

WORLD AFFAIRS

Noam Chomsky: The Last Totalitarian

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My friend and colleague Benjamin Kerstein has published a number of books, and this summer he released what is perhaps the most blistering critique of the radical leftist ideologue Noam Chomsky ever to appear in book form. It's called *Diary of an Anti-Chomskyite* and is a collection of essays, reviews, and take-downs that originally appeared on his blog of the same name during a three-year period from 2004 through 2007.

I read most of the material in this book when it first appeared, and now I have it all in one place in trade paperback on my bookshelf. Kerstein and I discussed Chomsky and his new book last week.

MJT: What possessed you to spend three years writing about Noam Chomsky?

Benjamin Kerstein: That's a huge question, and lest people start thinking I'm completely obsessive, I should note that I was doing a lot of other things at the same time. The short answer is 9/11. I grew up in an extremely liberal community where Chomsky was very popular, and as soon as 9/11 happened I knew that all those people I used to know would go straight to him in order to find out what they should think about it, and what they would come back with would be very nasty indeed. I regret that I was proven absolutely correct in that. It was really a disgraceful display by some very disgraceful people. Chomsky had become quite marginal in the years before that, but after 9/11 the left disinterred him and put him back on a pedestal. The *New York Times*, for example, ran a ridiculously fawning profile of him. He was being mainstreamed again and I felt strongly that someone had to say something.

I like to think that I and the others who were speaking out against him managed to make a small difference. For years he was spewing this stuff out with basically no opposition at all. I hope we managed to give people some material that helped them apply some critical thinking to his claims.

MJT: Can you boil down your case against him into a couple of sentences or paragraphs?



Benjamin Kerstein

Benjamin Kerstein: There are a couple of main points that should be made. First, Chomsky is an absolutely shameless liar. A master of the argument in bad faith. He will say anything in order to get people to believe him. Even worse, he will say anything in order to shut people up who disagree with him. And I'm not necessarily talking about his public critics. If you've ever seen how he acts with ordinary students who question what he says, it's quite horrifying. He simply abuses them in a manner I can only describe as sadistic. That is, he clearly enjoys doing it. I don't think anyone ought to be allowed to get away with that kind of behavior.

Second, Chomsky is immensely important to the radical left. When it comes to American foreign policy he isn't just influential, he's basically *all they have*. Almost any argument made about foreign affairs by the radical left can be traced back to him. That wasn't the case when he started out back in the late '60s, but it is now.

Third, he is essentially the last totalitarian. Despite his claims otherwise, he's more or less the last survivor of a group of intellectuals who thought systemic political violence and totalitarian control were essentially good things. He babbles about human rights all the time, but when you look at the regimes and groups he's supported, it's a very bloody list indeed.

Communism and fascism are obviously dead as the proverbial doornail, but I doubt the totalitarian temptation will ever go away. The desire for unity and a kind of beautiful tyranny seems to spring from somewhere deep in the human psyche.

Fourth—and this may be most important—he makes people stupid. In this sense, he's more like a cult leader or a New Age guru than an intellectual. He allows people to be comfortable with their prejudices and their hatreds, and he undercuts their ability to think in a critical manner. To an extent, this has to do with his use of emotional and moral blackmail. Since he portrays everyone who disagrees with him as evil, if you *do* agree with him you must be on the side of good and right. This is essentially a kind of secular puritanism, and it's very appealing to many people, for obvious reasons, I think. We all want to think well of ourselves, whether we deserve it or not.

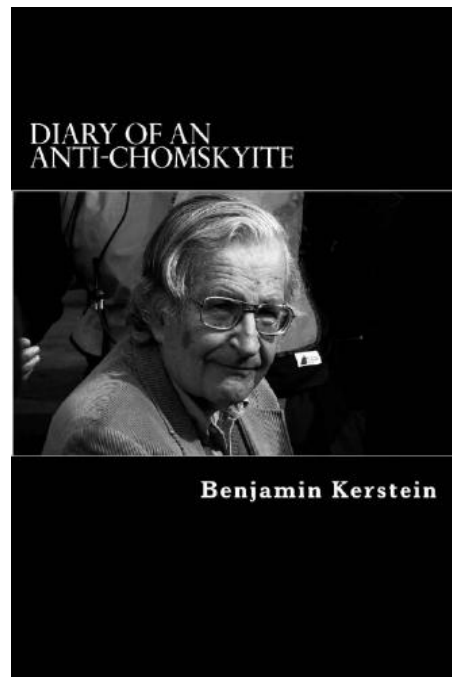
There is an intellectual side to this, as well. You see it clearly in his famous debate with Michel Foucault. Chomsky says at one point that there is a moral and ethical order that is hardwired into human beings. And Foucault basically asks him, why? How do you know this hardwired morality exists? And even if it exists, how can we know that it is, in fact, moral in the first place? We may feel it to be moral, but that doesn't make it true.

Chomsky's answer is essentially: Because I believe it to be so. Now, whatever that is, it isn't thinking. In fact, it's an excuse for not thinking. Ironically, Chomsky later said that Foucault was the most amoral man he ever met, whereas I would argue that Foucault was simply pointing out that Chomsky's "morality" is in fact a form of nihilism.

I think people come to Chomsky and essentially worship him for precisely that reason. He allows them to feel justified in their refusal to think. They never have to ask themselves any difficult questions or provide any difficult answers. It's a form of intellectual cowardice essentially, but I'm sure you can see its appeal.

This may be one of the reasons for Chomsky's hostility to psychoanalysis. Psychoanalysis may be many things, but it is certainly a method of gaining self-knowledge, of asking difficult questions about one's self and others. And that is precisely what he, and his followers, want to avoid.

My apologies for the length of this answer, but I think you'll agree that, of all the bad things people are capable of, their refusal to think is one of the worst, mainly because it leads to most of the other bad things of which they are capable.



MJT: Can you give us an example of a Noam Chomsky lie?

Benjamin Kerstein: Well, the greatest of them all is his claim that there was (and possibly still is) an alliance between the United States and the Nazis. It's so blatantly deranged that several Chomsky admirers I've spoken to simply denied outright that he ever said it.

But it's right there in his book *What Uncle Sam Really Wants*. Obviously, the United States never had an alliance with Nazi Germany, and the Nazi regime hasn't existed since 1945, so it would be rather difficult to conclude an alliance with it. Now, I have absolutely no idea whether Chomsky actually believes this lie or not—I doubt it—but it's an important part of his ideology. In one of his earliest books, he wrote that America requires a process of de-Nazification. He has denied saying this, but again, it's right there in black and white. I think it's impossible to understand Chomsky's politics without understanding that, to him, the US is morally equivalent to Nazi Germany and needs to be dealt with accordingly. It should be noted, by the way, that this was a very important aspect of post-war Stalinist propaganda, and I have no doubt that Chomsky adopted it from that rather dubious source.

MJT: Were you ever a Chomskyite yourself?

Benjamin Kerstein: That's a difficult question. I grew up in a community where he was popular, and I accepted many of his ideas without knowing where they came from. But I can't say I was ever a worshiper of his. The few times I tried to read his books I found them dull and repetitive. Chomsky is much more interesting when read with a critical eye. Nonetheless, I can't say I was unsympathetic to the basic worldview he was expressing. We all were. It was all around us, after all. But I don't think anyone becomes a Chomskyite by reading him. As Camus said of communists, "first they convert, then they read the scriptures." Let's say that, had things gone differently, I might have become one. I certainly know a great many people who did. So I would have to say that, compared to Chomsky's true believers, no. But in terms of being sympathetic to a point of view that was influenced by him, I would have to give a qualified yes.

MJT: For a while he denied Pol Pot's genocide in Cambodia ever happened. Then when he could no longer deny it had really occurred, he blamed it on the United States instead of the perpetrators. What do you think was initially going on in his head? Was he lying? Was he in denial? How do you explain it?

Benjamin Kerstein: It would take a team of psychiatrists a hundred years to figure all of that out. I can only give you my personal speculations on the subject. I think that, in the beginning, he may have believed that it was all a frame-up by the *New York Times* and the US-Nazi alliance or whoever else he made up to blame it on. No doubt a great deal of wishful thinking on his part was involved, but it's possible he was sincere in his conspiracy theories.

Then, as the facts became more difficult to deny and he started looking worse as a result, things got more complicated. At some point, he must have realized that he was saying things that in all likelihood were false. My guess is that he justified it in two ways: First, by relativizing it. Something along the lines of "whatever the Khmer Rouge may have done, it can't be as bad as what America did in Vietnam, or Chile, or Indonesia, etc. Therefore, I am justified in continuing to defend the regime." Second, by demonizing his opponents, by saying "whatever the Khmer Rouge may have done, it's more important not to allow my opponents to win, because they are evil, and it is morally wrong to allow evil to win."

Then, when the really horrendous scope of the genocide became clear, he was faced with having to admit he'd been wrong and owning up to it publicly. That is something Chomsky has never done and will never do. Perhaps he has a very fragile ego under all the bluster. It certainly seems like it. In any event, blaming anything and everything bad that happens in the world on the United States has always been Chomsky's default position. So once he'd exhausted all other possibilities of escape, that's what he fell back on. And he'll keep doing it until his dying day. You will never get a *mea culpa* from him on anything, and certainly not on Cambodia, which is probably the biggest disgrace of his career.

What is truly sad is that if you look at the claims Chomsky attacked in his famous article on the subject, they turned out to be mostly accurate in terms of the number of dead, etc. Now, at the time (most people don't know or have forgotten this) there was a serious debate over possible military intervention to stop the killing. I could be wrong, but I think it was Paul Berman who said that Chomsky helped shift the debate from what to do about the genocide to whether it was even happening. I doubt any words I could write would constitute a more damning indictment than that.

There may have been another and much darker motive at work—and I want to emphasize that this is speculation on my part. The Khmer Rouge justified its violence by claiming it was wiping out the urban bourgeoisie and that this was a necessary use of force whose purpose was to achieve a more just society. In other words, the people they killed deserved it. Chomsky may have bought this argument. He certainly hasn't shied away from it in other cases. Remember, in terms of motive what the Khmer Rouge did wasn't hugely different from what most other radical Left regimes have done when they seized power. The major difference is one of scale. That is, in

terms of the number of people dead and especially in terms of the percentage of the population that was annihilated, the Khmer Rouge was disproportionately bloodthirsty.

MJT: This book reads like you wrote it not with a pen but with a blowtorch. Was that a calculated decision on your part, or did the subject matter itself set you on fire?

Benjamin Kerstein: Mostly the latter. I have a visceral reaction to certain kinds of intellectual malfeasance, and I do not like people who exploit the relative weakness or ignorance of others in order to abuse and manipulate them. But there was a certain amount of calculation in that I did try to take some of Chomsky's style—which is strident, to say the least—and turn it back on him. A sort of exercise in turnabout as fair play. I like to think that I did so without also falling into the dishonesty and emotional blackmail that characterizes Chomsky's writing. I also hope that my use of irony and sarcasm was more successful than his; Chomsky is really quite pathetic when he tries to be funny.

MJT: Your review of Chomsky's *Peace in the Middle East?* was eye-opening. He wrote it right after the Yom Kippur War. It was published in 1975. He was stridently anti-Israel back when much of the left was still pro-Israel. I can't help but wonder, given his out-sized influence in radical circles, if he were instead pro-Israel like many others, and if he remained so, if Israel would be a little more popular in the West today than it is, if the hostility toward the Jewish state would come primarily from the right-wing fringe instead of the left-wing fringe. What do you think?

Benjamin Kerstein: It's a complicated question, because in a certain sense Chomsky was a bit late to the game on Israel, though he more than made up for it afterwards. It didn't begin with him. The New Left was already moving against Israel as far back as the mid-1960s. It really starts with the Suez War in 1956, when Israel turns decisively against the USSR and pivots toward the West. The Soviets started pumping out the anti-Israel propaganda, and people in the Western Left naturally started falling into line. And certainly, the rise of a certain kind of Third World-ism that fetishized the Arab war against Israel predated Chomsky's emergence as a major voice on the anti-Israel Left. It's also important to remember that, despite Chomsky's intense hatred of Israel, his real *idée fixe* has always been the United States. It's only as Israel starts to draw closer to the US following the Six Day War, and especially after the Yom Kippur War, that he really gets going.

It's for this reason that the question of his remaining pro-Israel really isn't a question at all. As soon as Israel became an important ally of the United States, Chomsky could never have been pro-Israel even if he'd wanted to be. It would have thrown his entire worldview into disarray.

I would say, though, that he solidified the position of the Left on Israel and certainly gave it a lot of ammunition. He also played an important role in giving anti-Israel ideas a legitimate place in the American intellectual debate—especially in academia—and in making it a sort of litmus test for Jewish Leftists. A lot of the things he wrote in the wake of the Six Day War were denunciations of fellow Jewish Leftists for not being “real” Leftists because of their Zionism. So as a collaborator in what was basically a purge, and in ensuring that Jewish Leftists knew that the price of their continued participation in the movement was their support for Israel, he did play an essential part.

He was also one of the anti-Israel Left's first and probably most important shields against accusations of Anti-Semitism. Since he was one of the most prominent Jewish intellectuals in America at the time (mainly for his linguistics work), he gave the anti-Israel Left a lot of cover, and allowed them to escape responsibility for the Anti-Semitic aspects of their ideology for a long time. It was really only with the Second Intifada that people finally started speaking out against Leftwing Anti-Semitism, which was mainly the fault of the movement itself. They'd gotten a free

pass for so long that they probably thought it would go on forever. In a sense, thankfully, this has to count as one of Chomsky's greatest failures.

MJT: At times in your denunciations of Chomsky you sound like a conservative. Correct me if I'm mistaken, but aren't you a centrist and even left-of-center in some ways?

Benjamin Kerstein: Whenever people ask about my personal political beliefs, I'm reminded of Orson Welles' line, "I, sir, am not one of anything." It's a bit of a cop-out, but I do have to admit that my politics don't really fit with any particular ideology. I think the most honest thing to say is that I've learned a great deal from both the Right and the Left, and I tend toward a "Third Way" position that tries to deal with social and political issues in a less dogmatic fashion. The ideology I probably feel closest to is communitarianism, in that it seems to acknowledge many of the flaws on both Left and Right and tries to steer a course between them. For example, it criticizes the Left for its overemphasis on the state as a means of change and control. But it also criticizes the Right for its tendency to hold that there is little or no positive role the state can play in a society.

And obviously I am a Zionist, but that is something that does not really fit within a Right/Left paradigm.

MJT: How many of his books have you read? I've read two of them and certainly won't read any more.

Benjamin Kerstein: Well, I've read pieces of a great many of them. I would say "most," but he churns them out at such a pace that I can't say that with any great confidence. I say "pieces" because his books are often repetitive. Most are collections of speeches or short articles, so there's naturally some skipping around in order to get to things you haven't dealt with. *Peace in Middle East?*, for example, is basically the same article repeated several times, with a unique article as the final chapter.

Much of the material I used in my book is composed of individual pieces, usually because when you write a blog, you naturally tend toward the topical. So, for instance, a transcript of the Chomsky-Dershowitz debate from a few years ago would appear on the Web, and I'd naturally deal with it more or less immediately. The only book I regret not having dealt with at length is *Manufacturing Consent*, which is one of his most famous and, I think, one of his silliest.

MJT: Chomsky once wrote that the United States could learn a lot about democracy from Haiti. Do you think he actually believes this sort of thing or is he just throwing bloody chunks of red meat to his base because they expect it?

Benjamin Kerstein: I doubt he actually believes that, but it's important to point out that most of what Chomsky says is driven by emotion rather than intellect. His *tone* is very intellectual, in that he speaks in a very quiet, measured style most of the time. But the content is clearly driven by what can only be called a species of hysteria. I obviously don't know him personally, but he seems to be at heart an extremely angry man, and I would guess that his anger is driven by something that is ultimately not political.

I will say, though, that one thing you realize very quickly when you deal with Chomsky at length is that he is *very* conscious of his audience. He often says one thing to a "red meat" type of crowd and something quite different—sometimes the opposite—to a potentially less sympathetic audience. Sometimes you even find both within the same speech or article.

A classic example is his comments on 9/11. First he condemns the attack, and then he spends several pages justifying it. Another is his claims about American democracy. In some of his earlier books, he quite obviously thinks that America is a kind of quasi-dictatorship or oligarchic tyranny

in which democracy and freedom are a sham. Then after 9/11 his audience balloons in size, and suddenly he's talking about how free American society is. A reader can essentially pick one or the other, depending on his inclinations.

MJT: Chomsky was denied entry to Israel in 2010 at the Allenby Bridge at the Jordanian border. You wrote in your book that you approved of the decision to send him back to Amman, that throughout his long career he has been “a consistent and dedicated supporter and/or apologist for tyranny, terrorism, political violence of all kinds, and sometimes horrifying acts of mass murder.” But what’s the worst thing that could have happened had Chomsky been allowed in? He wasn’t a security threat. By declaring him *persona non grata*, he looked like a martyr and Israel came off like a country that can’t handle free speech or criticism. Was it really worth it? Don’t you think Chomsky was privately thrilled that this happened?

Benjamin Kerstein: Well, what I wrote was mainly intended as a criticism of those who were portraying him as an innocuous sort of liberal in order to attack the Israeli decision. I felt very strongly that, whether they approved of the decision or not, they had a responsibility to point out what he really believes.

That being said, I did support the decision, for two reasons: First, I don't think any country has the obligation to indulge people dedicated to its defamation. And what Chomsky says about Israel is defamatory. It's also important to point out that defamation is not criticism. Criticism is quite a different thing, and I certainly don't think Israel should ban a critic like Peter Beinart, for example, who I completely disagree with.

I also pointed out that some of the things Chomsky has said about Israel could fall under the jurisdiction of Israel's laws against racist defamation. Obviously, libertarians and others do not approve of these laws, but I think they are sometimes necessary, and some very dangerous people within Israel itself have been at least somewhat impeded by them. Meir Kahane is the most well-known example.

Second, I do think there was the potential—perhaps an unlikely one, but a potential nonetheless—that violence could have been provoked by Chomsky during his visit. His rhetoric, as you've pointed out, is often extremely brutal, and his views on Israel tend toward outright demonization. The situation in the West Bank is always volatile, and I think there was a case to be made that Chomsky could potentially have set off the proverbial fire in the crowded theater.

Now, I do think that letting Chomsky into the country probably wouldn't have been a huge disaster, and the ban did make Israel look bad internationally. I myself probably would have let him in, but I don't disapprove of the decision not to.

MJT: In your book you describe him as a monster. Not a gadfly or a lunatic, but an actual *monster*. What would you say to people who reject Chomsky's view of the world but who think *monster* is a bit much?

Benjamin Kerstein: It's a good question, and I would only say that over the last hundred years or so we have been faced with a series of powerful secular ideologies that have done many good things but also many horrifying things. As a result, we've had to reckon with the role that intellectuals play in creating and supporting these ideologies. And especially with the extent of their responsibility for the things done by these ideologies, good or bad. Now there are many, many cases over the last century of intellectuals lending their minds or simply their names to dubious causes, and over time we've developed a certain sense of what the responsibility of the intellectual ought to be. It obviously isn't an easy question. Was Jean Paul Sartre a monster, for example, because he was a Stalinist for a time? I would say no, though he did have an awful lot to answer for.

The most famous of these cases—and I mention it in my book—was Martin Heidegger. Now, there is no doubt that Heidegger was a brilliant philosopher, and most of his philosophy isn't political at all; it's a very esoteric exploration of the nature of existence and of the concept of existence. Nonetheless, I think history has reached the conclusion that there was something monstrous about him because he not only lent his name and his prestige to the Nazi party when it took power, but because he also used his skills to justify it philosophically. The strongest reason, though, is that after it was all over, when he was under no pressure politically or otherwise to do so, he *continued* to defend his actions and to minimize the Nazis' crimes, including the Holocaust.

In the case of Chomsky, however, I think we have one of the most egregious cases. He didn't just support an ideology, he essentially created it, or at least played a major—perhaps the decisive—role in doing so. And there isn't just one case of lending his skills to justifying horrendous acts of political evil, there are many. And as I noted before, he has never owned up to any of them and as far as I can tell never will. What we're looking at with Chomsky is a man who has dedicated essentially his entire public life to political evil. I think we are justified in calling such a person a monster.