

## **The Responsibility of Intellectuals**

**Noam Chomsky Interviewed by Gabriel Matthew Schivone, June 25, 2007**

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From the point of view of the objectives of our Eyesociety website, what is most important in this interview is the discussion of the way in which people become mouthpieces of the drift toward centralisation and the destruction of the planet whilst remaining totally unaware of it. The problem, which Chomsky does not comment on, then becomes to map these invisible forces. JR.

GMS: Addressing a community of mostly students during a public forum at the steps of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, in 1969, you expressed: "This particular community is a very relevant one to consider at a place like MIT because, of course, you're all free to enter this community—in fact, you're invited and encouraged to enter it. The community of technical intelligentsia, and weapons designers, and counterinsurgency experts, and pragmatic planners of an American empire is one that you have a great deal of inducement to become associated with. The inducements, in fact, are very real; their rewards in power, and affluence, and prestige and authority are quite significant." Let's start off talking about the significance of these inducements, on both a university and societal level. How crucial is it, in your view, that students particularly consider and understand this, as you describe, highly technocratic social order of the academic community and its function in society, that is, comparably to the more directly associated professional scholarship considering it?

CHOMSKY: How important it is, to an individual, depends on what that individual's goals in life are. If the goals are to enrich yourself, gain privilege, do technically interesting work—in brief, if the goals are self-satisfaction—then these questions are of no particular relevance. If you care about the consequences of your actions, what's happening in the world, what the future will be like for your grandchildren and so on, then they're very crucial. So, it's a question of what choices people make.

What makes students a natural audience to speak to? And do you think it's worth speaking truth to the professional scholarship as well or differently? Are there any short- or long-term possibilities here?

I'm always uneasy about the concept of "speaking truth," as if we somehow know the truth and only have to enlighten others who have not risen to our elevated level. The search for truth is a cooperative, unending endeavor. We can, and should, engage in it to the extent we can and encourage others to do so as well, seeking to free ourselves from constraints imposed by coercive institutions, dogma, irrationality, excessive conformity and lack of initiative and imagination, and numerous other obstacles.

As for possibilities, they are limited only by will and choice.

Students are at a stage of their lives where these choices are most urgent and compelling, and when they also enjoy unusual, if not unique, freedom and opportunity to explore the choices available, to evaluate them, and to pursue them.

In your view, what is it about the privileges within university education and academic scholarship which, as you assert in some of the things you've written, correlate with them a greater responsibility for catastrophic atrocities such as the Vietnam War or those in the Middle East in which the United States is now involved?

Well, there are really some moral truisms. One of them is that opportunity confers responsibility. If you have very limited opportunities, then you have limited responsibility for what you do. If you have substantial opportunity you have greater responsibility for what you do. I mean, that's kind of elementary, I don't know how it can be discussed.

And the people who we call 'intellectuals' are just those who happen to have substantial opportunity. They have privilege, they have resources, they have training. In our society, they have a high degree of freedom—not a hundred percent, but quite a lot—and that gives them a range of choices that they can pursue with a fair degree of freedom, and that hence simply confers responsibility for the predictable consequences of the choices they make.

### The Rise of a Technical Intelligentsia

I think at this point it may do well for us to go over a bit the beginnings and evolution of the ideological currents which now prevail throughout modern social intellectual life in the U.S. Essentially, from where may we trace the development of this strong coterie of technical experts in the schools, and elsewhere, sometimes having been referred to as a 'bought' or 'secular priesthood'?

Well, it really goes back to the latter-part of the nineteenth century, when there was substantial discussion—not just in the United States but in Europe, too—of what was then sometimes called 'a new class' of scientific intellectuals. In that period of time there was a level of knowledge and technical expertise accumulating that allowed a kind of managerial class of educated, trained people to have a greater share in decision-making and planning. It was thought that they were a new class displacing the aristocracy, the owners, political leaders and so on, and they could have a larger role—and of course they liked that idea.

Out of this group developed an ideology of technocratic planning. In industry it was called 'scientific management'. It developed in intellectual life with a concept of what was called a 'responsible class' of technocratic, serious intellectuals who could solve the world's problems rationally, and would have to be protected from the 'vulgar masses' who might interfere with them. And it goes right up until the present.

Just how realistic this is, is another question, but for the class of technical intellectuals, it's a very attractive conception that, 'We are the rational, intelligent people, and management and decision-making should be in our hands.'

Actually, as I've pointed out in some of the things I've written, it's very close to Bolshevism. And, in fact, if you put side-by-side, say, statements by people like Robert McNamara and V.I. Lenin, it's strikingly similar. In both cases there's a conception of a vanguard of rational planners who know the direction that society ought to go and can make efficient decisions, and have to be allowed to do so without interference from, what one of them, Walter Lippmann, called the 'meddlesome and ignorant outsiders', namely, the population, who just get in the way.

It's not an entirely new conception: it's just a new category of people. Two hundred years ago you didn't have an easily identifiable class of technical intellectuals, just generally educated people. But as scientific and technical progress increased there were people who felt they can appropriate it and become the proper managers of the society, in every domain. That, as I said, goes from scientific management in industry, to social and political control.

There are periods in history, for example, during the Kennedy years, when these ideas really flourished. There were, as they called themselves, æthe best and the brightest.Æ The æsmart guysÆ who could run everything if only they were allowed to; who could do things scientifically without people getting in their way.

ItÆs a pretty constant strain, and understandable. And it underlies the fear and dislike of democracy that runs through elite culture always, and very dramatically right now. It often correlates closely with posturing about love of democracy. As any reader of Orwell would expect, these two things tend to correlate. The more you hate democracy, the more you talk about how wonderful it is and how much youÆre dedicated to it. ItÆs one of the clearer expressions of the visceral fear and dislike of democracy, and of allowing, again, going back to Lippmann, the æignorant and meddling outsidersÆ to get in our way. They have to be distracted and marginalized somehow while we can take care of the serious questions.

Now, thatÆs the basic strain. And you find it all the time, but increasingly in the modern period when, at least, claims to expertise become somewhat more plausible. Whether theyÆre authentic or not is, again, a different question. But, the claims to expertise are very striking. So, economists tell you, æWe know how to run the economyÆ; the political scientists tell you, æWe know how to run the world, and you keep out of it because you donÆt have special knowledge and training.Æ

When you look at it, the claims tend to erode pretty quickly. ItÆs not quantum physics; there is, at least, a pretense, and sometimes, some justification for the claims. But what matters for human life is, typically, well within the reach of the concerned person who is willing to undertake some effort.

Given the, albeit, self-proclaimed notion that this new class is entitled to decision-making, how close are they to actual policy, then?

My feeling is that theyÆre nowhere near as powerful as they think they are. So, when, say, John Kenneth Galbraith wrote about the technocratic elite which is taking over the running of societyùor when McNamara wrote about it, or othersùthereÆs a lot of illusion there. Meaning, they can gain positions of authority and decision-making when they act in the interests of those who really own and run the society. You can have people that are just as competent, or more competent, and who have conceptions of social and economic order that run counter to, say, corporate power, and theyÆre not going to be in the planning sectors. So, to get into those planning sectors you first of all have to conform to the interests of the real concentrations of power.

And, again, there are a lot of illusions about thisùin the media, too. Tom Wicker is a famous example, one of the æleft commentatorsÆ of the New York Times. He would get very angry when critics would tell him heÆs conforming to power interests and that heÆs keeping within the doctrinal framework of the media, which goes back to their corporate structure and so on. And he would answer, very angrilyùand correctlyùthat nobody tells him what to say. He writes anything he wants,ùwhich is absolutely true. But if he wasnÆt writing the things he did he wouldnÆt have a column in the New York Times.

ThatÆs the kind of thing that is very hard to perceive. People do not wantùor often are not ableùto perceive that they are conforming to external authority. They feel themselves to be very freeùand indeed they areùas long as they conform. But power lies elsewhere. ThatÆs as old as history in the modern period. ItÆs often very explicit.

Adam Smith, for example, discussing England, quite interestingly pointed out that the merchants and manufacturers—the economic forces of his day—are the principal architects of policy, and they make sure that their own interests are almost peculiarly attended to, no matter how grievous the effect on others, including the people in England. And that's a good principle of statecraft, and social and economic planning, which runs pretty much to the present. When you get people with management and decision-making skills, they can enter into that system and they can make the actual decisions—within a framework that's set within the real concentrations of power. And now it's not the merchants and manufacturers of Adam Smith's day, it's the multinational corporations, financial institutions, and so on. But, stray too far beyond their concerns and you won't be the decision-maker.

It's not a mechanical phenomenon, but it's overwhelmingly true that the people who make it to decision-making positions (that is, what they think of as decision-making positions) are those who conform to the basic framework of the people who fundamentally own and run the society. That's why you have a certain choice of technocratic managers and not some other choice of people equally or better capable of carrying out policies but have different ideas.

What about degrees of responsibility and shared burdens of guilt on an individual level? What can we learn about how one views oneself often in positions of power or authority?

You almost never find anyone, whether it's in a weapons plant, or planning agency, or in corporate management, or almost anywhere, who says, "I'm really a bad guy, and I just want to do things that benefit myself and my friends." Almost invariably you get noble rhetoric like: "We're working for the benefit of the people." The corporate executive who is slaving for the benefit of the workers and community; the friendly banker who just wants to help everybody start their business; the political leader who's trying to bring freedom and justice to the world—and they probably all believe it. I'm not suggesting that they're lying. There's an array of routine justifications for whatever you're doing. And it's easy to believe them. It's very hard to look into the mirror and say, "Yeah, that guy looking at me is a vicious criminal." It's much easier to say, "That guy looking at me is really very benign, self-sacrificing, and he has to do these things because it's for the benefit of everyone."

Or you get respected moralists like Reinhold Niebuhr, who was once called "the theologian of the establishment." And the reason is because he presented a framework which, essentially, justified just about anything they wanted to do. His thesis is dressed up in long words and so on (it's what you do if you're an intellectual). But what it came down to is that, "Even if you try to do good, evil's going to come out of it; that's the paradox of grace." And that's wonderful for war criminals. "We try to do good but evil necessarily comes out of it." And it's influential. So, I don't think that people in decision-making positions are lying when they describe themselves as benevolent. Or people working on more advanced nuclear weapons. Ask them what they're doing, they'll say: "We're trying to preserve the peace of the world." People who are devising military strategies that are massacring people, they'll say, "Well, that's the cost you have to pay for freedom and justice," and so on.

But, we don't take those sentiments seriously when we hear them from enemies, say, from Stalinist commissars. They'll give you the same answers. But, we don't take that seriously because they can know what they're doing if they choose to. If they choose not to, that's their choice. If they choose to believe self-satisfying propaganda, that's their choice. But it doesn't change the moral responsibility. We understand that perfectly well with regard to others. It's very hard to apply the same reasoning to ourselves.

In fact, one of the—maybe the most—elementary of moral principles is that of universality, that is, if something's right for me, it's right for you; if it's wrong for you, it's wrong for me. Any moral code that is even worth looking at has that at its core somehow. But that principle is overwhelmingly disregarded all the time. If you want to run through examples we can easily do it. Take, say, George W. Bush, since he

happens to be president. If you apply the standards that we applied to Nazi war criminals at Nuremberg, he'd be hanged. Is it an even conceivable possibility? It's not even discussable. Because we don't apply to ourselves the principles we apply to others.

There's a lot of talk about 'terror' and how awful it is. Whose terror? Our terror against them? I mean, is that considered reprehensible? No, it's considered highly moral; it's considered self-defense, and so on. Now, their terror against us, that's awful, and terrible, and so on.

But, to try to rise to the level of becoming a minimal moral agent, and just enter in the domain of moral discourse is very difficult. Because that means accepting the principle of universality. And you can experiment for yourself and see how often that's accepted, either in personal or political life. Very rarely.

### Looking at Nuremberg and the Culture of Torture

What about criminal responsibility and intellectuals? Nuremberg is an interesting precedent.

The Nuremberg case is a very interesting precedent. First of all, the Nuremberg trials of all the tribunals that have taken place, from then until today it is, I think, the most serious by far. But, nevertheless, it was very seriously flawed. And it was recognized to be. When Telford Taylor, the chief prosecutor, wrote about it, he recognized that it was flawed, and it was so for a number of fundamental reasons. For one thing, the Nazi war criminals were being tried for crimes that had not yet been declared to be crimes. So, it was *ex post facto*. 'We're now declaring these things you did to be crimes.' That is already questionable.

Secondly, the choice of what was considered a crime was based on a very explicit criterion, namely, denial of the principle of universality. In other words, something was called a crime at Nuremberg if they did it and we didn't do it.

So, for example, the bombing of urban concentrations was not considered a crime. The bombings of Tokyo, Dresden, and so on those aren't crimes. Why? Because we did them. So, therefore, it's not a crime. In fact, Nazi war criminals who were charged were able to escape prosecution when they could show that the Americans and the British did the same thing they did. Admiral Doenitz, a submarine commander who was involved in all kinds of war crimes, called in the defense a high official in the British admiralty and, I think, Admiral Nimitz from the United States, who testified that, 'Yeah, that's the kind of thing we did.' And, therefore, they weren't sentenced for these crimes. Doenitz was absolved. And that's the way it ran through. Now, that's a very serious flaw. Nevertheless, of all the tribunals, that's the most serious one.

When Chief Justice Jackson, chief counsel for the prosecution, spoke to the tribunal and explained to them the importance of what they were doing, he said, to paraphrase, that: 'We are handing these defendants a poisoned chalice, and if we ever sip from it we must be subject to the same punishments, otherwise this whole trial is a farce.' Well, you can look at the history from then on, and we've sipped from the poisoned chalice many times, but it's never been considered a crime. So, that means we are saying that trial was a farce.

Interestingly, in Jackson's opening statement he claimed that the defense did not wish to incriminate the whole German populace from whence the defendants came, for the crimes they committed, but only the

planners and designers of those crimes, the inciters and leaders without whose evil architecture the world would not have been for so long scourged with the violence and lawlessness of this terrible war.

That's correct. And that's another principle which we flatly reject. So, at Nuremberg, we weren't trying the people who threw Jews into crematoria; we were trying the leaders. When we ever have a trial for crimes it's of some low-level person like a torturer from Abu Ghraib not the people who were setting up the framework from which they operate. And we certainly don't try political leaders for the crime of aggression. That's out of the question. The invasion of Iraq was about as clear-cut a case of aggression than you can imagine. In fact, by the Nuremberg principles, if you read them carefully, the U.S. war against Nicaragua was a crime of aggression for which Ronald Reagan should have been tried. But, it's inconceivable; you can't even mention it in the West. And the reason is our radical denial of the most elementary moral truisms. We just flatly reject them. We don't even think we reject them, and that's even worse than rejecting them outright.

I mean, if we were able to say to ourselves, "Look, we are totally immoral, we don't accept elementary moral principles," that would be a kind of respectable position in a certain way. But, when we sink to the level where we cannot even perceive that we're violating elementary moral principles and international law, that's pretty bad. But that's the nature of the intellectual culture not just in the United States but in powerful societies everywhere.

You mentioned Doenitz escaping culpability for his crimes. Two who didn't escape punishment and were among the most severely punished at Nuremberg were Julius Streicher, an editor of a major newspaper, and also an interesting example Dr. Wolfram Sievers of the Ahnenerbe Society's Institute of Military Scientific Research, whose own crimes were traced back to the University of Strasbourg. Not the typical people prosecuted for international war crimes, it seems, given their civilian professions.

Yeah; and there's a justification for that, namely, those defendants could understand what they were doing. They could understand the consequences of the work that they were carrying out. But, of course, if we were to accept this awful principle of universality, that would have a pretty long reach to journalists, university researchers, and so on.

Let me quote for you the mission statement of the Army Research Office. This "premier extramural" research agency of the Army is grounded upon "developing and exploiting innovative advances to insure the Nation's technological superiority." It executes this mission "through conduct of an aggressive basic science research program on behalf of the Army so that cutting-edge scientific discoveries and the general store of scientific knowledge will be optimally used to develop and improve weapons systems that establish land-force dominance."

This is a pentagon office, and they're doing their job. In our system, the military is under civilian control. Civilians assign a certain task to the military: their job is to obey, and carry the role out, otherwise you quit. That's what it means to have a military under civilian control. So, you can't really blame them for their mission statement. They're doing what they're told to do by the civilian authorities. The civilian authorities are the culpable ones. If we don't like those policies (and I don't, and you don't), then we go back to those civilians who designed the framework and gave the orders.

You can, as the Nuremberg precedents indicated, be charged with obeying illegal orders, but that's often a stretch. If a person is in a position of military command, they are sworn, in fact, to obey civilian orders, even if they don't like them. If you say they're really just criminal orders, then, yes, they can reject them, and get into trouble and so on. But this is just carrying out the function that they're ordered to carry out. So, we

go straight back to the civilian authority and then to the general intellectual culture, which regards this as proper and legitimate. And now we're back to universities, newspapers, the centers of the doctrinal system.

It's just the forthright honesty of the mission statement which is also very striking, I think.

Well, it's like going to an armory and finding out they're making better guns. That's what they're supposed to do. Their orders are, "Make this gun work better," and so they're doing it. And, if they're honest, they'll say, "Yeah, that's what we're doing; that's what the civilian authorities told us to do."

At some point, people have to ask, "Do I want to make a better gun?" That's where the Nuremberg issues arise. But, you really can't blame people very severely for carrying out the orders that they're told to carry out when there's nothing in the culture that tells them there's anything wrong with it. I mean, you have to be kind of like a moral hero to perceive it, to break out of the cultural framework and say, "Look, what I'm doing is wrong." Like somebody who deserts from the army because they think the war is wrong. That's not the place to assign guilt, I think. Just as at Nuremberg. As I said, they didn't try the SS guards who threw people into crematoria, at Nuremberg. They might have been tried elsewhere, but not at Nuremberg.

But, in this case, the results of the ARO's mission statement in harvesting scholarly work for better weapons design, it's professors, scholars, researchers, scientific designers, etc., who have these choices to focus serious intellectual effort and to be so used for such ends, and who aren't acting necessarily from direct orders but are acting more out of freewill.

It's freewill, but don't forget that there's a general intellectual culture that raises no objection to this.

Let's take the Iraq war. There's libraries of material arguing about the war, debating it, asking "What should we do?", this and that, and the other thing. Now, try to find a sentence somewhere that says that "carrying out a war of aggression is the supreme international crime, which differs from other war crimes in that it encompasses all the evil that follows" (paraphrasing from Nuremberg). Try to find that somewhere. I mean, you can find it. I've written about it, and you can find a couple other dozen people who have written about it in the world. But is it part of the intellectual culture? Can you find it in a newspaper, or in a journal; in Congress; any public discourse; anything that's part of the general exchange of knowledge and ideas? I mean, do students study it in school? Do they have courses where they teach students that "to carry out a war of aggression is the supreme international crime which encompasses all the evil that follows"?

So, for example, if sectarian warfare is a horrible atrocity, as it is, who's responsible? By the principles of Nuremberg, Bush, Rumsfeld, Cheney, Wolfowitz, Rice—they're responsible for sectarian warfare because they carried out the supreme international crime which encompasses all the evil that follows. Try and find somebody who points that out. You can't. Because our dominant intellectual culture accepts as legitimate our crushing anybody we like.

And take Iran. Both political parties—and practically the whole press—accept it as legitimate and, in fact, honorable, that all options are on the table, presumably including nuclear weapons, to quote Hilary Clinton and everyone else. "All options are on the table" means we threaten war. Well, there's something called the U.N. Charter, which outlaws "the threat or use of force" in international affairs. Does anybody care? Actually, I saw one op-ed somewhere by Ray Takeyh, an Iran specialist close to the government, who pointed out that threats are serious violations of international law. But that's so rare that when you find it it's like finding a diamond in a pile of hay or something. It's not part of the culture. We're allowed to threaten anyone we want—and to attack anyone we want. And, when a person grows up and acts in a culture like that, they're culpable in a sense, but the culpability is much broader.

I was just reading a couple days ago a review of a new book by Steven Miles, a medical doctor and bioethicist, who ran through 35,000 pages of documents he got from the Freedom of Information Act on the torture in Abu Ghraib. And the question that concerned him is, "What were the doctors doing during all of this?" All through those torture sessions there were doctors, nurses, behavioral scientists and others who were organizing them. What were they doing when this torture was going on? Well, you go through the detailed record and it turns out that they were designing and improving it. Just like Nazi doctors.

Robert Jay Lifton did a big study on Nazi doctors. He points out in connection with the Nazi doctors that, in a way, it's not those individual doctors who had the final guilt, it was a culture and a society which accepted torture and criminal activities as legitimate. The same is true with the tortures at Abu Ghraib. I mean, just to focus on them as if they're somehow terrible people is just a serious mistake. They're coming out of a culture that regards this as legitimate. Maybe there are some excesses you don't really do but torture in interrogation is considered legitimate.

There's a big debate now on, "Who's an enemy combatant?"; a big technical debate. Suppose we invade another country and we capture somebody who's defending the country against our invasion: what do you mean to call them an "enemy combatant"? If some country invaded the United States and let's say you were captured throwing a rock at one of the soldiers, would it be legitimate to send you to the equivalent of Guantanamo, and then have a debate about whether you're a "lawful" or "unlawful" combatant? The whole discussion is kind of, like, off in outer space somewhere. But, in a culture which accepts that we own and rule the world, it's reasonable. But, also, we should go back to the roots of the intellectual or moral culture, not just to the individuals directly involved.

As you mentioned before, whether students are taught serious moral principles: At my school, the University of Arizona, there are courses in bioethics—required ones, in fact, to hard scientific undergraduates (I took one, out of interest)—which mostly just discuss scenarios in terms of "slippery slopes" and hypothetical questions within certain bounds, and still none at all in the social sciences or humanities. Do you think there should be? Would that be beneficial?

If they were honest, yes. If they're honest they'd be talking about what we're talking about, and doing case studies. There's no point pontificating about high minded principles. That's easy. Nazi doctors could do that, too.

Let's take a look at the cases and ask how the principles apply—to Vietnam; to El Salvador; to Iraq; to Palestine—just run through the cases and see how the principles apply to our own actions. That's what is of prime importance, and what is least discussed.

As a note to end on, there seems to be some very serious aberrations and defects in our society and our level of culture. How, in your view, might they be corrected and a new level of culture be established, say, one in which torture isn't accepted? (After all, slavery and child labor were each accepted for a long period of time and now are not.)

Your examples give the answer to the question, the only answer that has ever been known. Slavery and child labor didn't become unacceptable by magic. It took hard, dedicated, courageous work by lots of people. The same is true of torture, which was once completely routine.

If I remember correctly, the renowned Norwegian criminologist Nils Christie wrote somewhere that prisons began to proliferate in Norway in the early 19th century. They weren't much needed before, when the punishment for robbery could be driving a stake through the hand of the accused. Now it's perhaps the most civilized country on earth.

There has been a gradual codification of constraints against torture, and they have had some effect, though only limited, even before the Bush regression to savagery. Alfred McCoy's work reviews that ugly history. Still, there is improvement, and there can be more if enough people are willing to undertake the efforts that led to large-scale rejection of slavery and child labor—still far from complete.

From: "John Raven" <jraven@ednet.co.uk>  
Reply-To: jraven@ednet.co.uk  
To: "Gordon Asher" <gordonasher@hotmail.com>  
Subject: Re: Chomsky on the Role of Intellectuals  
Date: Thu, 27 Sep 2007 07:37:18 +0100 (BST)

I intended to write to thank you for the above and to say that I was going to forward it to some others ... but I don't know whether I did this before my computer was stolen. But, in any case, I no longer have it and would appreciate it if you would send it again.

Best wishes and thanks for keeping up your interest.

John

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