alain Goldschlager, John Goldsmith, Elizabeth Harvey, David Heap, Denise Helly, Henry Hiz, Henry Hoeningwald, Michael Holquist, Russell Jacoby, Martin Jay, George Jochnowitz, Konrad Koerner, Julia Kristeva, Seymour Melman, Bruce Nevin, Juvenal Ndijirigya, Christopher Norris, Mark Pavlick, Michel Pierssens, Larry Portis, Marcus Raskin, Nicolas Ruwet, Tiphaine Samoyault, Elise Snyder, George Szanto, Darko Suvin, Jeff Tennant, Clive Thomson, Lisa Travis, and Michel Van Schendel offered invaluable assistance for this project, sometimes unwittingly, and Alham Usman brought me to the final corrections by patiently listening to and commenting upon the entire text one last time. I have also learned a tremendous amount from organizations such as the Chomsky Reading Group at Vertigo Books in Washington, D.C., The Palo Alto Peace and Justice Center in California, David Barsamian's public radio show in Boulder, Colorado, and Znet. I have also thoroughly enjoyed reading the words of the many unsung Internet heroes who read Chomsky's work and react to it in their blogs, reading lists, and posted messages. Support for this research has taken many forms, and I owe special debts of gratitude to a range of people affiliated with particular institutions in which this work was written, notably Columbia University, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, University of Pennsylvania, University of Western Ontario, Vanderbilt University, and Yale University. I owe special gratitude to current and past members of the MIT Press, notably Carolyn Anderson, Amy Brand, Gita Manaktala, Sandra Minkkinen, Marney Smyth, Ben Williams, and especially Tom Stone, and, for

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