

## **The Chomsky Effect: Episodes in Academic Activism<sup>1</sup>**

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Noam Chomsky is one of the most recognized names of our time; his contributions to linguistics and the implications of his theories for studies on the workings of the human mind have rocked the intellectual world for over fifty years, beginning with the critical reception of his first book on *Syntactic Structures* (1957), his review of Skinner's *Verbal Behaviour* for *Language* in 1959, and the range of books he produced in the 1960s, including his assessment of *Current Issues in Linguistic Theory* in 1964, *Aspects of the Theory of Syntax* in 1965, *Topics in the Theory of Generative Grammar* in 1966, *Cartesian Linguistics: A Chapter in the History of Rationalist Thought*, also in 1966, *Language and Mind* in 1968, and (with Morris Halle) *The Sound Pattern of English* (1968). Since then, the flow of linguistic work has been profuse, as Chomsky overturned prevailing paradigms in fields concerned with the study of language and set the stage for the rethinking of the whole field of linguistics, often with overt reference to approaches first articulated during the Enlightenment. During this same period, Chomsky's very public crusade against the Vietnam War, recorded in the pages of the *New York Review of Books* and assembled in *American Power and the New Mandarins*, 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 studies (sometimes with Edward Herman) of how media functions in contemporary society, have combined to provoke some very strong feelings, positive and negative, about him and his work. The effect that he has upon people on account of his actions and his views extends across national, social, and institutional lines, and the ever-growing corpus of work he has undertaken in the political realm is a remarkable testament to what an intellectual can accomplish when engaged 'beyond the ivory tower'.

I am concerned with the range of reactions to Chomsky's arguments because, taken together, they contribute to what I've come to think of as the "Chomsky Effect". This "Effect" is important not only for those interested in understanding Noam Chomsky as a person, but also for those who hope to change the present system of systemic inequality in the direction of positive social change. But Chomsky is consistently reiterating that the type of 'good society' that he envisions will not come about as a result of his molding a group of followers sympathetic to his (or anybody else's) blueprint; indeed, any such suggestion is worrisome since it suggests that people should adhere, to the detriment of their own values and freedom, to some pre-conceived dogma. If society is to change, then attitudes towards it must change, hopefully in response to rational and informed decisionmaking effected for the good of the individual and the associations into which s/he freely enters. Chomsky plays a role here not solely on account of his specific analysis of particular events, but, moreover, on account of the attitude that he brings to his work and to the positive effect that he has upon those who use his approach to challenge oppression and awaken their own creative abilities. From this standpoint Noam Chomsky shouldn't be seen as a guru, but rather as a catalyst for individuals and groups interested in rational inquiry and in social change.

Given the profile he has within certain circles, and the contentious nature of his approach, Noam Chomsky also has a large contingent of retractors who eagerly jump on any miscue that could be used to undermine or challenge his work, even more than is

usually the case in an academic discipline like linguistics, or a competitive environment like the elite American university. The most significant and frequently-mentioned example of this is the oft-cited but little-understood Faurisson Affair; for this reason, I'll complete this chapter with a sustained discussion of Chomsky, Faurisson and France because I think that a clear and comprehensive reading of the Faurisson Affair will go a long way to expanding or at least clarifying Chomsky's Effect in places where dogma or ignorance have prevailed.

### *The Many Sides of the "Chomsky Effect"*

Noam Chomsky's commitment to work beyond the Ivory Tower, which has made him the occasional target of popular media (in terms of his having been idolized, ignored, misrepresented or censored), is based upon a truly radical conception of society, and his work places him in the excellent company of intellectual figures from universities who have pursued radical political work beyond the ivory tower, even as they made lasting contributions to their respective fields, notably Zellig Harris (Linguistics, University of Pennsylvania), Seymour Melman (Engineering, Columbia), Anton Pannekoek (Astronomy, University of Amsterdam), Bertrand Russell (Philosophy, Cambridge University), and Edward Said (English Literature, Columbia). Chomsky explicitly and implicitly recalls ideas proposed by anarchists and anarcho-syndicalists like Michael Bakunin and (especially) Rudolph Rocker, Council Communists like Karl Korsch, Rosa Luxembourg, Paul Mattick and Anton Pannekoek, and conceptions of the 'good society' upheld more recently, and in varying ways, by the likes of Michael Albert, Lydia Sargent and Howard Zinn. His views on Israel and Palestine hearken back to idealist conceptions about the socialist state that was to be erected in Palestine by proponents of the Kibbutz Artzi, and by various organizations which favored increased cooperation between oppressed Arabs, Jews, and Palestinians in the Middle East and beyond, such as Avukah, Hashomer Hatzair, and the League for Arab-Jewish Cooperation. These ideas have great currency for Chomsky on account of his early influences, notably some intense discussions to which he was privy on account of his visits, beginning in his teenage years, with a remarkable uncle of his who ran a newsstand and a kind of spontaneous literary political salon at a newspaper stand on Seventy-Second Street in New York City. This model of intense, open-ended discussion remains for him critical, and is in fact one of the legacies of his own approach when he meets with individuals, whether in his MIT office, or in the course of rallies, talks or discussions beyond the ivory tower. Commenting upon his approach to linguistics research, Chomsky has remarked that "very few people who do scientific work by sitting alone in their office all their lives. You talk to graduate students, you hear what they have to say, you bounce ideas off your colleagues. That's the way you get ideas, that's the way you figure out what you think. That's the way, and in political life or social life, it's exactly the same thing."<sup>2</sup>

Chomsky was born in 1928 in Philadelphia into a remarkable family; his father William was described in a 1977 *New York Times* obituary as "one of the world's foremost Hebrew grammarians", and his mother, who taught alongside of his father at the religious school of the Mikveh Israel congregation, is still remembered for her brilliance and her uncompromising and serious approach to critical concerns for the family which included Zionism, the Hebrew language, and of course Jewish cultural affairs. Noam expanded his array of formative influences through his readings, notably of anarchist and

anti-Bolshevik writers, and, beginning in 1945, through direct contact with some remarkable people at the University of Pennsylvania, most notably his teacher and mentor Zellig Harris. Harris's influence upon Chomsky's general approach to questions of language and politics is substantial, and indeed a huge array of people I've met over the last few years (in the course of current work on Zellig Harris) claim equal debts to this towering figure. What all of this suggests is that to understand Noam Chomsky demands that one invest in careful study into formative influences, and into the ways in which he has updated historical approaches (inspired notably by Enlightenment thinking and anarchist work) to accord with the complexities and challenges of contemporary society.

The study of historical works alongside of Chomsky's own thinking helps contextualize Chomsky's approach to the 'good society', and the extreme distance that we have to travel if we hope to live to see a manifestation thereof in our lives. But not only does Chomsky consider that these ideals could be achieved, he also insists in his many historical writings that we recognize the actions that have led to improvements in people's lives (the abolition of slavery, the passage and application of Bills of Rights, Charters, Constitutions, and Declarations guaranteeing the protection of human rights), the ways in which efforts to transform societies in ways which populist movements and free associations, and the on-going threats to these advancements by the brutal model of contemporary capitalism and its corollary military-backed imperialism. In other words, Chomsky is popular amongst persons for a range of reasons, but few people I think realize that his objective, like that of the Catalonians earlier this century, is nothing other than a radical overturning of society as we know it today. He stands therefore at the opposite end of the spectrum from the so-called 'public intellectuals' who are regularly summoned by elites to legitimize or explain unpopular repressive legislation to those deemed too ignorant or stupid to understand that whatever is best for elites is, and should be, the law of the land.

Many people who are unfamiliar with anarchist movements express surprise when they learn that that Chomsky views are *this* radical, are "anarchist", because they've come to equate anarchy with violence and chaos, or with some brand of unattainable, and therefore undesirable idealism. Chomsky persistently emphasizes the anti-capitalist, pro-cooperative and spontaneous roots of anarchism, and the many ties it has, especially in the United States, to the history of the working class. The spontaneity of anarchist uprisings is important since it suggests a natural accord between anarchy, actual human needs (when they are freely expressed), and the natural propensities of human beings for creativity and cooperation; perhaps this is the reason for the historically-valid perception that if allowed to spread, true anarchy has deeply-rooted popular support. And Chomsky hastens to point out that this occurs despite the lousy press that anarchism has received over time, press that has made a rather convenient link in people's mind to that which is violent, uncontrollable, and menacing.

There are historical reasons for the link frequently made between anarchy and violence, including the obvious lack of an institutional basis for anarchism and a collective amnesia about the fact that many anarchist ideas grow out of actual examples from history, such as the loose and free association of groups in ancient Greece (to take an early example) and, more recently, the workings of certain segments of Spanish society in the 1930s. Instead, the legacy that remains grows out of selected and oft-

repeated memories of its so-called “terrorist phases”, including one which lasted from March of 1892 until June of 1894, during which time nine people were killed and numerous others wounded in eleven separate detonations in France, all linked in some way to anarchists. As Mina Graur suggests in a recent biography of Rudolph Rocker, “that was the time when the stereotype of the vile anarchist, a dagger in his hand and a fuming bomb in his pocket, was planted in the public’s mind. The press and the police did their best to reinforce this image and frighten the public with the specter of the “great international anarchist conspiracy”.<sup>3</sup> Examples like this could be multiplied with references to similar events in different periods throughout the world, including the violent anarchist label that was used to justify the conviction and rapid execution of Sacco and Vanzetti. The point is that the image is far from the anarchy proposed by the likes of Chomsky, or the version proposed by anarchists such as Rudolph Rocker, whose views on this point and many others are reflected in Chomsky’s approach.

If Chomsky’s anarchy has been cause for confusion, his Judaism and Israel have been for many persons a source of veritable bewilderment. Once again, though, Chomsky’s views on Israel and Palestine hearken back to a corpus of early radical Zionist works which promoted bi-nationalism and free association of the type that came to be associated with certain Kibbutzim. In this respect as well he is quite similar to Rocker, who befriended a series of radical Jewish groups, notably in London, New York and Paris, which were quite distant from what today would be considered “Zionist” organizations and which, even then, stood quite apart from other organizations or Jewish radicals: “Unlike the Bund, which supported Otto Bauer’s formula of an extraterritorial autonomy as a solution to the Jewish national problem, or the Zionists, who favored political self-determination in the form of a Jewish state, the radical Jews in Paris treated Jewish national self-determination as an essentially non-national issue. Instead, they regarded the problem as part of a more general social question, which would, accordingly, be resolved by means of an all-engulfing social revolution. Rocker was fascinated by these anarchists who embodied in their very existence the Bakuninist type of revolutionary, dedicating themselves, body and soul, to the idea of the revolutionary”.<sup>4</sup>

In fact, Chomsky has much in common with a range of early radical Zionists about whom most people know very little, because their ideals have been usurped by organizations and individuals who actively link Zionism to organized religion or Israeli state politics. As the son of one of this century’s great Hebrew scholars, and himself a highly-trained reader of Hebrew texts, Chomsky is also very much the Jewish intellectual, who speaks of his admiration for the general questioning approach of Jews to their world, and to the types of close readings proposed by, for example, scholars of the Talmud. He recalls: “I was raised in a Jewish tradition and I learned Hebrew very young. My parents were both professors of Hebrew. They observed religious customs without being themselves very religious. It is necessary to realize in fact that Judaism is a religion founded upon the carrying out of certain rights, but it does not require an act of faith. You can be an observant Jew while at the same time be an atheist. My wife was raised in the same milieu as me. Neither of us are either believers nor observers. I continue to read the Hebrew press and Hebrew literature, and I am profoundly implicated in questions that were of concern to me during my childhood” (*Le Monde* Sept. 1, 1998, my translation). This will sound strange to some readers who have come to associate Chomsky, notably on account of the Faurisson Affair, with anti-Zionism or even anti-Judaism, charges

which simply don't stand up to the scrutiny on the basis of available evidence, as we'll see.

Chomsky approaches his linguistics work from a scientific perspective, but he is unlike popular academic figures from the sciences as well, such as Jacques Cousteau, Stephen J. Gould, Carl Sagan or David Suzuki because he is simply more contentious. There are linguists who feel that they haven't received from him their due, Zionists who consider his views on Israel similar to those upheld by anti-Zionists, and a range of people who have been swayed by arguments suggesting that his approach to East Timor, academic freedom, Pol Pot, the United States, Israel or, moreover, Faurisson, are unacceptable. One point I'd insist upon, however, is that as much as Chomsky tries to convince people that his views on some specific point or another are accurate, he doesn't prescribe a formula for appropriate behavior or accurate thinking. What's interesting about his belief in a recognizable and (eventually) knowable human nature is the concomitant effort everywhere apparent in his work beyond the ivory tower to postulate a set of cognitive tools, intrinsic to all people, which can be employed to unleash our potential. The link between his postulating these ingrained abilities and his political work is his confidence that a world free of oppression, authoritarian structures and 'leaders', whatever form it might take, would be a vast improvement over the present situation. In this sense Chomsky has the effect of a facilitator, a catalyst, an inspiration, rather than the leader of some form of anarchist vanguard; so I would suggest that support for Chomsky's approach should not be equated with blind allegiance to specific comments he makes or to the battles he has chosen to wage, but to the values he upholds. So to the degree that we consider our own values in accord with his, we are likely to feel more or less sympathetic to him.

What I myself find inspiring about Chomsky (and my sympathy for his stance is well-known) is the positive effect he has upon people who are dissatisfied with, and anxious to improve, the world as they themselves experience it. We are encouraged by schools, companies, religious institutions and in the media to respect the views of politicians, teachers, journalists and 'experts' even when they seem to us inappropriate. When someone of Chomsky's intellectual and academic stature comes and says that some action seems to us unfair, unjust or prejudiced in the workplace, the household, the neighborhood or the world is indeed aberrant by standards of decency or justice, then we come to feel empowered. In other words, when Chomsky suggests in plain and simple English that bombing innocent civilians and then starving them over a prolonged period in Iraq is perverse, that invading Granada, bombing Tripoli, enforcing an embargo upon Cuba, or supporting murderous Contras is obscene, that choosing, based upon corporate or national interests, whose human rights are worth upholding and whose, like the East Timorese, the Rwandans or the Burundians, aren't, is hypocritical, we become empowered. For obvious reasons we've come to expect that the great and well-respected are going to either shy away from these types of issues, or else use obscure terms and convoluted reasoning to legitimize perverse trends, like ever-growing corporate profits, insane military budgets, the 'streamlining' of industry, or the 'paying down' (with moneys from the poor rather than with the corporate profits made from our human or natural resources) of our 'national debt'. To hear Chomsky talk about these matters generates genuine amazement and even gratitude from those taught or, through various means forced, to accept what seems to them intrinsically wrong. As an anarchist, he has

taught us to be wary of movements or “solutions” proposed from above, movements which, in the end, have turned out to be ineffectual or (as in the case of state Marxism or Maoism, for example) downright murderous.<sup>5</sup> This approach is one of the things that makes Chomsky popular, and one of the ways that he serves to popularize ideas beyond the Ivory Tower.

An examination of Chomsky’s amazing career (almost one hundred books, over a thousand articles, untold academic honors) could also be a source of inspiration for those with some degree of power both inside of and beyond the Ivory Tower because he offers a concrete example of how one can employ a privileged position to advance the interests of the downtrodden. Despite his having been arrested, threatened, included on the Nixon ‘most wanted list’ and marginalized by some groups, he has been compensated both by the sense that his own decisions have been taken on the basis of consistent refusal to act on the basis of careerism, the profit motive or the will to power, and by triumphs in the public domain, evidence for which can be found at virtually any of his innumerable public lectures. Wherever he goes Chomsky fills whole auditoriums with admiring devotees, he is swarmed by curious on-lookers, and he is swamped by demands that he grant interviews, accept honorary degrees, and speak to local activist groups. Indeed, an article called “Chomsky Swims Against Mainstream” in *The Baltimore Sun* (3 January 1999) makes reference to the “millions of Americans [who] have been drawn to the books and speeches of Chomsky the political analyst. His vast knowledge, clarity and strong commitment to humane values make Chomsky an appreciated speaker – and an energizing catalyst for social activism. At frequent appearances across the country, overflow audiences of thousands are routine.” He is for these people a beacon, an inspiration, a catalyst for action in a world where marginal groups find themselves ignored and despised. Of course not everyone who shows up for Chomsky’s talks leave in agreement; Kathleen Hendrix of the *Los Angeles Times* wrote in “The Unbridled Linguist” that in the course of one such talk “one man yelled out he’d bet \$100 that one of Chomsky’s claims about National Security Council policy would turn out to be “a lie”. (“I’ll take that bet,” actor Ed Asner called out).” One woman angrily called out “Why do you live here?”, and another man was overheard saying after the talk that “Wanting to ask Noam Chomsky a question is like wanting to walk into a buzz saw”.<sup>6</sup>

I had the pleasure of meeting some of these audiences in the course of the book tour for *Noam Chomsky: A Life of Dissent*, and was continuously amazed by the array of people who came out for talks, from welfare mothers to famous philosophers, from local activists to former classmates of his, from students to ex-cons (one of whom claimed to have shared a cell with Chomsky, although unlike Norman Mailer, whose similar experiences are recorded in his *Armies of the Night*, this man had been incarcerated for something quite unrelated to the rejection of conscription for a war in Vietnam!). These people came out not only to hear about him, but to talk about their own Chomsky, their experience of him and his work; as the linguist and activist David Heap suggested to me, no matter where one stands on the issues he discusses, it is impossible to be indifferent about Chomsky. Representatives from the groups that had sponsored or been supported by Chomsky’s appearances, including Mark Pavlick of the “Chomsky Reading Group” in Washington DC, the members of the Palo Alto Peace and Justice Center in California, and hosts of radio and television shows, all recalled with great fondness the positive repercussions that remained long after the microphone was turned off and the hall

dimmed. Chomsky leaves a trail of energy behind him, carved out by the force and the manner of his talks; he's known as he who was still willing to discuss long after the event was slated to be over, who was always ready to take one more question, to learn about one more activist group, to have one more beer with those willing to stay on at the pub into the evening hours. For those audiences and organizations he is as an intellectual hero, a valiant and able combatant who is willing to donate his energies, his time, his life, to the battle against oppression in all forms. A 30 December, 1969 article by Robert Reinhold called "Moral Question is Raised At Conference in Boston" in the New York Times reminds us of just how long this has been going on: "Dr. Shilling's remarks [regarding whether Universities should accept money from the U.S. Defense Department] were greeted with less enthusiasm than Professor Chomsky's by many of the young people in the audience, who wore buttons with red fists of protest and passed out leaflets..." (p. 26).

Chomsky's following has expanded in these thirty years, and now extends to music and even cinema. An article by Mike O'Neill in *The Tampa Tribune* (May 24, 1996) cites U2's Bono saying that Chomsky is the "Elvis of academia", the evidence for which includes a single called "Noam Chomsky" by the Horsies, an homage to him by Midnight Oil, and the fact that *Rock and Roll Confidential* refers to him as "a quote machine with all the rockers". K. L. Billingsley (author of *Hollywood Party: How Communism Seduced the American Film Industry in the 1930s and 1940s*) has documented the whole array of bands that use Chomsky's lyrics and persona as muse to their own music or political aspirations in his March 1996 *Heterodoxy* article "Noam Chomsky, Punk Hero". When in 1996 Pearl Jam was preparing a tour of the US, much ado was made of their attack against Ticketmaster's monopoly over the concert trade, and they wanted to do so by charging \$20 for the best tickets to their shows. Then, "as part of its small economic rebellion against the way rock and roll does business, in fact, Pearl Jam set up a 75-watt 'pirate' radio station on every stop on its tour. The station broadcast selections from their albums. But there was something else besides the crashing chords, and this is what was interesting about Pearl Jam's venture into radio. In between cuts, a male monotone voice oozing vulgar Marxism droned on about manipulation of the media, the evils of corporations, and the sins of America generally. The recorded voice belonged to Massachusetts Institute of Technology professor Noam Chomsky, the linguistic theorist and hard-core leftist whose career has bizarrely branched into the music business". The reference to "vulgar Marxism" indicates that all the popularity in the world won't necessarily yield accurate readings!

Billingsley notes that Pearl Jam not an isolated example of this phenomenon; REM wanted Chomsky to tour with them to open their act with a talk (he turned them down), the punk band Religion added a Chomsky talk to the B side of one of its records, Rage Against the Machine included a photo of a Chomsky book inside of the cd cover of "Evil Empire," and Bonnie Raitt, along with a former producer for the Rolling Stones are working on an album by well-known rockers "pounding out rhythms to back Chomsky's lyrics". And so, asks Billingsley, "What gives? Noam Chomsky has always had his admirers, but to become a hero of the Slackers crowd and a figure in the rock and roll mass cult in his sixties? This is, to say the least, a curious development. But then the emergence of Noam Chomsky as a guru to the hardcore Left has been somewhat curious". His explanation for this "guru" status (which Chomsky, as we've seen,

specifically refuses) relates to a very tangible sense that Chomsky has indeed been tenacious, out there when everyone else had already gone home.

With Achbar and Wintonick's enormously popular *Manufacturing Consent*, Noam Chomsky came to the 'big screen', and with it came a new forum to promulgate the Chomsky Effect. On the up side we see thousands of people in audiences anxiously awaiting his words as he moves with grace through a plethora of different topics for different interviewers; but in the *Seattle Times* (June 10, 1993 E5) John Hartl recalls that the down side is represented as well: "During the course of the movie's 167 minutes, Chomsky is shown expressing his ideas with everyone from William F. Buckley (who threatens to smash his face in) to Boston University President John Silber (who calls him 'a systematic liar')".

To his students he's known as the tireless and impassioned teacher whose door is open for long and detailed discussions, particularly for students working within his framework. Stephen Pinker, a friend and admirer, has been cited in the *Boston Globe Magazine* (Nov. 19, 1995, p. 25) as saying that "he implies that people who disagree with him are stupid and ignorant. He is a brilliant debater and an out-and-out bully. It's great fun if you're on his side, but not if you're suddenly the target. People storm off and hate his guts for the rest of their lives". Pesetsky, another colleague of his at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), has stated that "the most striking fact is how consistently people with anything at all to say about language feel the need to strike some attitude for or against Chomsky's ideas." He's considered as the ruler over the realm that he and Morris Halle founded at MIT, so there are also students from different disciplines and institutions who have described to me a kind of MIT-UPenn or Berkeley or Yale or Chicago rivalry, complete with spies and espionage expeditions. In that same article Joan Bresnan of Stanford is cited as saying that "he revolutionized linguistics but did it in a divisive way.... He's a polarizer. He's created warring schools".

The range and tenor of these remarks is not surprising. Like any popular intellectual, Chomsky is the subject of myths, gossip and storytelling, although in his case the source of such stories even includes poems ("Old Man Chomsky") and even several plays, which are fascinating events in themselves. In 1991 Daniel Brooks<sup>7</sup> and Guillermo Verdecchia<sup>8</sup> published a play which was inspired by Noam Chomsky's (and Edward Herman's) "language and analysis", called *The Noam Chomsky Lectures*<sup>9</sup>. It had been performed for the first time as part of the Buddies in Bad Times Rhubarb! Festival at the Annex Theatre in Toronto, in February 1990, and was then expanded for the World Stage Festival in July of 1990; the text that became the book is based upon a version presented from March 12-32 at the Backspace, Theatre Passe Muraille. Chomsky himself commented on it, suggesting that "Maybe a new genre is in the making", while the Socialist Worker described the text as "an anti-imperialist primer" and Theatrum stated that "it reaffirms the theatre as a place of dissent". These reviews suggest that when Chomsky's work is appropriated artistically it can have beyond the pale of linguistics and politics, and into the world of literature and theatre. Another work was undertaken by the Groupe de Création Théâtrale Mécanique Générale in Montréal, called "Chomsky, quelques bruits et la danse de Saint-Guy: Dérives hallucinatoires d'une activiste". This play, never published, is the comical story of gangsters who kidnap Chomsky but are unable to find anyone willing to pay the ransom (!). It was developed by Luc Dansereau



and performed by Estelle Claretton, Michèle Dansereau, Michel Côté and Luc Dansereau from the 28<sup>th</sup> of April until the 2<sup>nd</sup> of May 1998.

There exist as well many anecdotes about Chomsky's life, some far-fetched, some true, and some deformed by the passage of time or the views of the narrator. For example, when during a demonstration Chomsky was being hustled off by billy-club-wielding cops, someone from the crowd apparently shouted out: "Don't hit him in the head!" Another recalls a comment made to him when he arrived in Japan to accept his prestigious Kyoto Prize wearing the same tie he'd worn on his previous visit, years earlier. His response? "Why would I need two?" There exists as well a range of anecdotes devoted to his ability to work constantly, including stories of late-night telephone calls to students or researchers to check specific facts or make comments, about the Chomskys' tearing out the kitchen in their house to make room for more books, about his car breaking down and him walking into a dealership and asking for another "blue one", and one about Chomsky's decision to save the time normally accorded to eating lunch in response to a doctor's suggestion that he lose some weight.

These particular stories are perhaps rooted in some event or another, and they are basically complimentary; once again, however, there are others. Chomsky's skills as an orator are legendary, and he has a stubbornly tenacious argumentative side, which led one colleague at MIT to state that "he does tend to stomp on arguments... he's not a grand old man, in terms of sitting back and letting 100 flowers bloom or letting the young people carry the torch<sup>10</sup>". This may be so, but it doesn't speak to the way that Chomsky, to follow the metaphor has prepared the soil so that people are encouraged to bloom; it is these efforts that are his force, his legacy, his Effect.

#### *Variables That Impact Upon the "Chomsky Effect"*

The Chomsky Effect is not only multi-faceted, but it is variable across disciplines, genres and classes of people. Two examples, one professional and one political, suggest the depth and range of reactions to Chomsky's approach. Within the (professional) linguistics community there are hoards of scholars, all around the world, who have been and who remain devoted to studying the implications of Chomsky's insights, and/or advancing the current research project (presently The Minimalist Program). There are also groups, notably the generative semanticists, who feel that Chomsky obfuscated the story of the rift that was formed between him and them in the 1960s and 1970s. These quarrels can make for some interesting and even valuable reading, when the focus is something other than professional jealousies, the demarcation of territories, the will to power, inner or inter-disciplinary rivalries, gossip, innuendo or falsification (alas, like any other professional domain such activities are disturbingly easy to find). I'm not particularly interested in the details of personal rifts in the professional study of language, and will not discuss details of the linguistics field since, beyond my desire to understand the overall goal of various research projects, it doesn't really relate to the realm of fundamental human issues that so preoccupy Chomsky beyond the Ivory Tower. Nevertheless, no examination of the Chomsky Effect would be complete without some mention of the effect that he has had upon the field of language studies. His ideas virtually revolutionized the field of linguistics which, when he entered it in the 1950s, was dominated by discussions about matters (distributionalism, behaviorism) now considered retrograde or, at the very least, of marginal interest.

The presence of such a powerful personality at the great scientific research institution, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, coupled with the presence of other towering intellectual figures like Walter Benjamin at Harvard and Zellig Harris at the University of Pennsylvania, has contributed to making linguistics recognizable to a public who otherwise would have little concern for such research. Chomsky and Harris, and their quite well-known parting-of-ways, has created a veritable mystique in the field and has perhaps been a force for promoting interest beyond the Ivory Tower; this is not to suggest that high profile linguists or linguistics-inspired researchers are household names, but many people have heard of Henry Hoenigswald, John Goldsmith, Joan Gopnik, Henry Hiz, Konrad Koerner, Leigh Lisker, Fred Lukoff, Robin Lakoff or Stephen Pinker. Ray Jackendoff, a former student of Chomsky's, now at Brandeis University, says that "Chomsky set the field on quite a different course, and most people wouldn't have gone into the field had it not been for him. I can think of one other person who has dominated in one field, and that's Freud".<sup>11</sup> The downside of this situation is that contemporary linguists now wonder what will happen to the field when Chomsky retires (he's seventy-two years old). Linguistic programs are already under attack in North America, and the loss of such a figure, who has lent both credibility and a kind of sexiness to the field, is of great concern. Others claim that people like Chomsky or Harris have been detrimental to those areas deemed by the Master as being of lesser importance, while still others foresee the rapid decline of the whole field (or its being folded into other traditional areas like anthropology, or newer areas like cognitive sciences). David Heap offers another scenario, which would see the convergence between the generative paradigm and its various rival or competitor frameworks: "I tend towards this vision not only because I am an irrepressible optimist (gotta be!), but also because I have seen evidence (in this country at least) of former sectarian enemies who now at least talk (and sometimes even listen) to each other. The convergence scenario is also a viable one outside of North America, notably in the UK and some places on the continent, where generative linguistics is seen as an interesting and important contribution but not the final word. France is (of course) another story" (personal correspondence, 20 August 1998). No matter what side one stands on, however, it is clear that Chomsky's Effect in this domain is of tremendous importance worldwide.

The second example comes from outside of the linguistic domain, where the effect is more complicated. Here, discussions regarding Chomsky's work vary significantly from place to place, and group to group. Some Jews believe that Chomsky's recalling socialist Zionism, which was ostensibly ruled out with the establishment of a Jewish state in 1948, is a tribute to his historical and political sensitivity; but there are many Jews who feel that Chomsky is anti-Zionist since he refuses to recognize the specificity of Israel's situation and give his blessing to the extraordinary military or extra-legal actions they sometimes take to deter their enemies. For instance Alfred Kazin was cited in the *Jerusalem Post* as saying that Chomsky is a "dupe of intellectual pride so overweening that he is incapable of making distinctions between totalitarian and democratic societies, between oppressors and victims".<sup>12</sup> And Nathan Glazer, who was an important figure in Avukah in the 1930s and 40s but has since renounced the approach taken by that group, commented to the *Boston Globe Magazine* (op. cit.) that "it's an old Marxist style of analysis: a polemic. Everything all hangs together. No matter what happens, it benefits the ruling class... That kind of analysis... can be tiresome".

Variations between these two positions exist, of course: there are Jews (and Gentiles) who consider that Chomsky's decision to speak on behalf of the Arabs or the Palestinians in Israel is a sign of his consistency on issues relating to human rights; there are those who use his approach to justify their attacks against Israel, unrelated to any desire to uphold international law; there are those who agree that all nationalism is racist, but find in Chomsky's work suggestions that he insists upon the racism of Israeli nationalism while playing-down other examples in the world; and there are those who consider that one constant in Chomsky's approach is his pervasive desire to speak on behalf of the underdog, formerly poor Arabs and Jews in Palestine, now oppressed Palestinians in Israel. This leads to another truism: One can learn a lot about groups by watching their reaction to Chomsky, often more about them than about Chomsky's ideas which are nuanced in ways that refuse easy categorization, and misconstrued in such debates.

Other variables include personal animosity that arises out of Chomsky's disregard for benefits which for some people are lifelong objectives, like material wealth or professional success. Chomsky is notoriously dismissive of those who denounce his work for careerist purposes, and indeed would be rather distraught, I would imagine, if he suddenly found favor with the intellectual or political elite. He is of course deeply ensconced in the elite in some ways, being a graduate of the prestigious University of Pennsylvania, a former Fellow at Harvard, a full Professor at MIT, and the recipient of countless professional awards. But in other ways he feels deeply at odds with elites for reasons that can also be traced to his political views. As an anarchist, he believes in the creative potential of all persons, and constantly fights against condemnation of the world's "rabble".

Chomsky's teaching and lecturing styles reflect this view as well, something that is evident from his paying attention to and taking seriously the views of all persons. Given this stance, the idea of a "popularizer" doesn't mean he who comes down from the mount to explain to the ignorant masses the meanings of his (or others') great teachings. Instead, he speaks to others as he himself as spoken to: on the basis of direct experience with the matters at hand, and informed by specific and general knowledge rather than by prestige or "qualifications". An amazing number of people with whom he has corresponded over the years express to me their surprise when the well-known Noam Chomsky responded to their questions or comments with detailed and serious letters. I myself first communicated with him while still a student in Comparative literature, and was astonished at his willingness to engage my diverse concerns (refugees, language theory, anarchist movements), and the care he devoted to each of my concerns. He's not singular in this respect; indeed a measure of Ivory Tower participants decency is their generosity, and my own experience is that those with the most integrity and concern tend to be the most generous with their time and respectful of others'. Given the range of issues that concern him, one can only imagine the number of letters that occupy the twenty hours per week he devotes to writing correspondence. Nathan Glazer refers to this quality as "wearying": "It's his indefatigability. He always writes the last letter. You just have to give up; he's more energetic than any of us" (*Boston Globe Magazine* op. cit.).

*Impediments to the "Chomsky Effect"*

In addition to differences in the Chomsky Effect across disciplines and interest groups, there is as well a huge variation that exists in the reception of Chomsky's work on the simple basis of nationality. In the United States, Chomsky is marginalized by the popular media, which is not to say that he is completely ignored, or that there is some kind of media collusion to keep him at bay (although some evidence for this does exist), but that he simply doesn't have the place that would normally be accorded to someone whose accomplishments were so overtly important as his own. A *Baltimore Sun* (Sunday, January 3, 1999) article notes that "For the most part, Chomsky has remained off the radar screen of U.S. mass media. With typical discretion, the nightly 'News Hour' program anchored by Jim Lehrer, on national PBS television, has interviewed Chomsky just once in 23 years." Chomsky frequently mentions this, and David Barsamian calls this "fitting" because Chomsky is "on the cutting edge – he's pushing the envelope of permissible thought... He's challenging us to examine and re-examine our assumptions. He's like an avant garde musician, exploring and expanding the boundaries of ... the way people think." This sounds odd in an era of feel-good superficial criticism of government policy, although I would consider it in line with the idea that Chomsky's work is simply too radical in its implications to be 'heard' against the backdrop of what is normally reported in the mainstream media. The *Baltimore Sun*'s interview with Jeff Greenfield, formerly of ABC, seems to confirm this: "'Some of that stuff [on media and propaganda] looks to me like it's from Neptune'" and Chomsky's "notions about the limits of debate in this country" are "absolutely wacko". And popular author Tom Wolfe has called his ideas "rubbish"<sup>13</sup> An idea that is more widespread than one might expect, as the *Baltimore Sun* article indicates:

[D]ecision-makers at National Public Radio News – ostensibly devoted to depth and breadth – have avoided Chomsky like the plague. The number of times that he has been on "Morning Edition" or "All Things Considered" during the last quarter-century can be counted on one hand.... In a letter to the public-broadcasting newspaper Current four years ago, "All Things Considered" host Robert Siegel was remarkably dismissive – sniffing that Chomsky "evidently enjoys a small, avid, and largely academic audience who seem to be persuaded that the tangible world of politics is all the result of delusion, false consciousness and media manipulation." When I asked Siegel for clarification recently, he mentioned that he had interviewed Chomsky on "All Things Considered" once in 1988. "I should assure you that there are people of varied political stripes who believe they should be on NPR and are unfairly excluded," Siegel added. "The editor in chief of the New Republic, no political bedfellow of Professor Chomsky, has expressed himself in this regard." But NPR News programs routinely present views in line with the editorial outlook of the New Republic. The airing of political perspectives akin to Chomsky's, however, is rare indeed. That's a key point: Avoidance of Chomsky is significant because it reflects media biases that operate across the board.

Chomsky does have his supporters in the popular press, like Christopher Hitchens, as well as many readers in *The Nation* and of course *Z Magazine*. On the other hand, he makes regular appearances in the pages of the popular media in places like the United Kingdom, Sweden, Holland, Israel and Canada; indeed in most countries of the world he is well-known in various quarters, and well-respected in most. For instance, I was quite amazed to hear people in Israel discussing his opinions because they tended to take his views on Arabs, Palestinians and American involvement in the country more seriously than do many Zionist groups in the US and Canada, where the line tends to be much more clearly drawn in favor of Israeli policy, be it what it may, simply because criticism of Israel is deemed somehow sacrilegious.

The glaring exception to this openness is France, and this on account of Chomsky's overall approach to political issues, which doesn't accord with the one generally promulgated by the Parisian intellectual elite,<sup>14</sup> and on account of the relationship, currently in flux, between American and French intellectuals. This relates to the larger issue of the function and responsibility of the popular intellectual, although even here there seems to be new winds of change which are now challenging the traditional role ascribed to the "Parisian intellectual". One reason for this is the seemingly daily revelations in France about the role that the French intellectual elite has played in France this century, which has shed more light upon the true nature of the Vichy regime, the links between intellectual and political classes, on-going government support for atrocities around the world (notably the actions and inactions of the French government during the Rwanda and Burundi massacres, and the history of their actions in Algeria), and, in a different register, the status of French literary and cultural theory (particularly in light of discussions that have swirled around the "Sokal Hoax"). Mark Lilla suggests in a recent article for the June 1998 *NYRB* on the politics of Jacques Derrida's work that "things have changed in Paris. The days when intellectuals turned to philosophers to get their political bearings and the public turned to intellectuals, are all but over".

Chomsky has often spoken of the illiberalism and in some cases the outright fascism that underwrites certain work by 'Paris intellectuals', and along the way has offered important glimpses of what he thinks about the work in which they are engaged, both in the political domain and also in language studies and contemporary postmodern theory. A terrific example of Chomsky's views of certain French work on language studies of people like Baudrillard, Kristeva, and Lyotard is found in an interview (recorded in Znet) with Mike Albert which helps clarify his stance as regards postmodern language studies and, moreover, speaks to his view of the (very popular) intellectuals who have promoted work relating to postmodern theory.

I don't want to overgeneralize. I think there is important and insightful work done in [postmodern] frameworks. I find it really hard to figure out because I've got to labor to try to tease the simple, interesting points out. But there are things there. I think we're making progress there. But I think there's a point that's much more general. The fact is, it's extremely hard to have good ideas. There are very few of them around. If you're in the sciences, you know you can sometimes come up with something that's

pretty startling and it's usually something that's small in comparison with what's known and you're really excited about it. Outside the natural sciences it's extremely hard to do even that. There just isn't that much that's complicated that 's at all understood outside of pretty much the core natural sciences. Everything else is either too hard for us to understand or pretty easy. The result is that simple ideas are dressed up in extremely complex terminology and frameworks. In part, it's just careerism, or maybe an effort to build self-respect." For instance, if (say) a literary theorist wants "to be in the same room with that physicist over there who's talking about quarks, he'd better have a complicated theory, too, that nobody can understand. He has a theory that nobody can understand, so why shouldn't I have a theory that nobody can understand?"

All of this is quite comical, and speaks to Chomsky's unusual take on 'theory' in the social sciences, and its application to important questions. More important, though, and this applies to the question of intellectual work within and beyond the Ivory Tower, is the question of what intellectuals can and should be doing to promote the values of freedom and liberation. Any deliberate distortion, concealment or obfuscation of ideas has the nefarious effect of directing our attention away from what is truly important for our own lives and for those of persons around us, and postmodern theory is in many cases a veritable celebration of obscurity over rationality.

### ***Resisting the "Chomsky Effect"***

It's important to consider the way by which resistance to Chomsky turns into a shunning of serious discussions about possible alternatives to contemporary inequalities in society, and how episodes like the Faurisson Affair discourage clear-headed examination of works which, in my opinion, question contemporary relations in society from a radical perspective and which offer some hope to the suffering and the oppressed. Best-selling author Alan Dershowitz, for example, consistently finds places to attack Chomsky and his views without any consideration of either the objectives or the specific information described in his work. I was once asked by administrators of a large Canadian university to write a response to a letter that had been written by a Dershowitz-inspired Jewish professor who abhorred that university's decision to invite Chomsky to speak there. It was ironic I would be asked to speak on behalf of such a figure as Chomsky, and that this professor who had denounced Chomsky and any institution willing to invite him turned out to have but a passing knowledge of the Faurisson Affair, even though this was the critical event that led him to denounce Chomsky's work. So why do so many people continue to relate some of his ideas to those of Faurisson and how does this episode exemplify the Chomsky effect in the life of a public intellectual?

### ***The Faurisson Affair***

On the basis of the so-called "Faurisson Affair", some people have described Chomsky as anti-Zionist, pro-revisionist (as regards the Holocaust), even "négationniste", implying that he denies that the Holocaust ever occurred. This far-fetched view relates to

what is sarcastically called in Philip Roth's *Operation Shylock* "Shoah business" (recalling what Martin Jay has called "a particularly distasteful article" from a 1993 *Der Spiegel* called "Das Shoah-business"<sup>15</sup>), since it creates a kind of monolith around discussions of the Holocaust and ensures that every word that falls outside of the accepted view is not only discounted, but so too is the other work by those who utter divergent opinions. What is important for a discussion of Chomsky's Effect is that his work deserves a place in serious discussions about possible alternatives to contemporary inequalities in society, and episodes like the Faurisson Affair discourage clear-headed debate. In other words, from a certain perspective it could be suggested that the Faurisson Affair has been used, and used remarkably successfully, to discount works which tend to question in a radical fashion status quo inequality. It is also a literal thorn in Chomsky's side, because it has created such a strongly-galvanized opposition to his ideas that he is constantly having to defend a point he has always deemed obvious, that his support for freedom of speech of someone isn't the same as his supporting that individual's ideas. The affair has also made him some bedfellows with whom he'd much rather not be associated, including revisionist groups of various stripes who use his 'support' for their freedom as a kind of 'support' for their position. But before I go on with this section, let me be clear about where I myself stand. I denounce with disgust the garbage that is Holocaust revisionism, and I recoil in horror reading the falsifications that are spread by the likes of Faurisson. Furthermore, I join Chomsky in condemning those who would for their own selfish reasons make of Faurisson's despicable work a *cause célèbre*.

Now, let's begin at the beginning. In the 1970s Robert Faurisson began to make public statements concerning the holocaust, including, for example, the following, from a 16 January letter to *Le Monde*: "Until 1960 I believed that these gigantic massacres had really occurred in 'gas chambers'. Then, after reading the work of Paul Rassiner, himself a deportee and the author of *Mensonge d'Ulysse*, I began to have my doubts. After fourteen years of personal reflection, and four years of relentless inquiry, I, like twenty other revisionists, have become certain that I am in the face of an historical lie". This proclamation, along with other statements in the same vein, led to a strong backlash against Faurisson, including threats of legal action, physical harm, and his being fired from his job as a professor of French literature at Université de Lyon 2. So in the Fall of 1979, a friend of Chomsky's named Serge Thion asked Chomsky to add his name to a petition in favor of the freedom to express opinions without persecution.

The petition, which eventually included signatures from five hundred people, was dubbed by the French media as "Chomsky's petition", and from that point on Chomsky became inexorably associated with the whole matter. The fact that the other 499 names are never mentioned (I've never seen them recalled in any of the literature about this Affair) speaks volumes about the relationship between the actual issues, and the efforts to challenge or denounce Noam Chomsky. This is not atypical of how media functions, of course, but given the effect that the whole affair has had one might question the motives of those who insisted upon turning this into a story directly related to an American intellectual who characteristically added his name to a list of people who denounce persecution of those with unpopular views.

The actual wording of the petition was as follows: "*Dr. Faurisson has served as a respected professor of twentieth-century French literature and document criticism at the University of Lyon 2 in France. Since 1974 he has been conducting extensive independent*

historical research into the “Holocaust” question. Since he began making his findings public, Professor Faurisson has been subject to a vicious campaign of harassment, intimidation, slander and physical violence in a crude attempt to silence him. Fearful officials have even tried to stop him from further research by denying him access to public libraries and archives” (cited in Vidal-Naquet 285). Says Chomsky, “I was asked to sign a petition asking that the authorities protect the civil rights of Faurisson, which I did. I sign innumerable petitions of this kind, and I don’t remember ever having refused to sign one. I thought that this affair would end there. But this was not the case on account of the barrage, fed by lies, which was produced in France to suggest that, among other absurdities, that by defending the civil rights of Faurisson I was defending his views” (41).

Vidal-Naquet has some clarifications to make about the petition: first, he states that contrary to the views of certain persons Faurisson’s civil rights were not violated, and indeed he was never, as some claimed, “prohibited [access to] either libraries or public archives” (286). Despite what Vidal-Naquet calls the “regrettable” conditions that drove Faurisson from his position in Lyon and into the Centre national de télé-enseignement, his right to freedom of expression as protected in contemporary law “were never endangered. Indeed, on two separate occasions he was able to publish in *Le Monde*” (288). In fact, there were limits placed upon Faurisson, and he was, as Vidal-Naquet recalls, successful moves to prosecute him for his work; but Vidal-Naquet thinks that this is justified: “My generation, comprised of men in their fifties [now seventies and eighties], is more or less the last for which Hitler’s crimes remain a memory. That it is necessary to struggle against the disappearance or, worse, the degradation of this memory seems to me obvious. Neither prescription nor pardon seem to me conceivable. Imagine if Dr. Mengele came to visit the Auschwitz museum or presented his card to the Centre de documentation juive contemporaine? But this memory what are we to do with this memory, which is not common to all persons? The pursuit against the perpetrators of the crime seems to me both necessary and derisory” (270).

This type of reasoning (Faurisson was not denied his civil rights, although he was eventually denied some rights which is regrettable, but the denial of his rights is justified in light of his activities, and those who denied him his rights were justified in light of the obligation they have as keepers of the memory to ensure that the crimes of the Holocaust are never forgotten) is the type that Chomsky’s attacks when he suggests that we must struggle hardest to protect those with whom we don’t agree.

Faurisson also questions Faurisson’s “research”, asking: “Is it or is it not the case that the petition represents Robert Faurisson as a serious historian who is undertaking real historical research?” (286). Others have joined Vidal-Naquet to question the validity of saying that Faurisson is (or was) a *respected* professor of literature, and, moreover, that the research in which he was engaged was “extensive” or “historical”. Vidal-Naquet suggests that “Faurisson, with the limited exception of Anne Frank’s *Journal*, is in search of falsification, not the truth. Is this a “detail” that is of no interest to Chomsky? And if we understand that, misinformed, he [Chomsky] signed in full confidence a text that was authentically “scandalous”, how is it possible to admit today the degree of care he exercises towards a falsifier?” (286).

Finally, Vidal-Naquet makes another oft-repeated comment concerning Chomsky’s one-mindedness: “But it gets better: by considering himself untouchable,



impervious to criticism, unaware of what Nazism was in Europe, draped in an imperial pride and an American chauvinism worthy of “new mandarins” that he once denounced, Chomsky accuses those who are not of his opinion to be enemies of liberty” (286-7). Here a series of issues previously discussed come to the fore; as a promulgator of anarchist ideals Chomsky is often accused of being blissfully “untouchable” because he never has to explain the details of the society to which he aspires, but instead can comfortably speak of the need for free and unfettered creativity, whatever the (other) consequences. Further, by speaking in idealist terms he can afford to ignore the details of what “Nazism was in Europe”, and thus by-pass the difficult obstacles to the elimination thereof for the present generation. The issue of American “chauvinism” and “imperial pride” are deemed to underwrite his universalist approach, an approach which demands equal treatment of all persons according to classical liberal principles despite whatever historical reparations might be due to those who have been persecuted in the past.

In response to the subsequent uproar caused by this petition, Chomsky wrote a short memoir on the civil liberties aspects of the Faurisson case to clarify the distinction between supporting somebody’s beliefs, and fighting for the right to express them. He then gave this text, which really looks like the type of letter that Chomsky sends to people in response to serious questions, to Serge Thion, with his tacit authorization to use it as he thought best. It ended up being published as an *avis*, a “notice” to Robert Faurisson’s 1980 book *Mémoire en défense contre ceux qui m’accusent de falsifier l’histoire: La question des chambres à gaz*.

Chomsky opens his text by saying that “this document contains remarks which are so banal that I must excuse myself before reasonable people who might come to read them”, it does seem apparent that Chomsky did envision that the text would be read by more than one person. Whatever the projected audience, however, the principle reason he offers for even writing it in the first place is because his commentaries “shed light upon some remarkable aspects of intellectual life in contemporary France” (ix). This is interesting in light of the ensuing debate since it indicates that from the very beginning the subject of the piece is intellectual life in France, not Faurisson. “Herein I deal with on specific and particular subject, the right to express ideas, conclusions and beliefs. I won’t say anything here about the work of Robert Faurisson or about his critics, about which I know very little, or about the subjects that they discuss, upon which I have no particular illumination”.

In *Réponses inédites*, a collection of three unpublished letters written by Chomsky in response to articles published in France together with a 1981 interview between a Parisian journalist and Chomsky which was supposed to be published by Libération, but which never appeared, Chomsky reiterates the point that “I didn’t write this text so that it would serve as the preface for a book that I didn’t know existed; that I then demanded that it be withdrawn, but although only a few weeks after I wrote it, it was already too late to stop its publication; at issue here is a series of facts which have provoked a large number of absurd and malevolent comments in the French press that I won’t recall here” (40). In short, says Chomsky, it’s useful to reconsider “my own engagement with the Faurisson affair: it consisted of a signature at the end of a petition, and then some replies to lies and slander. That’s it, that’s all!” (43).

The problem associated with this Affair emerges in the final paragraph of this “avis”, the one that has been cited most often by those who use the Faurisson Affair as

justification for refusing to engage Chomsky's opinions. Here Chomsky takes up the question of Faurisson's anti-Semitism, first by suggesting that even if he was anti-Semitic that he still warranted protection from those who would like to take away his right to research and to work. He then writes: "One could really ask oneself if Faurisson really is anti-Semitic or Nazi. As I said, I don't know his works very well. But in light of what I've read, largely on account of the nature of the attacks made against him [by Vidal-Naquet, incidentally, something which he himself later revealed], I see no proof which would support such conclusions. Nor do I find credible proof thereof in the documents that I've read about him, either in published texts or in private correspondence. From what I can tell, Faurisson is a kind of apolitical liberal" (xiv-xv). This of course offers fuel for Vidal-Naquet's flame; referring to Chomsky's opening comments, he writes: "The preface in question emerges from a rather new genre in the Republic of Letters. Noam Chomsky read neither the book for which he wrote the preface, nor previous writings from the author, nor criticisms made thereof, and he is incompetent in the domain to which they apply". Referring to Chomsky's closing comments, about Faurisson's anti-Semitism, Vidal-Naquet remarks that Chomsky has just affirmed that he's not competent to judge the works since he hasn't read them. So, says Vidal-Naquet, "Chomsky-the-double read Faurisson and never read him, read his critics and never read them. (282).

Chomsky's response is that "writing elementary remarks on the right of freedom of expression is not a 'rather new genre in the republic of letters,' and I didn't read the book I 'prefaced' because I didn't 'preface it' or even know that it existed, all of which Vidal-Naquet knows very well" (September 9, 1997). Once again, Chomsky's own remarks send us back to the 'preface': "I nowhere proclaim my 'competence.'" Rather I proclaimed my *incompetence*, clearly and explicitly" (September 9, 1997). And concerning Faurisson's anti-Semitism, Chomsky's point remains as it was then: Vidal-Naquet had not at that time provided clear evidence of Faurisson's anti-Semitism, and "if the harshest and most knowledgeable critic of Faurisson can produce nothing but that evidence in support of the charge of anti-Semitism, then the charge must be weakly grounded indeed. That's completely accurate, whatever may have been discovered later" (September 9, 1997).

It is indeed the case, as Vidal-Naquet suggests here, that Chomsky's final paragraph contains speculations concerning Faurisson's allegiances, and so does this last statement. In fact, to even ask the question about Faurisson's political orientation was as Chomsky himself points out totally unnecessary in light of the previous discussion. Chomsky responds: "That leaves the matter of whether it is appropriate, in a statement on the right of freedom of expression, to say at the end that the person charged may indeed be an anti-Semite or worse, but if so, that will change nothing about his right of free expression. And furthermore, that such charges are themselves serious, and should be backed by evidence, which, in this case, those who make the charges make clear they cannot provide. I could have -- and perhaps should have -- elaborated on the little I had seen of Faurisson's writings. In fact, it consisted of several letters to newspapers (refused publication) in which he praised those who fought 'the good fight' against the Nazis and praised the heroism of the Warsaw Ghetto fighters" (September 9, 1997).

George Jochnowitz offers a range of objections to some of the points raised by Chomsky in this episode when he asks: "Should a professor of history be allowed to

teach that the Japanese-Americans were never interned (as distinct from saying they should have been) or that slavery had never existed in the United States? Should a historical linguist be allowed to teach that all languages are descended from Hungarian? Arthur Butz taught engineering. His job wasn't threatened because his subject was not relevant to the issue. The right to advocate murder is different from the right to say genocide didn't happen when your title is Professor of "document criticism" (personal correspondence August 7, 1998). Recall that for Chomsky, defending only those with whom we agree is meaningless, a view which can be traced back to the Enlightenment tradition and, as Larry Portis suggests, to Voltaire. "In this sense, the position taken by Chomsky coincides with that of Voltaire, concerning the defense of the right to express opinions which he considers abominable" (167).

The reference to Voltaire returns us to the very source of the problems between Chomsky and those who feel that he simply goes to far in his defense of those (like Faurisson) we should, in fact, be suppressing for our own good, and for the good of future generations. Voltaire himself was admonished for what could be considered a consistent application of classical liberal principles in public affairs, summed up by his famous dictum "I disagree with everything you say, but I shall fight to the death for your right to say it". Voltaire (and others who have been important influences for Chomsky, such as Bakunin), support the thrust of this utterance and don't take it to mean that this defense necessitates an engagement with the material deemed offensive. The view of many persons with whom I myself have had contact in France, including the editors of the French version of my Chomsky biography, disagree. The latter wrote that Chomsky's views on the application of this principle could have lead people to boycott any text that supports him in this regard because Chomsky signed the petition without engaging Faurisson's writing. For this editor, as for many others in France, the defense of freedom of expression of someone whose work you haven't read doesn't obligate you in any substantive way, and that to follow the spirit of Voltaire's approach necessarily presupposes that we not only defend one's right to express his view, but that we become interested therein so as to refute it. In other words, this position would demand of Chomsky that he proclaim: I have read what you've written, I am not in agreement with you for the following reasons, but I will defend with all my might your right to express your opinion.

The effort that one would have to expend in order to follow this precept is monumental, particularly for those like Chomsky who regularly sign this type of petition; on the other hand, Chomsky is quite famous for having read and assimilated such tremendous amounts of material, so anyone who knows him would just assume him capable of adding to this volume exponentially. This is itself part of the Chomsky Effect; he leaves us with the impression of having an informed view on most matters, and of being familiar with a remarkable array of materials, in short, of simply having "read everything". In popular forums he is as likely to be asked about the proper way to raise a child as he is about the specific details concerning some atrocity committed in the distant or recent past, somewhere in the world. The reality, as he suggests, is that nobody could possibly hope to deal with assessing all works by all those for whom petitions are circulated, and that furthermore it is virtually inconceivable that we'd be in agreement with views expressed by all these people; a huge effort would have to be expended in

each case to embark upon the (unrelated) exercise of commenting upon works of people we're trying to defend.

### *Chomsky's Perception of the French Intellectual Scene*

Chomsky often notes that he has signed potentially more inflammatory petitions in the United States without the kind of backlash, in either the legal or media realms, as the one he has witnessed in France, and that furthermore the United States has its own versions of Faurisson in the person of Arthur Butz, who has never gained the notoriety of Faurisson. So why was it such a big issue in France? asks Chomsky: "If it weren't for the extraordinary effort of first French, then American, intellectuals to give the maximal possible publicity to Faurisson, he would have remained in (much deserved) obscurity. That's why you can't get a copy of his "Mémoire," to which my statement on freedom of expression was added as an "avis." No one cares about what is in it; it has been used rather the way Bosnia has, as a technique of self-aggrandizement by intellectuals who are too ridiculous to discuss. Same with Butz. It was recognized early on that it wouldn't be wise to make a fuss about him; freedom of speech is protected here, unlike France. So he is ignored, and his influence is undetectable. Lessons? Pretty obvious, except maybe to those utterly immersed in the commissar culture" (letter of 23 June 1997). The very vocabulary of this remark ("ridiculous", "fuss", "ignored", "obvious") shows Chomsky's use of cynical, acerbic or sarcastic humor as a means of forcing his audience to challenge standard versions of well-known events.

However one views this debate, there is in my opinion nothing to suggest any relationship between Faurisson's hypotheses concerning the holocaust and Chomsky's defense of the former's right to defend them. As regards the existence of gas chambers, Chomsky has made a number of statements, including: "For me, no reasonable evidence exists which puts into doubt the existence of gas chambers". This does not mean that questions thereabout, such as how people could enter the 'showers' hours or minutes after prisoners have been gassed to death, should not be posed. According to Chomsky, "the issue here is facts, not religious beliefs. Only religious fanatics would refuse that one inquire about facts" (44). Faurisson's work, like the gamut of holocaust denial, relies upon obvious falsifications, as has been demonstrated widely. Again, though, this is no reason to question the facts as widely-accepted; further research tends to clarify the facts, while offering further fuel for challenging revisionist theses.

### *The Refusal to Publish Chomsky's Replies*

Being a popular academic implies that there exists an audience anxious to read Chomsky's views of things, a desire that is satisfied by his tremendous output of books, articles, and talks; instead, the Faurisson Affair was for a long time an excuse to marginalize Chomsky, especially in France, where he was denied a chance to offer his side of the story to the magazines and newspapers like *Le Matin de Paris*, *Nouvelles littéraires* and *Libération* even though they printed inflammatory articles about his views. In Chomsky's opinion, some of the errors propagated by the French media are so obviously out of sync with his views that they should have been noted immediately. For instance, Chomsky recalls that "*Le Matin de Paris* suggest[ed] that I consider "even the idea of genocide" as an "imperialist myth", even though the editors could not have not known that I'd described "the massacre of the Jews" as the most fantastic outburst of

collective insanity in the history of mankind, and that the book in question, [*American Power and the New Mandarins*] is devoted to numerous examples of genocide throughout the world” (42-3). Is the French media any different from the American one? Both are controlled by powerful interests, although this story would probably have been differently rendered had it occurred on American soil.

The entire debacle moved further beyond the Ivory Tower with the involvement of PEN club in France. *Le Monde* published an article on 31 December, 1980, in which PEN, which struggles for the freedom of imprisoned writers, complained that “on account of Noam Chomsky, the Faurisson Affair, which had previously been a kind of folklore, became once again an international controversy”. Chomsky replies: “What moved the affair into the public arena was their decision to give it extraordinary publicity: by the *Le Monde* statement, the suspension from teaching, the ‘falsification of History’ trial (which, interestingly, Vidal-Naquet always seeks to deny or evade), etc. As for it’s becoming ‘international’, the *New York Times* story on a ‘tempest in a teapot’ is not inaccurate. It became ‘international’ precisely because of the actions of those who seek to give maximal publicity to Holocaust revisionists” (9 September, 1997).

One would have imagined PEN being involved differently in this affair given that a French “tribunal” condemned Faurisson for his research, leading Chomsky to express astonishment: “The French tribunals have now condemned Faurisson for having, in addition to other villainous acts, been lacking in the “responsibility” and “prudence” of the historian, for having been negligent for not using certain key documents, and for having been “*laissé prendre en charge par autrui (!) son discours dans une intention d’apologie des crimes de guerre ou d’incitation à la haine raciale*”. Most surprising was that “the court then claimed that it doesn’t restrain the historians right to express him or herself freely, but does condemn Faurisson for having exercised this right. By this shameful judgment, the state has been accorded the right to determine an official truth (in spite of protests from the judges) and to punish those responsible for “irresponsibility”. If this decision does not provoke massive protests [it didn’t], this will be a dark day for France” (43-4). His point of view does not preclude the possibility of speaking out against anti-Semitic, racist, xenophobic or obviously-falsified accounts of the world; it does however refuse the point of view that the State (or any other institution) should be given the right to determine for individuals who has the right to speak or research. Furthermore, says Chomsky “when the court condemned Faurisson a few years later, it never charged him with anti-Semitism (at least, according to the excerpts from the judgment published in *Le Monde*). Rather, it charged him with having “allowed others” to use his work for nefarious ends – a pretty astonishing charge, but indicating, apparently, that they could find no basis for the charge of anti-Semitism, several years later” (9 September, 1997).

## **Conclusion**

The virulence of the remarks against Chomsky, and the very fact that I have written this chapter in support of Chomsky’s views, are two sides of the Chomsky Effect. His detractors challenge him on a number of grounds: he refuses to back down once he has taken a position, he defends his intellectual work in linguistics in ways that even allies sometimes find too stringent, he draws lines which seem to eliminate the possibility of reasonable concessions and, on the basis of certain views manages to alienate a large

compendium of individuals who might otherwise find in his work valuable tools for their own approaches. But, as David Heap says, Noam Chomsky provokes a vast array of effects which can sometimes lead to complex reactions because “he does not want to be *either* worshipped or reviled, he just wants to stimulate people to think critically. So his own intention is in fact at odds with the Effect on the public: it is very hard to get people to believe that they can think for themselves when you are either the unwilling object of adulation or the unwilling object of smear-campaigns.” But he certainly has been an incredible source of motivation, and the very diversity of the audiences who come to hear him, year after year, speaks volumes; his work, within and beyond the Ivory Tower, is indeed heard and, in certain quarters, he inspires great work on a whole range of levels. Given the magnitude of his ambition, to help people think for themselves by accepting as legitimate their own approach, this in itself is a great achievement.

## Endnotes

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<sup>2</sup> "Old Wine, New Bottles: Free Trade, Global Markets and Military Adventures", University of Virginia, February 10, 1993.

<sup>3</sup> Mina Graur, *An Anarchist Rabbi: The Life and Teachings of Rudolph Rocker*, Jerusalem, Magnes Press, 1997, pp. 61-2.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.* 46.

<sup>5</sup> Here again is an overlap between Chomsky and Rocker (and indeed between Chomsky and a range of anarchists, who tend to excel at envisioning the effects of world events upon larger issues). For example, Graur reminds us that Rocker "was much quicker than most of his anarchist friends to recognize that the Bolshevik revolutionary myth was just that, a myth, and it was not going to yield any real social betterment". (131)

<sup>6</sup> View, Part 5, p. 1, Feb. 1, 1988.

<sup>7</sup> Born in 1958, Daniel Brooks studied theatre in Toronto, "the Method" in New York, clown in Paris, dance in Buenos Aires and puppet theatre in Brazil. He has performed his own work in Europe and South America, and worked with many theatre companies in Toronto as a writer, director and actor. He is also the artistic co-director of Toronto's Augusta Company.

<sup>8</sup> Guillermo Verdecchia is a playwright, actor, director and translator whose work has been seen and heard across the country and around the globe. Born in Argentina, Guillermo Verdecchia currently lives and works in Vancouver, B.C. He received the Governor General's Award for Drama and a Chalmers Canadian Play Award for his play, [Fronteras Americanas - American Borders](#) (1997). "Crucero/Crossroads," his adaptation of *Fronteras* for film, has played at festivals

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around the world and received nine international awards. With Daniel Brooks, he is co-author of [The Noam Chomsky Lectures](#) (1991) which received a Chalmer's Canadian Play Award and was shortlisted for the Governor General's Award. His most recent play, written with [Marcus Youssef](#), [A Line in the Sand](#) won a Chalmers Best New Play award in 1997. Guillermo also writes short fiction which appears from time to time in literary magazines and has written a collection of short stories.

<sup>9</sup> Coach House Press, Toronto, 1991.

<sup>10</sup> Cited in *The Boston Globe Magazine* Nov. 19, 1995, p. 25.

<sup>11</sup> Anthony Flint, "Divided Legacy", *The Boston Globe Magazine* Nov. 19, 1995, p. 25.

<sup>12</sup> *The Jerusalem Post* "Looking Right for the Revels of the Hippy Left of Yesteryear", by Matt Nesvisky, June 2, 1995, p. 4.

<sup>13</sup> Ron Weiskind, "Chewing Up the Pacifier:", *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* P4, Oct. 15, 1993.

<sup>14</sup> The term "French intelligentsia" is itself a source of confusion for many, so distinctions must be made early on. Generally speaking, there is enormous resistance to Chomsky's work in France, as we'll see, and there is an identifiable group of French intellectuals in Paris who have been associated with this resistance; yet the lines are not always easily discerned, and alliances exist on various fronts. For instance, an article which was published on 31 March 1999 in the French paper *Le Monde* and entitled "Statement by French intellectuals" was signed by: Pierre Bourdieu, Pauline Boutron, Suzanne de Brunhoff, Nolle Burgi-Golub, Jean-Christophe Chaumeron, Thomas Coutrot, Daniel Bensaid, Daniel Durant, Robin Foot, Ana-Maria Galano, Philip Golub, Michel Husson, Paul Jacquin, Marcel-Francis Kahn, Bernard Langlois, Ariane Lantz, Pierre Lantz, Florence Lefresne, Catherine Levy, Jean-Philippe Milesy, Patrick Mony, Aline Pailler, Catherine Samary, Rolande Trempe, and Pierre Vidal-Naquet. This gives some idea of a French intellectual elite, but if this list is any indication, there is no clear 'party line' which unifies them, even from Chomsky's own perspective (and he does use the idea of the "Paris intellectual" quite frequently). For example, one person on this list stands on the opposite end of Chomsky's spectrum as regards the Faurisson Affair, as we'll see (Pierre Vidal-Naquet), while another, who recently published a book called *Acts of Resistance: Against the Tyranny of the market*, received remarkably strong praise from Chomsky, which appears as an endorsement in ads for the book: "Bourdieu once again selects the right targets and, as always, has much to say that is incisive and enlightening". Further, the petition that accompanied the list of names of this French intelligentsia was very much in the spirit, sometime to the letter, of Chomsky's own opposition to the bombing of Serbia, described in various mediums.

<sup>15</sup> *Cultural Semantics: Keywords of Our Time*, Amherst, U of Massachusetts P, 1998.