

Chomsky, Freedom & Truth

Review

Pat Flanagan

1985

a review of

Ecrits Politiques, 1977–1983. Noam Chomsky, Paris. Editions Acratie, 1984 189 pp.

There is Noam Chomsky the world-famous linguist, Chomsky the anarchist theorist, Chomsky the political activist against American foreign policy; last but not least, there is Chomsky the polemicist and ideology critic.

Despite his ceaseless activism commencing with the Vietnam war and his role as perhaps the leading Western spokesman for classical anarcho-syndicalism, it is for his revolutionary contribution to modern linguistics and his engaged polemics that Chomsky is chiefly known in the West. Precisely how, or indeed whether, these four components of Chomsky's demanding intellectual-political practice hang together, has vexed and exercised enemies and sympathetic critics alike, on both the left and right in each domain.

This latest selection of Chomsky's political writings from 1977 to 1983, does not aim to tackle let alone answer this question. Its audience is the French intellectual left, among whom Chomsky remains a figure of fascination and controversy, chiefly for his polemical writings in recent times on Kampuchea, Israel, and the work of "revisionist historians" like Faurisson who deny the Nazi extermination of the Jews. Nevertheless, it can be read with profit by those unfamiliar with such recent works by Chomsky as *The Political Economy of Human Rights* (1979), *Language and Responsibility* (1979), *Towards a New Cold War* (1982), *Radical Priorities* (1982), or *The Fateful Triangle* (1983).

Incisive intellectual power and a passionate commitment to freedom and truth are the outstanding features of this essay-collection. It is not necessary to agree with Chomsky's views on particular issues in anarchist theory, on Israel or Faurisson to appreciate the sincerity and integrity of this commitment, even when it leads him to polemical excess, often with unpleasant acrimony and vituperation for those involved. Indeed, it is precisely Chomsky's passion for freedom and truth which unites his practice in the four domains mentioned above.

Ecrits Politiques falls naturally into three parts. Apart from an overview introduction by Martin Zemliak, the first 112 pages are devoted to five essays on anarchist theory. Two in particular—an introduction to Daniel Guerin's *Anarchism*, and the 1977 Huizinga lecture, "Intellectuals and the State"—provide an excellent statement of the libertarian socialist standpoint from which Chomsky criticizes liberal apologists for State capitalism and Marxist apologists for-State socialism alike. In the interview, "The Present Reality of Anarcho-Syndicalism", Chomsky modestly denies his status as an anarchist thinker ("Disons que je suis une sorte de compagnon de route"), referring and deferring instead to the classical democratic libertarian tradition from Humboldt to Jefferson, Bakunin to Rudolph Rocker.

Part two consists of three substantial pieces based on this standpoint, criticizing American-Israeli policy in the Middle East, covering the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon and the Sabra-Chatila refugee camp massacres. As a "non-Jewish Jew" (Issac Deutscher), Chomsky is particularly scathing on the Zionist racism of the (then) Begin government's policies, and on the role of the United States foreign policy-making establishment and media in their material and ideological support for what can only be described under the Nuremburg Conventions as gross crimes against humanity.

Chomsky demonstrates with ease how the Israeli “commission of inquiry” into the invasion and massacres, no less than general reporting throughout in the west, functioned not to secure truth or justice, but to whitewash and cover-up the realities of US-Israeli racist expansion in the region. The plans for the incorporation of part or all of Lebanon into Greater Israel date back at least to Ben-Gurion and the first days of the creation of the Israeli state.

Chomsky’s conclusion is grim: As long as the United States continues to support and arm her strategic “Sparta” in the Middle East, no political settlement with Palestinians or Arabs generally is possible. The almost certain prospect can only be “new tragedies: repression, terrorism, war” and even doubtless a conflict which will engage the super-powers in a “final solution” in which few will escape.

The final part of the book consists of a series of exchanges between Chomsky and various critics over Kampuchea and the Faurisson affair. These exchanges make depressing reading, taken as symptoms of the state of intellectual and moral-political health of the contemporary left. Tolstoy, at the end of *War and Peace*, defines history as a dead man answering questions which no one has put to him.

Vigorous polemic, based on scrupulous respect for fact, logic and moral principle, even or especially when the issues are passionately controversial, is one thing. Dogmatism, caricature and ideological lack of tolerance, leading to distortion and even lies, quite another. In France and elsewhere, the level of debate has ranged abysmally, from scrupulous to completely unscrupulous.

It is impossible here to discuss the issues in detail. Suffice it to say that on Kampuchea, Chomsky is widely regarded as being an apologist for the Khmer Rouge slaughter; while on Faurisson, as defending the right of expression of a pro-Nazi who denies Auschwitz’s gas chambers and the existence of the Nazi Final Solution. Chomsky insists that his writings on Kampuchea, with one exception, make no reference, hence, take no stand, on the factual issue of the Khmer Rouge-caused civilian killings and deaths; his concern has been an ideological critique of the unsubstantiated claims of writers Ponchaud, Lacouture, Barron-Paul, and others on the matter.

There are in fact three issues: What are the facts? When did they become available in the West? And, what Chomsky says about them. Even today, the facts, as distinct from estimates, speculation and hypothesis, are uncertain; and it is true that Chomsky’s relevant writings on Kampuchea cover the period 1975–8 when the country was almost entirely closed to Western observers.

Still, the fact remains that these writings give the impression of being implicitly apologetic, because of Chomsky’s refusal to address directly the factual issue. Hence, his penchant, even passion, for ideology critique has proved to be (if I can mix metaphors) a boomerang with negative multiplier effects.

On Faurisson, Chomsky’s libertarian insistence of the unrestricted right of free expression for all, even for one holding false or pernicious views, has, if possible, caused even more controversy and damage to his reputation. At issue is not whether Chomsky agrees with or supports Faurisson’s denial of the Nazi gas chambers (though Chomsky, in good faith, foolishly allowed his name to be so misused by Faurisson and his supporters).

The issue is whether libertarian tolerance should be extended not just to one’s intellectual enemies or opponents (classic liberalism), but also to the spokesmen for views in whose name anti-libertarian intolerance is practiced. Of course, anything, above all, truth, freedom, justice or related values, can be abused by the unscrupulous for intolerant ends. Chomsky, consistent with his commitment to absolute tolerance, has supported the right of men he regards as war criminals to teach and research in American universities.

In abstract principle, Chomsky’s libertarianism is unquestionably admirable. In actual, real-world practice, however, a consistent libertarian must be intolerant of the intolerant. The question then is whether support for Faurisson’s free expression of pernicious falsehoods is likely to result in intolerant (e.g. anti-Semitic) practices by supporters of the Nazi-apologetic movement of which he becomes a witting or unwitting part.

This is a matter of practical judgment on which reasonable people may differ. My judgment is that on this issue libertarian tolerance should not be extended to Faurisson’s right of free expression. Because of Chomsky’s commitment to absolute tolerance, however, the practical issue cannot even arise. Here, I believe, Chomsky’s commitment to abstract principle breaks down, his opposition to ideological abuses of freedom and truth becoming itself an ideology injurious of freedom and truth.

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