
The Chomsky Effect

A Radical Works Beyond the Ivory Tower

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The Chomsky Effect Within and Beyond the Ivory Tower

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, vilified, 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 who have pursued radical political work. Some of these figures are professors or academics who chose to work beyond the confines of academia, even as they made lasting and original contributions to their respective fields, and those with whom Chomsky has the strongest affinities, include Zellig Harris (linguistics, University of Pennsylvania), Seymour Melman (engineering, Columbia), Anton Pannekoek (astronomy, University of Amsterdam), Bertrand Russell (philosophy, Cambridge University), Edward Said (English literature, Columbia) and Howard Zinn (history, Boston University). Chomsky is not terribly excited about putting himself into the company of academics, however, and when he does mention antecedents to his work he explicitly and implicitly recalls ideas proposed by anarchists and anarcho-syndicalists like Michael Bakunin and—especially—Rudolph Rocker, anti-Bolshevik Marxists like Karl Korsch or Rosa Luxemburg, classical liberal thinkers like Wilhelm von Humboldt and Adam Smith, and those who offer up conceptions of the “good society” or critiques of existing phenomena found, in varying ways, in the efforts of his close collaborators Michael Albert, David Barsamian, Edward S. Herman, and Carlos Otero. 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 that favored increased cooperation



Figure 1.2
“I’m Drawn To Noam” by Patricia Storms.¹

I need to keep my quick sketch skills limber, so with this in mind, I’ve created a new category, I’m Drawn To You. Every now and then I’ll do quick caricatures of personalities in the media who fascinate, intrigue, inspire and even disgust me.

I’ve always been drawn to faces. As a kid I would stare at people’s faces for long periods of time, trying to memorize every line and curve, as well as the spirit in their eyes and their smile (that is, if they were the smiling type). When I was first in college studying Library Techniques, I used to stare at all the faces of the women in the class (it was 95% women who took the course), and would often secretly draw them because their faces were fascinating, but also because I was usually bored out of my fucking mind. It eventually got back to me that some people in the class thought that I might be a lesbian since I stared at the women so much. Seems like a strange connection to make to me, but whatever.

So if you recognize the face, you will see that my first choice is none other than Noam Chomsky. I hope I have done him justice. I think he is one of the most important voices of reason in the world right now, even though I find his droning voice so damned annoying. His written work is, for me, a tough slog, but I’ll keep trying. If you’ve never encountered him before, I highly recommend the videos *Manufacturing Consent*, *The Corporation*, and the newest one, *Noam Chomsky: Rebel Without a Pause*.

Mr. Noam Chomsky, I’m Drawn To You. But tell your wife not to worry.

between oppressed Arabs, Jews, and Palestinians in the Middle East and beyond, such as Avukah, Hashomer Hatzair, and the League for Arab-Jewish Cooperation.² These ideas have great currency for Chomsky because 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 who ran a newsstand and a kind of spontaneous literary political salon on 72nd 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 Massachusetts Institute of Technology (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 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.”³

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, Elsie, who taught alongside his father at the religious school of the Mikveh Israel congregation, is still remembered for her brilliance and her uncompromising and serious approach to Zionism, the Hebrew language, and, of course, Jewish cultural affairs. The array of formative influences on Noam was expanded through his readings of anarchist and anti-Bolshevik writers and, beginning in 1945, through direct contact with people at the University of Pennsylvania, most notably his teacher and early 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 researching this book and a forthcoming study of 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 research into his 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 Chomsky's own thinking helps contextualize Chomsky's approach to the "good society," and the extreme distance we have to travel if we hope to see a manifestation of these ideals in our lifetime. But not only does Chomsky consider that these goals could be achieved, he also insists in his historical writings (and there are many) that we look back to past moments when concrete advances were made in this very direction—notably in Catalonia until the victory of Franco's fascists, a consequence not only of Franco's own efforts but of the many direct and indirect contributions made by the Nazis, the British, the Soviets, and the Americans, who all chipped in to destroy populist movements and free associations set up in variance with the more brutal model of contemporary capitalism. In other words, Chomsky is popular among people for a variety of reasons, but I suspect few people comprehend that his objective, like that of the Catalonians earlier this century, is nothing less than a radical overturning of society as we know it today. He is, therefore, quite different from most of the so-called public intellectuals to whom I will refer in the conclusion of this book, and indeed some of his earliest writings outside of the field of linguistics were critical of the "New Mandarins" who are regularly summoned by elites to legitimize or explain (justifiably) unpopular 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: "Contrary to widespread belief and self-serving doctrine produced by the intelligentsia themselves, the fact is that, by and large, intellectuals have tended to be submissive and obedient to one or another state—generally their own, though naturally episodes of apologetics for foreign states tend to receive more attention, conformity to domestic power being tacitly assumed as the norm."⁴

Many people who are unfamiliar with anarchist movements express surprise when they learn that Chomsky's views are *this* radical, are "anarchist," because most people have come to equate anarchy with violence and chaos, or with some brand of unattainable, and therefore undesirable, idealism. Chomsky persistently emphasizes the anticapitalist, procooperative 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 because 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 consistently negative 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 justifiable 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 solid friendships or good marriages, or in the loose and free association of groups in ancient Greece (described by Rudolph Rocker in his masterpiece *Nationalism and Culture*) and, more recently, the workings of certain segments of Spanish society in the 1930s. Instead, the legacy that remains grows out of memories of its so-called terrorist phases, including one that lasted from March 1892 until June 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'."⁵ Examples like this could be multiplied with references to similar events in different periods throughout the world. The point is that the image is far from the anarchy proposed by the likes of Chomsky, who in turn has been influenced by a range of anarchists such as Rudolph Rocker, whose views on this point and many others are probably closer to Chomsky's than anyone else's.

If Chomsky's anarchy has been cause for confusion, his Jewish heritage and views on Israel have been for many a source of veritable bewilderment. Once again, though, Chomsky's views on Israel and Palestine harken back to a corpus of idealist historical works, notably conceptions about the nonreligious, inclusive socialist state that was to be

erected in Palestine by proponents of the Kibbutz Artzi (a federation of kibbutzim founded upon progressive socialist ideas by the Hashomer Hatzair youth movement)⁶ and by various individuals and organizations that favored increased cooperation between the oppressed (Arabs, Jews, Palestinians) in the Middle East and beyond. Many of those involved with this effort would be unfamiliar to most readers, but—if only to remind ourselves of others who have had these ideas and have not been accused of being anti-Semitic on their account—it is worth invoking the clearly deified Albert Einstein. It is seldom mentioned that Einstein supported a region in Palestine that would be home to a broad array of oppressed peoples, not just Jews; indeed, he gave a talk, published along with four others given between 1921 and 1933 as *Mein Weltbild*,⁷ which already set out a major theme of an approach to Jews and to Zionism that would might place his ability to stay in Germany into question. In a prescient statement, particularly as we continue to witness Israeli military incursions into Arab territories, Einstein warned:

We need to pay great attention to our relations with the Arabs. By cultivating these carefully we shall be able in future to prevent things from becoming so dangerously strained that people can take advantage of them to provoke acts of hostility. This goal is perfectly within our reach, because our work of construction has been, and must continue to be, carried out in such a manner as to serve the real interests of the Arab population also. In this way we shall be able to avoid getting ourselves quite so often into the position, disagreeable for Jews and Arabs alike, of having to call in the mandatory power as arbitrator. We shall thereby be following not merely the dictates of Providence but also our traditions, which alone give the Jewish community meaning and stability. For our community is not, and must never become, a political one; this is the only permanent source from whence it can draw new strength and the only ground on which its existence can be justified.⁸

Just as Chomsky's anarchism resonates with a particular set of ideas and principles drawn from historical sources, which I will document in chapter 3, Chomsky's approach to Zionism also has an earlier foundation. In this respect as well Chomsky is quite similar to Rocker, who befriended a series of radical Jewish groups, notably in Paris and London, 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. Rucker 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.⁹

In fact, Chomsky has much in common with a range of early radical Zionists about whom most people, including contemporary Zionists, know very little, largely because their ideals have been replaced by organizations and individuals who actively link Zionism to organized religion or Israeli state politics. And 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.¹⁰

This will sound strange to some readers who have come to associate Chomsky, notably on account of the Faurisson Affair, discussed in the next chapter, with a complex anti-Zionism or even anti-Judaism, charges which we can evaluate further alongside documented information.

Chomsky is unlike other popular academics, particularly figures from the sciences such as Jacques Cousteau, Stephen J. Gould, Stephen Hawkins, Carl Sagan, or David Suzuki, because his views are simply more contentious. There are linguists who feel that they haven't received from him their due, Zionists who consider his views on Israel painfully 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, Faurens, are unacceptable. One point I would 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 does not prescribe a formula for appropriate behavior or accurate thinking beyond, say, paying attention and not succumbing to authority. What is interesting about his belief in a recognizable and (eventually) knowable human nature is the concomitant effort everywhere apparent in his work beyond academia to postulate a set of cognitive tools, intrinsic to all humans, that 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. 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 is the positive effect he has upon so many people who are dissatisfied with the world as they themselves experience it. We are encouraged in schools, religious institutions, the workplace, and in the society at large to respect the views of those empowered to dictate how we should react to events (teachers, journalists, “experts”), so when someone of Chomsky’s intellectual and academic stature comes and says that what 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—that is, when he confirms 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, or supporting murderous Contras is obscene, and that not assisting those in need for obviously corporate-inspired reasons while preaching freedom and equality 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 basic 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 money from the poor even as we reduce taxes for the rich) 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 that, in the end, have turned out to be ineffectual or (as in the cases of brutal, unregulated environment-destroying capitalism, state Marxism, or Maoism) downright murderous.¹¹ This approach is one of the reasons Chomsky is admired and one of the ways that he serves to popularize ideas beyond the scholarly community.

An examination of Chomsky’s career could also be a source of inspiration for those with some degree of power both inside and beyond institutions, such as the university (intellectuals, writers, teachers), because he offers a concrete example of how one can employ a privileged position (in his case Professor at the famed Massachusetts Institute of Technology) to advance the cause of the downtrodden against forces of oppression. Despite his having been arrested, threatened, included on Nixon’s “most wanted list” and marginalized by some groups or institutions, he has been compensated both by the sense that his own decisions have been formulated on the basis of consistent adherence to what I would consider decent values (rather than careerism, the profit motive, or the will to power) and by triumphs in the public domain, evidence for which can be found at any of his well-attended public lectures. Wherever he goes (and he travels extensively; indeed since retirement his schedule of talks seems only to have accelerated), Chomsky fills auditoriums with admiring devotees, he is swarmed by curious onlookers, and he is swamped by demands that he grant interviews, accept honorary degrees, and speak to local activist groups. An article called “Chomsky Swims Against Mainstream”¹² 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 these talks leave in agreement. The *Los Angeles Times* reported in “The Unbridled Linguist” by Kathleen Hendrix¹³ 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’.”

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 constantly 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, and of course students. An excon 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 Chomsky’s dissension against the status quo. These people came out not only to hear about him, but to talk about *their own* Chomsky, their experience of him and his work, because whatever their views, they all felt passionately about his approach to the world. As a linguist friend, David Heap, has pointed out in conversation, no matter where one stands on the issues Chomsky discusses, it is impossible to be indifferent about him. So many people I met on that tour, and ever since, recall with great fondness the positive repercussions that Chomsky had left behind long after the microphone was turned off and the hall dimmed; for this reason, Chomsky seems to leave a trail of energy behind him by the very force of his talks and the manner that he employs. He is known as a lecturer who is still willing to discuss long after the event ends, who is 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. This is a longstanding effort on his part, as was clear already from a December 30, 1969, *New York Times* article by Robert Reinhold titled “Moral Question is Raised At Conference in Boston,” which describes a by-now very familiar scene: “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.”

Not only is the Chomsky Effect longstanding, it is also remarkably diverse—including, somewhat incomprehensibly, an architect designing a house, as we discover in a 2002 *New York Times* article: “Mr. Eisenman and Mr. Falk shared an interest in Noam Chomsky’s theories of language and mused about what Mr. Eisenman called a Chomskyesque house. ‘I don’t know what it meant,’ Mr. Falk said in a recent interview, ‘but it sounded good.’”¹⁴ When it comes to sounding good, however, the real stage is music, as we shall see.

Rockin’ Chomsky

In the last 10 years there have been some frenzied attempts to censor certain kinds of music and certain artists. Do you think that within the realm of entertainment that there are things which are threatening to the system of domination and the veil of disinformation?

Noam Chomsky: There is, well, I should say that I don’t know much about this part of the world. But there can be no question that part of the revival of independence and dissidence and breaking of constraints, much of which was extremely healthy, which took place in the 1960s, was very closely tied to the developments in the music world, and that frightened people. Elites want to put things back in control and order.¹⁵

—Tom Morelo (guitarist, Rage Against the Machine)

His venomous message is spread on tapes and CDs, and the campus lecture circuit; he is promoted at rock concerts by superstar bands such as Pearl Jam, Rage Against the Machine, and U-2 (whose lead singer Bono called Chomsky a “rebel without a pause”).

—David Horowitz¹⁶

Chomsky's following has expanded seemingly exponentially over the years and now extends in surprising ways into the domain of popular culture, notably punk and rock music.¹⁷ A May 24, 1996, article by Mike O'Neill in *The Tampa Tribune* 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 array of bands that use Chomsky's lyrics and persona as muse to their own music or political aspirations in his article provocatively titled "Noam Chomsky, Punk Hero."¹⁸ For example, when Pearl Jam was preparing a tour of the United States in 1996, much ado was made of their attack against Ticketmaster's monopoly over the concert trade: "Eddie Vedder knows what it feels like not to have enough money to be able to buy a T-shirt at his favorite band's show and he wants to turn this thing around," said Pearl Jam's manager, Kelly Curtis, 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 in Billingsley's work to "vulgar Marxism" indicates that all the popularity in the world won't necessarily yield accurate readings. Nevertheless, he does correctly note that Pearl Jam is 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 Bad 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 the

CD cover of “Evil Empire,” and a former producer for the Rolling Stones and Bonnie Raitt (at the time when Billingsley was writing his article) were working on an album by well-known (but unnamed in this article) 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:

For some of his former leftist comrades, Chomsky was simply an eccentric, a sort of Doctor Dementia of the far left afflicted by a radical logorrhea which seemed embarrassingly passé. But there was also at the same time, the growth of a legend which made of Chomsky a cult hero. . . . Indeed, to his small cult of followers, Chomsky was heroic because he alone had kept up the attack when the rest of the left had lapsed into embarrassed silence. For them, he was the only figure radical America could offer who bore comparison to the European intellectual—that engagé figure whose opinions were backed by intellectual achievements whose significance could not be denied even by the most ardent opponents of his politics.

One of the reasons for Chomsky’s popularity in the music world is, according to Billingsley, the fact that some rockers, who learned of his work in “ghettoes” at universities, are now musicians. He cites Charles Young, who writes about music for *Playboy* and *Musician* (and who wrote the cover story for *Rolling Stone* on the Sex Pistols), who notes that Chomsky’s “influence is growing all over the place,” and that “the seed was planted by the Sex Pistols, and Noam Chomsky is the blossom on the plant now.” Young’s own interest in anarchy grew through listening to punk music, and he found Chomsky on a shelf devoted to anarchists’ writings. Says Billingsley: “For Young, discovering Chomsky ‘was truly a life-changing experience.’ Galvanized by the conversion experience, he became positively evangelical, with his own musical milieu proving the ideal mission field: ‘Rock and roll is a fruitful area to spread it because rock musicians are natural anarchists in terms of their personality, even if they don’t know it. It makes complete sense to me that

Chomsky has been picked up in these circles rather than among Hollywood moviemakers.” Trying to get a sense of the popularity of Chomsky’s thought, Young is cited as saying “It’s not just fuck-youism. Punk has always been an attitude and not a philosophy. He [Chomsky] had a philosophy that went with the attitude. The emotional appeal of punk fades as you grow older and intellectual appeal comes along to fill it up. The American ruling class feels no obligation toward anything like a social contract anymore. With communism defeated, they can lay off everybody they want and turn the United States into the Third World. It’s happening everywhere now. Chomsky is addressing that. He offers an explanation and offers facts. People are very grateful for that. They want to find out who he is.” This quote is a great example of the Chomsky Effect, and Young himself has used his own influence to spread the word, says Billingsley: “When he interviews musicians, he gives them copies of Chomsky’s books. Young ‘turned on’ the band Live, which sold six million albums last year, to Chomsky. He also gave Chomsky books to Rancid, an ‘avowed leftist band.’ And he convinced Jan Wenner to let him interview Chomsky for *Rolling Stone*, stained-glass window to the rock culture. What emerged was not so much an interview as a duet.”

Chomsky’s influence in the musical world extends further, into the “punkzine” punk magazine *MAXIMUMROCKNROLL*, which ran one of his lectures with the caption: “This is reality,” and which has Chomsky as part of its “Project Braintrust (along with Tim Yohannan, Grendl M, Dave S, and FAIR, the New York-based leftwing media group”). Says Billingsley, “Around the time of the [first] Gulf War, *MAXIMUMROCKNROLL* released a record called “New World Order.” On one side is “music of resistance” by the group Bad Religion. The song “Heaven is Failing,” by Mr. Brett (Brett Gurewitz), has these lyrics: “As I walk beneath the valley / I shall fear no evil / For thanks to King George and his rainbow cabinet / Today murder is legal.” On the flip side Chomsky takes a solo: “The U.S. Air Force is pounding large parts of Iraq and Kuwait into dust, killing no one knows how many people” and “American troops walking into what could be a meat grinder.”

Interestingly, according to Billingsley, “This seven-inch vinyl release may have been the inspiration that made Chomskyites of Pearl Jam. The group’s leader, Eddie Vedder, ‘is a big Bad Religion fan,’ according to

Andy Kaulkin of Epitaph records, a label owned by former Bad Religion member and Chomsky devotee Brett Gurewitz. The label negotiated with AK Press of San Francisco, which Kaulkin describes as ‘kind of anarchist,’ for the rights to release Noam Chomsky CDs such as ‘Class War: The Attack on Working People’; ‘Prospects for Democracy’; and ‘The Clinton Vision’—all based on lectures recorded at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. ‘It makes sense for us to produce it,’ says Kaulkin. ‘Epitaph is the foremost label. The kids respect Epitaph and will buy anything that is on Epitaph. The kids will want to know more about Chomsky. It’s got our logo on it.’ Other bands on the Epitaph label, it is worth noting, include Offspring, Voodoo, Glow Skulls, Wayne Kramer, NOFX, Down By Law, Joykiller, Total Chaos, Red Aunts, Rancid, Gas Huffer, Ten Foot Pole, Claw Hammer, and RKL (Rich Kids on LSD). Lest this seem an arcane list, a Los Angeles record retailer confirms that he sells ‘boatloads’ of Epitaph material, new and used. Kaulkin says that his Chomsky project will help AK Press, but that it is also a commercial project that will make money.”

Further, Don Was (who has a portrait of Chomsky above the drum kit at his studio, which he calls “the Chomsky Ranch”) worked “on an album that combines Chomsky readings with original music by REM, Pearl Jam, and other groups. X has already laid down one track. Proceeds of the album will go to FAIR. And what does Professor Chomsky himself think of rock and punk bands pushing his stuff? Chomsky says he had never heard of *MAXIMUMROCKNROLL* or Bad Religion but complied with their request for material. “‘Seemed fine to me,’ he said, ‘but I know very little about this scene.’ His devotee Charles Young, however, says that Chomsky is ‘completely in favor’ of these musical adaptations and notes that calls from bands are pouring into the professor’s MIT office at a surprising rate. ‘It has been explained to Noam what a potential tool rock can be for organizing’, says Young, and Chomsky is presumably intrigued by the idea of building a cadre among a new lumpen youth audience since he has failed to build a cadre audience anywhere else. Young is optimistic about prospects for getting the word out. He notes that Tom Morello of the band Rage Against the Machine studied at Harvard: ‘They are smart guys. They have been reading Chomsky for years. Between Pearl Jam and REM, Rage Against

the Machine, it is spreading out there. It might be wishful projection but I believe that music will be going into a political period again’ ”:

But if Noam Chomsky will not likely be touring with Pearl Jam any time soon, for now, however, the Chomsky-rock dialectic remains. Perhaps it is just retribution that after a lifetime of leftist fundamentalism, Chomsky’s most eager acolytes turn out to be the subliterates of *MAXIMUMROCKNROLL*, where Bad Religion, bad politics, and bad music converge. It is also strangely appropriate that he has finally found favor with a kind of ruling class. Every member of Pearl Jam, after all, is a multimillionaire with a fan base that, as one producer put it, “will buy anything they put out” and which hangs on their every word. The various producers and even many of the punk bands are also wealthy and powerful, enjoying the rewards of the American society, although they too posture as members of a downtrodden proletariat.

Interesting as always is the degree to which the Left is expected to abide by some rigid set of principles (Maoist? anticonsumerist? ascetic? abstinent?), while the rest of society can happily gorge itself with wanton disregard for any restraint. It would seem that at least part of the idea of this music is to inform those who feel that there’s something amiss on society’s playing field, and that perhaps we ought to level it out rather than erecting one luxurious version for the rich and another paltry one for the poor.

Despite what feels like a decline in popular culture activism, as anti-consumption grunge gives way to Bentley-backdropped hip-hop videos featuring, say, G-Unit, or the sickening consumerist celebration of wealth and excess by Paris Hilton or those featured on television shows about billionaire’s lifestyles, there remains a strong antiestablishment sentiment across the musical horizon. This is very much a bottom-up phenomenon, whereby bands come to be inspired by certain political ideas, and then promote them to eager fans, in a process not unlike the creative move from the bottom up, as we see in an interview titled “Monopolies, NPR, & PBS,” between Robert McChesney and David Barsamian:

It’s actually ironic, given all the claims made about the market. It’s a very poor mechanism for creativity. Look at popular music. These record companies are desperate to make money. So they want to give people what they want, the five companies that sell 90 percent of the music now, all but one part of these huge giants we just named. The problem they have is that the commercial impulse isn’t always very good for creativity. All the great breakthroughs in rock and roll and popular music in the last 40 years have been outside of their web. It happens in the nooks and crevices. Once these corporate guys get hold of it, they try to recreate it. Real creativity can’t be sparked on Wall Street.¹⁹

More surprising than this kind of resistance to corporatization among the bands and the fans is where this sentiment comes to play out, such as in the Texas band the Dixie Chicks, or in the Indigo Girls, which in both cases contain band members speaking out not only to a status quo in their immediate environments, but to their own personal past and family members. In a November 1999 interview with Sandy Carter, Amy Ray recounts:

Sandy Carter: Can you talk some about experiences and influences that gave birth to your views and social vision?

Amy Ray: From an early age, I had a sense of community involvement. But my family background was very conservative. My father was a product of the 1950s, very conservative, very smart, and hard to argue with, but also very charitable and giving. By college, I was gay and had broken away from a lot of that background, become an environmentalist, and was into social welfare and down on the military. But some of my biggest changes came when I met Winona LaDuke in 1990. Through her I was able to bring environmental and indigenous activism together and that opened doors to other connections. Reading Noam Chomsky helped me see the interconnections between a broad range of issues and how the whole paradigm of society needs to change. Later, meeting the Zapatistas in Mexico and seeing change happen at the grassroots level, bottom-up, that was certainly an inspiration.²⁰

As a resident of Nashville, I am constantly amazed at the heartfelt appeals by country, folk, and blues stars, presumably with many Republican supporters in the room, for a reconsideration of or downright rejection of current administration policies. We expect such introductions from Joan Baez or Emmylou Harris, and we get them, but there's a much stronger moral and sometimes religious-inspired discourse in musical performances than one might expect in the so-called red states. And the 2004 election certainly galvanized a large array of voices, from the stage to the public and back again. Moby, Eddie Vedder, Bono and others maintain their resistance, but they're joined by committed rockers and aficionados; the www.interpunk.com site, for example, remarks the flowering of spoken word resistance through discussion of Jello culminating, once again, with AK Press's involvement with the production of accompanying text:

The surprise Green Party presidential nomination and the growing rebellion against corporations has aroused interest in JELLO's spoken word side as never before. This election year special combines fresh reflections on the WTO convention in Seattle; democracy; e-issues; the Green Party & other election issues;

post Columbine High School backlash on kids who think; and our ever more interesting times taken from recent live performances in Boulder, Seattle and Denver. JELLO BIAFRA's *Become The Media* is the sixth installment in his spoken word albums. JELLO BIAFRA is the former leader of DEAD KENNEDYS and collaborator in the ongoing LARD project. JELLO's last spoken word release *If Evolution is Outlawed, Only Outlaws Will Evolve* was released in November 1998 to rave reviews. Recently, Alternative Tentacles Records released *THE NO WTO COMBO Live From The Battle In Seattle LP/CD* which featured JELLO BIAFRA, Kim Thayil and Krist Novoselic protesting & rocking against the World Trade Organization last December. This release will be available to the book world via AK Press.²¹

Reviews on the interpunk site offer some humorous anecdotal reactions to Jello; an April 10, 2003, review by Stian Nygard, for example, states: "great spoken word by a great man. hours of listening. easy listening that is. jello speaks very clearly. not like noam chomsky, he mumbles too much. im not saying noam chomsky is worse than jello, just that he speaks more dull and you have to pay more attention to him. maybe the problem is that im from norway. anyway, this is interesting stuff."²² Or the August 7, 2001, call to reflect and consume the right stuff, from Rob in Illinois, who on December 29, 2001, states "Support Alternative Tentacles and keep buying Jello's stuff! I'd recommend to get this to learn how the other members DK were trying to ruin the name and Jello. Good cd otherwise, if your interested in political scandals and whatnot check this out," and Kent in Las Vegas on August 7, 2001: "Classic Jello Biafra. I think all the punks who are all anti-authority and all anti-government should listen to some stuff by Biafra, and read some things by Noam Chomsky. Instead of just being ignorant towards what they hate. Buy BUY BUY! yea!" The point of course is that this music inspires understanding or at least curiosity among a marginalized population who would benefit from alternative insights, as Andrew from New Jersey suggested on February 5, 2002, "this cd is about basically one that exposes the politicians for what they are gives hope the underground and just is good."²³

Perusal of alternative reading lists on such sites as amazon.com further reinforce this link between music and dissident views. One guide, by James O'Blivion,²⁴ a self-described political junkie (subversive), begins with an introduction to the problem:

Tired of sweating and slaving for minimum wage (or slightly above) whilst the billionaires acquire more billions? Tired of violent crime that makes your neighborhood a dangerous place to live? Tired of giving 1/5 of your income to your government while corporate executives (who can AFFORD to give 1/5 of their income) receive tax break after tax break? If so, be aware that your enemy has a name . . . and it is Capitalism. See . . . this is how it works: Corporations own EVERYTHING. They own the media, they own the government, they own the war machines, they own the country . . . don't let them own YOU.

His antidote is “anti capitalist reading,” such as Noam Chomsky’s works in both book form and in the CD form mentioned previously. He also invokes Daniel Guerin’s *Anarchism: From Theory to Practice*, and, “above all,” Robert McChesney’s *Corporate Media and the Threat to Democracy* and a Benjamin Bagdikian book titled *The Media Monopoly* (the cover of which appears on a Rage Against the Machine album, “The Battle of Los Angeles”), along with other works by Noam Chomsky, Che Guevara, Marx and Engels, Jean-Paul Sartre, Malcolm X, and Franz Fanon.

Appropriately, in response to the site’s own questions, “So what now?” and “Where do you go from here?” there’s a section on “anti-capitalist music”:

Well, allow me to recommend a few items for your listening enjoyment. First, you’ll want to get ahold of a few Dead Kennedys albums . . . I’d say that “Bedtime for Democracy” is a good place to start. After listening, you may also want to check out their lead singer Jello Biafra’s spoken word. “I Blow Minds for a Living” and “Become the Media” are my highest recommendations. Up next, curl up and settle into Anti-Flag’s brilliant anti-corporate opus, “A New Kind of Army.” Pay extra close attention to the lyrics of “The Consumer’s Song” . . . they’re calling out to you. Next, grab some Rage Against the Machine, preferably their 1991 album, “Rage Against the Machine.” That should give enough fuel to the fire of your discontent. And quite possibly the most important album on this list: “A New Morning, Changing Weather” by The (international) Noise Conspiracy. This is where it’s really at. When you hear “Capitalism Stole My Virginity,” you’ll know what I’m talking about.²⁵

The “Effect” is clearly set out here, for, according to O’Blivion, “after checking out a few of the items mentioned, I’m sure you’ll be well on your way to fighting the system which holds you down. From there on in, you should have no problem finding similar works which expound upon the ideas of socialism and anarchism. Thanks for reading . . . and good luck. Solidarity.”

The most trenchant effect of this music-politics link, though, is that when dissent occurs in a popular musical venue, Chomsky is invariably invoked, generally as an example of what can be said, or of a reasonable place to turn to when in search of information. At a 2003 concert in Denver, Colorado, Eddie Vedder of Pearl Jam angrily impaled a mask of George Bush on his microphone stand and then slammed it to the stage. The results, in addition to a “few dozen” people walking out, were long sequences of discussions on various sites about the event. An individual self-titled “European” wrote, on November 5, 2004, the following blog:

the thing is, you people who go on about oh, what's wrong we are just trying to save the world from bin laden, and sadam was such a fuck and deserved to die and get kicked out etc. . . . try and get a proper perspective on it all . . . someone talked about ed vedder having no tact. well does george W? does the US government? what about all these countries it goes into in the name of freedom and democracy? don't you think there is more to it than your government claims? the US has been trying to get a better grip and hold on the middle east for over fifty yes 50 years. do some proper research before you get involved in this subject man. get a grip of your own perspective before you start trumpeting on about the good will of the US government. the US is currently run by a radical rightwing extremist group that has managed to go around conquering and manipulating whatever country it can in the name of peace. don't believe everything they tell you. wake up and try and see the truth. of course they're gonna go on about what an awful guy he was . . . and sure as shit he was, but's it's their perfect excuse to go and milk the land, to gain another base in the middle east . . . to spread themselves across the planet . . . and who's gonna benefit? you can't be serious to claim the iraqis are gonna benefit? I mean sure maybe a bunch of them will no longer get pulled out of society and thrown into jail to have their balls electrocuted, but lots of shit is gonna happen that is just as bad . . . the country will end up owing billions of dollars to the US and will have to pay it back for the next century, there will still be shit loads of poor people barely able to eat, while a bunch of white, private school educated, elitists get fatter or higher on coke which ever one gets them through the night. the rest of the world is trying to help in a neutral way without benefits and the US just says step aside, or get yourselves an army big enough to stop us . . . that's exactly what they said, except maybe in more eloquent terms yet disguised with more gloss and varnish . . . wake the fuck up . . . and eddie vedder is one of the few in the states who can see through all this . . . if you had any sense you'd do yourself the favour of doing some proper research outside of switching on your TV and listening to the news, the US news channels are the most biased media signals outside of north korea . . . i mean some proper research . . . try noam chomsky . . . he is possibly the most free thinking american the US currently has . . . good luck on your voyage out of the dark forest . . . i hope you make it.²⁶

One of the suppositions that guides all of this, from blogs to radical reading lists to the desire to purchase books by Noam Chomsky in record stores, is the sense that the right is going so far as to raise serious questions, even among those who might have been or remained uninterested in the workings of government. Many people suggest, with the newly composed Supreme Court, the growing presence of hardened religious fanatics in positions of power, the unquestioned and ever-growing rise of the Pentagon budget in the face of massive tax cuts to the rich and concomitant reductions in social aid across the spectrum, that a new backlash is brewing. One such galvanizing point was the 2004 reelection campaign of George Bush, and whole sites are devoted to bringing politics to the punk and rock scene. For instance, www.punkvoter.com features discussions about U.S. politics, considerable Bush-whacking, and articles by members of bands such as The Frisk, The Criminals, Blatz, The Gr'Ups, Tsunami Bomb, Midtown, The Dwarves, The AKAs, Jawbreaker, Jets To Brazil, Lunachicks, Sick Of It All, Operation Ivy, Common Rider, Authority Zero, Trans Am, Kool Arrow Records, Goldfinger, Jello Biafra, Good Riddance, Anti-Flag, Pennywise, Bad Religion, The Lawrence Arms, Razorcake Fanzine. Jesse Luscious, of The Frisk, The Criminals, and Blatz. The Gr'Ups, for example, writes about just coming "home from a Punkvoter.com meeting with a ton of folks including Fat Mike, Jello Biafra, and San Francisco Supervisor Matt Gonzalez. We figured out the next steps for PV—and it's going to be a blast!"²⁷ Among the priorities named at the meeting?

Another PV priority is the continuing assault on Roe vs. Wade and related choice issues. Obviously the Supreme Court and other judicial appointments will be key to the survival of legal, accessible abortions and other basic sexual health and sexual education programs. A third is a combination of fighting media consolidation and encouraging media literacy. Less corporations owning more and more media outlets combined with rampant ethic problems within those media outlets (Fox News anyone?) leaves us vulnerable to the rabid demagogues salivating on right wing talk shows and websites. Fight them by checking out books like "The Culture of Fear: Why Americans Are Afraid of the Wrong Things" (by Barry Glassner) and "Manufacturing Consent" (by Noam Chomsky)!²⁸

Jesse Michaels, of Operation Ivy and Common Rider, has another approach to being just "informed" by the likes of Chomsky and Zinn, worth quoting at length:

Before I say anything else, I want to say again, all these radical things are great and very important. But in a time when things are going from just scary to really terrifying, at a time when we are actually looking down the barrel of worldwide feudalism, it may be a good point to take stock and look at what really works, what could really change things and what is really practical. People on the left, particularly young people, need to be RICH. They need to have the means to start networks such as FOX. People on the left need to understand the language of the rich. It is of much greater importance to understand economics, technology and how the people in power actually create policy than it is to understand Che Guevara's philosophy of agrarian uprising. Howard Zinn is fantastic and does the world a great service but the left has a thousand Howard Zinns and not enough Rupert Murdochs. Noam Chomsky is a fine researcher and disseminator of information but the left desperately needs some Diebolds, some Cheneys, some Bushs etc. I don't mean the left needs some reactionary pricks that want to drag the world back into the dark ages, I mean the left needs some people with strong convictions who actually have the means to put their ideas into practical action and who are willing to fight dirty. My vision for the future isn't a million kids with liberal arts degrees and "Anti-Capitalist readers" tucked in their hemp shoulder bags, my vision for the future is a million kids with technology and business degrees from M.I.T. living the good life and using their power and influence to ACTUALLY MAKE CHANGES IN GOVERNMENT AND PARTICULARLY IN THE MEDIA. Why is this anathema to progressives? Fear of money on the left is the ultimate ally of the robber barons. Kids calling bands or writers "Sell outs" when they become successful benefits an elite who don't want the riff raff living next door to them. Worst of all, this naively anti-money attitude limits the one pointing their finger to a mental ghetto of limited means, limited power and even limited personal happiness. MONEY won/stole the last two elections. MONEY created Fox News. MONEY created the Iraq war. MONEY created the oil lobbies, the MIC, etc. A good example on the positive side is somebody like Fat Mike of fat records. Fat Mike is not a real political guy but he took his power (\$) and put it to real, tangible use with Rock Against Bush. This tour went on for months and planted seeds in the minds of an enormous mall-culture generation that wouldn't go anywhere near a protest march. This is not condescension on my part, it's simply the truth. What if somebody more sophisticated than Mike did the same thing with even more means?²⁹

As one might imagine, the array of political views aired on such sites is vast, although I would venture to say that if there is a theme among those who mention someone to whom they turn for help and information, it's that people should be reading Noam Chomsky, and the overall view of how his work has affected them, or should affect others, is to motivate them to seek out alternative sources of information, and to use their minds to productively and with curiosity try to understand the world. In an interview by Jackie Renn for Real Change News, recorded as "A

Tradition of Troublemaking Punk Grandad Joe Keithley on post-grunge music and People Power,”³⁰ Renn recalls that “before MTV’s *Rock the Vote*, there was punk music’s *Rock against Reagan*. Now the base ingredient of punk music, rebellion, is putting new blood into election 2004.” Reminding readers that “punk rock is not only a musical style but a culture, an anti-establishment movement born from the economic downfall of Great Britain in the 1970s and the policies, foreign and domestic, of the U.S. in the 1980s.” Keithley recalls his own political activities in the interview, including running for the Green Party, but now mostly takes action by playing acoustic guitar on the picket line: “I have lots of friends in the union movement up there. We played a couple of really big anti-war rallies. It was great; Noam Chomsky came and spoke. We’ve done other things like anti-globalization. Whatever comes along. I don’t put one brand of politics on what we do or what I do personally. I kind of go with the people. People Power.” The motivation for inviting Chomsky, therefore, was to motivate this people party, because, in his words, “People can overthrow governments if they put their minds to it.”

Presumably, the appeal of being anti-status quo for a punk band is intrinsic in the very exercise in which they engage when they play music; however, when one moves more mainstream, one immediately recalls the fervor with which the Dixie Chicks were attacked for their vocal outpourings against Bush. In a May 26, 2003, article by Matt Schild titled “Fight the Power,”³¹ NOFX’s Mike Burkett commented: “Now everyone is scared of being ‘Dixie Chicked,’” Burkett says. “You say one thing bad about your government and you might lose a large portion of your fans. Good. Who wants a bunch of idiots for fans, anyway? Besides all that, I feel that it is the artists responsibility to speak out. Noam Chomsky recorded an entire speech on the same subject. If artists don’t speak out, who will?”

And finally, it seems incumbent upon us to consider the role that music has played for Chomsky. The Znet site has a considerable library of folk, antiwar, populist, and activist music, but Chomsky himself has little engagement with such things. In an interview with David Barsamian, in the 2001 collection of interviews published as *Propaganda and the Public Mind: Conversations with Noam Chomsky*, Chomsky says: “Part of the

genius of the system of domination and control is to separate people from one another so that [collective action] doesn't happen. We can't 'consult our neighbors', as one of my favorite Wobbly singers once put it back in the 1930s. As long as we can't consult our neighbors, we'll believe that there are good times. It's important to make sure that people don't consult their neighbors." And who was that Singer? "T-Bone Slim." Barsamian, clearly surprised by the musical reference, asks, incredulously, "You were listening to T-Bone Slim?" Chomsky's reply is more of what one might expect, notably "I read about these things. I'm not attuned to the auditory world"(!) (146–147). Not prepared to let a sleeping dog (bone) lie, Barsamian recalls the discussion at a later date: "In our last interview, you actually surprised me by mentioning a song by T-Bone Slim. Apparently you had read about it in some book. Are there any other musical references in your writing?"

NC: It just shows you really haven't read what I've written carefully (laughs). I actually quoted that in print—but I'll leave it to you to find out where. I read it in a collection of T-Bone Slim's songs which was put out by one of the anarchist publishers a couple of years ago. I kind of liked that one.

DB: Going back to the thirties and forties and that whole period of Woody Guthrie and the Weavers, were you ever connected to any of that music?

NC: Not much, I used to listen to Leadbelly years ago. I heard it but I was not much part of it.

DB: Some music groups today take inspiration from you, like Rage Against the Machine, U2, Chumbawamba, and Bad Religion, with whom you've actually recorded. Are they in touch with you?

NC: Just for interviews now and then. I had an interview with a musician from Rage Against the Machine a couple of weeks ago. I hear about it now and then, but I honestly don't know anything about it. (203–204)

Here, as throughout Chomsky's work and words, is that dry and sometimes ironical sometimes sarcastic wit, also mentioned by Barsamian ("His rich and wry sense of humor often goes unnoticed in the fusillade of facts," *ibid.* ix). This is a complicated characteristic, which combines self-deprecation, a strong sense of self-worth and limitations, along with a healthy dose of sarcasm:

Tom Morello (guitarist, Rage Against the Machine): Are you a fan of any particular kind of music, and can we play a request for you?

Noam Chomsky: If I told you what my tastes were, it would shock you.

TM: Oh no, you go right ahead. Shock me.

NC: Almost nothing. I am very much restricted to things in my childhood or before. Far before.

TM: Our CD catalog is pretty large, try me.

NC: I wouldn't even know what to say. Beethoven's Late Quartets.

TM: Anything in R&B or pop music. Anything that rings a bell?

NC: I am so ignorant, it isn't even worth asking me. I sort of knew something when my kids were around, but that's a lot of years ago.

This humorous way of speaking (“it would shock you,” “far before,” “It isn't even worth asking me”), in evidence throughout Chomsky's talks and writings, is indeed a powerful part of what makes the Chomsky Effect, and I'll return to it in some detail in the concluding chapter. Notice as well the direct collaboration that Chomsky has undertaken, for Chumbawamba's album “For Free Humanity, For Anarchy,” Bad Religion's “New World Order: War #1” (released by the U.S. magazine *Maximumrocknroll* to protest the first Gulf War), and a track by Chomsky entitled “Capitalism Speech” appears on The Marcia Blaine School For Girls—School Disco Volume 2 (released by Metal-On-Metal). On the Bad Religion site (<http://www.badreligion.com/titles/>) we learn from a June 8, 2004, note that Epitaph Records “The Empire Strikes First” contains “14 songs that are fresh, focused, and absolutely alive in the way that great rock ‘n’ roll energizes everything it touches. It's been a long road from their early-80s beginnings, but these days, the primary concerns of Graffin and Gurewitz are not the band's intricate (and subtle) years-long evolution; they're first and foremost topical songwriters focused on domestic chaos and its global manifestation. Bad Religion is, after all, the outfit that, during the first Gulf War in 1991, shared a Maximum Rock ‘n’ Roll split seven-inch with radical MIT professor Noam Chomsky, who, like them, is locked into the tense present and dedicated to exposing the forces who lie and disguise to deepen and enforce human misery.” In an interesting art/politics link, the blurb then goes on to suggest that “It's tempting to say—though impossible to prove—that the *The Empire Strikes First* is a such a terrific album because vocalist Graffin and guitarist Gurewitz, the band's most important creative forces, are responding to the death, desolation, and destruction of war, and to the concurrent attacks on the Bill of Rights; it seems

more than just a happy accident that the band has just delivered one of its most charged and inspired records in years.” One could only hope that this would be one of the Effects of engagement!

Dissidentiwood

With Mark Achbar and Peter Wintonick’s 1992 *Manufacturing Consent: Noam Chomsky and the Media*, and, more recently, with Will Pascoe’s 2003 *Rebel Without a Pause*, Noam Chomsky has come to the big screen. Both films, particularly the former, have been popular with audiences around the world, although, as we’ll see later, their international appeal may be relatively stronger than their domestic pull, particularly in the case of the broadly diffused *Manufacturing Consent*, even though as Billingsley notes: *Manufacturing Consent* “was shown widely on college campuses and broadcast recently on PBS, which offered a tape of the show and a copy of *The Chomsky Reader* as bonus gifts for donors.” The film itself contains a series of scenes reflecting the range of the Chomsky Effect; on the positive side we see thousands of people in audiences anxiously awaiting his words, and we hear the power of his analyses as he moves with grace through a plethora of different topics for different interviewers. But in a June 10, 1993, *Seattle Times* article, 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’).” But as was the case with Michael Moore’s *Fahrenheit 9/11*, a chord was struck, and audiences responded with enthusiasm. In an interview with Pat Dowell, on National Public Radio, a sense of the film’s effect, and indeed the effect that being filmed had upon Chomsky himself, is made clear:

Dowell: Only the mall shoppers aren’t watching. They’re playing miniature golf, seemingly oblivious to Chomsky’s looming image discussing thought control, the Gulf War, or spectator sports as training for irrational jingoism. Audiences who’ve seen the finished film in theaters have been more responsive. Chomsky says he’s gotten lots of mail, much of it angry about his analysis of sports. More gratifying to him is the fact that the movie has proved useful to activists raising public awareness of East Timor. And that makes Chomsky glad

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he agreed to let Wintonick and Achbar follow him with a camera, literally for years.

Chomsky: In fact, for a while, I couldn't get off an airplane in some foreign country without seeing those two smiling faces there, and my heart sinking. It felt [like?] the first scene of "Dolce Vita" a bit.

Dowell: Noam Chomsky goes to the movies? Fellini movies?

Chomsky: Yeah, I'm not as remote from the popular culture as I sometimes pretend.

There is a line here, however, with which Chomsky feels uncomfortable, and it relates in some way to the genre of film, as we will see. First, of course, is the intrusive nature of the biographical genre, or indeed any production that showcases the work of an activist who is trying to encourage people to do things together or on their own, and not to worship authority of any sort. As to the former, Chomsky notes: "My wife, particularly, laid down an iron law that they were to get nowhere near the house, the children, personal life—anything like that—and I agreed with that. I mean, this is not about a person. It's about ideas and principles. If they want to use a person as a vehicle, okay, but, you know, my personal life and my children and where I live and so on have nothing to do with it." As to the second issue, on the nature of the genre as "entertainment," Chomsky begins by stating that he has not seen the film *Manufacturing Consent*, and never will, "partly for uninteresting personal reasons, namely, I just don't like to hear myself and mostly think about the way I should have done it better, and so on. There are, however, some more general reasons. Much as the producers may try to overcome this, and I'm sure they did, there's something inevitable in the nature of the medium that personalizes the issues and gives the impression that some individual—in this case, it happens to be me—is the, you know, the leader of a mass movement or trying to become one, or something of that kind."

In an era of sound bites and reality TV, people (including public intellectuals) are often willing to do or say the most obscene kinds of things to simply have their coveted five minutes of fame; from Chomsky's perspective, this is not only wrong, it is a lost opportunity to make connections and build community. Chomsky is in this sense an exception, for a precise set of reasons: "There's very little in the way of political

organization or other forms of association in which people can participate meaningfully in the public arena. People feel themselves as victims. They're isolated victims of propaganda, and if somehow, somebody comes along and says, you know, the kind of thing that they sort of have a gut feeling about or believed anyway, there's a sign of recognition and excitement and the feeling that maybe I'm not alone."³²

So the effect of *Manufacturing Consent* was powerful, and to the degree that it has generated this "recognition and excitement" it would seem to be a useful tool for organizing and diffusing ideas. But as time passed, Chomsky became more and more reticent about its effect in ways that are both complex and revealing. In discussions with several individuals, including Mark Achbar, which took place in Woods Hole, Massachusetts between 1993 and 1996, Chomsky is asked about the film, why he refuses to see it, and what role it played—or could play—in advancing the kinds of ideas he hopes to promote. Here, some of his concerns are predictable in light of what I have described so far; if his hope is to catalyze people to think through things for themselves, and to hook up for creative interaction with individuals to explore issues and ideas, then he wouldn't want blind allegiance to what he himself is saying: "I get a ton of letters about it—like I get a letter from some steelworker in Canada saying, 'I took my friends three times, we all saw it and it's great,' and so on and so forth. Well, that's all fine. But the standard letter, the *standard* letter, is something like this: it says, 'I'm really glad they made this film; I thought I was the only person in the world who had these thoughts, I'm delighted to know that somebody else actually has them and is saying them.' Then comes the punch-line: 'How can I join your movement?' That's why I'm ambivalent" (319).³³

There are several points here. First, he is but the speaker for a much broader effort undertaken by, say, the group who has invited him, and therefore his very presence there is a sign of the hard work that has been done to organize the event, and it's this hard work that ought to be recognized: "somebody else organized the talk, and the real work is being done by the people who organized the talk, and then followed it up and are out there working in their communities. If they can bring in some speaker to help get people together, terrific, but that person is in no sense 'the leader'" (319).³⁴

But at this point it seems reasonable to ask about where these ideas come from, that is, doesn't Chomsky present *his* ideas, and therefore someone might come out to hear *him* speak? In many writings, he points out that much of what he has to say in the political realm, and even in the linguistic work, emanates from early oft-forgotten sources (as we will see in chapter 3), which is part of the answer; but here he addresses another point, about hero worship and deferring to higher authority:

Woman: But the critique of the media in the film is taken from speeches that *you* gave.

Chomsky: Yeah, but that's because other people are doing important things and I'm not doing important things—that's what it literally comes down to. I mean, years ago I used to be involved in organizing too—I'd go to meetings, get involved in resistance, go to jail, all of that stuff—and I was just no good at it at all; some of these people here can tell you. So sort of a division of labor developed: I decided to do what I'm doing now, and other people kept doing the other things. Friends of mine who were basically the same as me—went to the same colleges and graduate schools, won the same prizes, teach at M.I.T. and so on—just went a different way. They spend their time organizing, which is much more important work—so they're not in a film. That's what the difference is. I mean, I do something basically less important—it *is*, in fact. It's adding something, and I can do it, so I do it—I don't have any false modesty about it. And it's helpful. But it's helpful to people who are doing the real work. And every popular movement I know of in history has been like that. In fact, it's extremely important for people with power not to let anybody understand this, to make them think there are big leaders around who somehow get things going, and then what everybody else has to do is follow them. That's one of the ways of demeaning people, and degrading them and making them passive. I don't know how to overcome this exactly, but it's really something people ought to work on.

Woman: As an activist for East Timor, though, I have to say that the film put our work on a completely different level. Even if you have some trouble with it personally, it has gotten people doing a lot of real work out there.

Chomsky: I think that's true; I know that's true.

Another woman: Now I've got to admit it—I felt odd having you sign a book for my friend earlier today.

Chomsky: Yeah, it's crazy—it's just completely wrong. In a place like San Francisco, it gets embarrassing: I can't walk across the Berkeley campus—literally—without twenty people coming up and asking me to sign something. That doesn't make any sense.

Woman: It does feel unnatural.

Chomsky: It is, it's completely missing the point. It's simply not factually accurate, for one thing—because like I say, the real work is being done by people who are not known, that's always been true in every popular movement in

history. The people who are known are riding the crest of some wave. Now, you can ride the crest of the wave and try to use it to get power, which is the standard thing, or you can ride the crest of the wave because you're helping people that way, which is another thing. But the point is, it's the wave that matters—and that's what people ought to understand. I don't know how you get that across in a film (cited in *Understanding Power*, 321–322).³⁵

Some of the same issues pertain to the second full-length feature Chomsky film, *Rebel Without a Pause*. This documentary offers the movie-going audience another approach to the Chomsky Effect, and some of the reviews are quite revealing relative to issues discussed to this point. John Danziger, in *Docurama*,³⁶ opens with:

You've got to be pretty seriously committed (to say nothing of having basically no interest in music) to think of Noam Chomsky as a rock star, but that's sort of the premise of this documentary, a worshipful portrait of the influential linguist and professor in the months before the Iraq war. The documenting of Chomsky minutiae and comings and goings has apparently become something of a cottage industry—a sticker on the cover of the case of this DVD, for instance, crowds that this is the most important Chomsky documentary since *Manufacturing Consent*, which may make you wonder just how many horses are in that race. Still, along with all the noise about Chomsky's celebrity is a good amount of Chomsky himself, articulating a point of view that gets abysmally short shrift in the mainstream media; even if you disagree with him vehemently, you'd have to admit that he's well read, well informed and hugely influential.

A number of reviewers have pointed out that *Rebel Without a Pause* did not have the impact of *Manufacturing Consent*, but was rather more like what one finds when surfing through the many sites devoted to videos and tapes of him speaking. Christopher Long writes, in *DVD Town*, for example:³⁷ “You probably already know if you're going to be interested in the movie. If you love Chomsky, you'll want to see it. If you can't stand him, you'll avoid it like the plague. *Rebel Without a Pause* doesn't match up to Mark Achbar's *Manufacturing Consent: Noam Chomsky and the Media*, the definitive Chomsky documentary, but it's still a worthy effort and of value even just as historical record. It's not exactly exciting viewing but Chomsky himself admits that he's not really a dynamic speaker; he just has a message many people want to hear.”

On a much smaller scale, there is as well *Power and Terror: Noam Chomsky in Our Times*, which could be classified among what is probably dozens of works put together by film students or Chomsky aficionados. Mickey Z³⁸ adds his sense of the cinema effect with a

discussion of *Power and Terror*, this “short, sparse film,” which he saw at Film Forum in the West Village. The review doesn’t talk much about the film, but rather focuses upon the new wave of interest in Chomsky that has developed among musicians, previously discussed. For him, the film itself “succinctly lays out the post 9/11 geo-political realities of the day,” offering “information we all need to hear; information that goes far beyond fashionable poses or indecipherable theories. As usual, our favorite dissident linguist has done the tedious work of compiling the statistics, the quotes, and the headlines. From there, as always, it’s up to us.” This is a common theme. But what he also emphasizes is that Chomsky speaks in a “language that would have most rock stars regurgitating their p?t? [*sic*] into their kidney-shaped pool,” so “Besides urging you to see this movie and spreading the word long and far, I’d also like to encourage music fans to demand more from your chosen idols. If Bono and others want to wear the hat of political rebel, let’s get more for our entertainment dollar.” It’s an interesting argument, in light of all that we’ve seen in this chapter, but rather than celebrating the diffusion of Chomsky’s ideas through the endlessly popular medium of music, Mickey Z bemoans the appropriation of Chomsky’s works in an unthinking way: “As was inevitable, rock stars awash in capital were using the only internal reference point they know: their massive ego. The highest form of praise they can muster is to elevate another human being to the same level of blind adoration they wallow in (I can see it now: Noam stage-diving at his next lecture). The only possible result of such self-centered drivels is the personalization of Chomsky as a youth ‘hero’ with very few of his ideas coming along for the ride. With most anti-corporate tyranny tenets being checked at the door by the pop music elite, members of the well-bred gentry class can now welcome a ‘dissident linguist’ with open arms, conveniently leaving the rest of us behind.” This, says Mickey Z, “is class war for the polite crowd.” So what does he expect? “Instead of just whining about the disappearing rain forest, why not educate the masses about the role corporate America, the U.S. government, and the meat-based diet plays in the domestic affairs of Brazil? Why just write a song for starving Somalis when you have the influence to mobilize hundreds of thousands of people to examine the social conditions that allow for poverty in a world of

plenty? If not, we can simply stop buying their music, going to their concerts, and wearing their overpriced, sweatshop-produced t-shirts.”³⁹ This is an interesting approach, reminiscent of Jean-Paul Sartre’s demand that authors be engaged in the issues of the times in his (immediate) post-WWII book *Qu’est-ce que la littérature* (*What is Literature*), and in his writings in and about his journal *Humanité*, as we will see in the last chapter. The degree to which we can expect this kind of engagement from artists is a complicated issue, hearkening back to discussions of the avant-garde and modernism, and one might wonder if, as we saw earlier, this would really make for better music. Probably not. But it’s clear that the musicians themselves, and the audiences present for the performances, are turned on and tuned in to a distinctly anti-status quo discourse; where it leads them, when the amplifiers and headphones are turned off, is another matter, which we will pick up in chapter five.

Professional Popularity

Given the broad popular appeal for Chomsky and his work, and the range of people who want to hear what he wants to say, there are of course many anecdotes about his life. Some of the stories about him are true, though perhaps distorted by the passage of time or the views of the person telling the story, and some of them are simply far-fetched, but they are part of a collection of positive and negative impressions recorded through anecdote. In one frequently cited example, it is said that during a demonstration he was being hustled off by billy club-wielding cops when suddenly someone shouted out “Don’t hit him in the head!”. Another recalls an observation when he arrived in Japan to accept his prestigious Kyoto Prize and someone noted he was wearing the same tie he had worn on his previous visit, years earlier, to a U.S. campus. His response? “Why would I need two?” This response was echoed in a comment he made to me, while folding his suit and placing it in my car after receiving an honorary doctorate from the University of Western Ontario, when he said that he had to take good care of it, since he only owns one. There exist as well numerous anecdotes recounting to his ability to work constantly, including stories of late-night telephone calls to students or researchers to check specific facts or make comments, a

report about the Chomskys' tearing out the kitchen in their house to make room for more books, an account of his car breaking down and him walking into a dealership and asking for another "blue one," and a story that when a doctor suggested he lose some weight, Chomsky responded with the welcome idea that he could save the time normally accorded to eating lunch.

These episodes are perhaps rooted in some event or another, and for the most part they are positive depictions, images of a man whose effect is deemed desirable. But given the radical nature of his views, and the fervor with which he defends or promotes them within his field and beyond the university environment, we find at least as many people who describe him as abhorrent, malicious, subversive, and dangerous, as we will see in the next chapter. For people on all sides, however, there is agreement that Noam Chomsky's oratorical skills are legendary, and virtually without equal (especially among his opponents!), and that he has a stubbornly tenacious argumentative side. As one colleague at MIT said, "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."⁴⁰ This may be so, but it does not speak to the way that Chomsky, to follow the metaphor, has prepared the soil so that people are encouraged to bloom; these are the efforts that represent his force, his legacy, his Effect, and on this point, even those who have been critical on some levels of Chomsky's work tend to agree. John Goldsmith (professor of linguistics at the University of Chicago and author, with Geoffrey Huck, of *Ideology and Linguistic Theory; Noam Chomsky and the Deep Structure Debates*, 1996), in personal correspondence, writes: "This is the most defensible position, from where I sit, with regard to Chomsky's beneficial effects. His effects as a teacher (both direct—his effects on the students who have spent time around him in Cambridge—and indirect, through his writings) have been great. As I've said repeatedly, in this respect I owe him a great deal. But the contrast between his espoused anarchism and his practical stance in cognitive science is one that's difficult for me to feel comfortable with."⁴¹ For Goldsmith, like others, there is also another side to this Effect, the negatives of which I will explore in the next chapter, from a range of perspectives and according to a range of variables.

The Chomsky Effect is not only multifaceted, it is also 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 and Effect. Within the professional linguistics community, there are hoards of scholars, from all around the world, who have been and remain devoted to studying the implications of Chomsky's insights and advancing the current research. There are also groups, notably the generative semanticists, who feel that Chomsky has betrayed them, lied about their work, or obfuscated the story of the rift that was formed between them in the 1960s and 1970s. These quarrels can make for some interesting and even valuable reading, when the focus is on something other than professional jealousies, the demarcation of territories, the will to power, inner or inter-disciplinary rivalries, gossip, innuendo or falsification (alas, as in any other professional domain, such activities are disturbingly easy to find). In noting these effects, I'm not going to adjudicate on one side or another, especially in the details of personal rifts that have opened up in linguistics, noted by Goldsmith, Harris, and elsewhere; 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, which will come up in different sections of this book. His ideas revolutionized the field which, when he entered it in the 1950s, was dominated by discussions about matters (distributionalism, behaviorism, structuralism) now considered retrograde or, at the very least, of marginal interest. It was the power of this work, undertaken from the time he was a graduate student, that provided the credibility and credentials for him to speak out as an intellectual on affairs of public concern, matters to which I will return in depth in chapter seven.

The presence of such a powerful personality at the great scientific research institution, MIT, coupled with the visibility of other towering intellectual figures like Roman Jakobson 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, or the early relation between Jakobson and Chomsky (Jakobson got Chomsky his first job at MIT) has created a veritable mystique in the field and has perhaps been a force for promoting interest beyond the

academic realm. This is not to suggest that high-profile linguists or linguistics-inspired researchers are household names, but many people have probably heard of Henry Hoeningwald, 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."⁴² The downside of this situation is that contemporary linguists now wonder what will happen to the field now that Chomsky is emeritus (he's 80 years old). Linguistic programs are already under attack in North America, and the loss of such a figure as an active participant therein, given that he has lent both credibility and a kind of sexiness to the field, is of great concern to some. Others claim that people like Chomsky or Harris have been detrimental to those areas deemed by them 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 European 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, August 20, 1998). No matter what side one stands on, however, it is clear that Chomsky's Effect in this domain is of tremendous importance worldwide. What will be his legacy? This is harder to determine. John Goldsmith responded at length to my inquiry in this regard:

For a number of years now linguists have been playing the "What do you think will happen to the field when Chomsky retires?" game. It's followed closely by the "How will history remember Chomsky? game." My guess, on the latter question, is that he will be remembered in fifty years much like Ernst Mach was

by mid-century. Do you know Ernst Mach? He was one of the most important, and certainly prestigious and influential, scientists in the second half of the 19th century. “Mach speed” is named after him, as are Mach bands, which one learns about in intro to psych courses. The founders of logical positivism, the Vienna Circle, originally called their group the Machkreise, the Mach Circle, debating issues that arose out of his scientific philosophy. He believed in sensory impressions, and he believed that all there was in addition to these sensory impressions were elegant methods for reducing the complexity of our descriptions of these impressions (you can see that this influenced Russell considerably, for example). There is much more that could be said about his ultimately influential ideas about the simplicity of certain kinds of descriptions—there’s a continuous thread leading to Chomsky’s simplicity metric of the 1950s and 1960s. But Mach’s greatest influence, perhaps, was on the young Einstein and others of his generation, because Mach argued that Newton’s notion of “absolute” space and time were errors; space and time do not exist, but are notions we use to organize our sense impressions. This philosophy freed up people like Einstein, and allowed them to rethink the character of space and time in radical new ways. But at the same time Mach’s view was less than liberating—he could never accept the idea of atoms, for example; they seemed to be so small that we’d never really encounter them in sensory data, so they couldn’t be real. Mach, and true followers of his work, simply didn’t accept the mounting evidence for atoms (of which the most impressive was Einstein’s analysis of Brownian motion in 1905). In sum, Mach’s greatest contribution was methodological and not substantive (though historians of science know about his contributions in a range of areas, including psychophysics); he is not remembered the way the greats of his generation are, such as Maxwell, Boltzmann, and Gibbs. But his overall philosophy had galvanizing effects on quite a few important figures, for both the good and the bad (as we see in hindsight).⁴³

The second example regarding Chomsky’s long-term Effect comes from outside of the linguistic domain, where the Effect is more complicated and the legacy more tied to the current moment. Here, discussions regarding Chomsky’s work vary significantly not only across time, but also from place to place, and group to group. Within the Zionist community, for example, there are individuals who feel that Chomsky stands up for a version of socialist Zionism (related to groups like Avukah, Hashomer Hatzair, Kibbutz Artzi), which for them was (and remains) an inspiration in their struggle to establish a society erected on non- or anticapitalist principles. Variations 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 as regards human rights abuse, which makes him a rare example of

someone who insists upon the consistent application of classical liberal principles of justice, as we'll see further on; 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 insist that all nationalism is prejudice, but find in Chomsky's work suggestions that he insists upon the prejudice 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. 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 that 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 distraught 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 well-paid full professor and holder of a named chair 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, and he is scorned by some for this reason. As an anarchist, he believes in the elimination of arbitrary authority, because this would create the conditions whereby the creative potential of all persons can be manifest, in its own way and on its own terms. He constantly fights against the wholesale condemnation of the world's rabble and the concomitant promotion of particular vanguards. His teaching and lecturing styles reflect these views 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" does not refer to the messenger 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 on the basis of his direct experience with the matters at hand and he seeks out the opinions of those with whom he is engaged.

For this reason, an astonishing number of people with whom he has corresponded expressed to me their amazement when the well-known Noam Chomsky came into their world by responding 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 astounded by his willingness to engage my diverse concerns (refugees, language theory, anarchist movements) with devotion and care that far exceeded polite recognition. He is not singular in this respect; indeed a measure of the decency of those in the teaching profession 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. But given the range of issues that concern him, one can only imagine the number of letters that occupy the twenty hours per week Chomsky 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.”⁴⁴

There is another point that deserves some elaboration because it leads us to the central concerns that underwrite Chomsky’s approach. Chomsky is fundamentally worried about the rising fascism and Stalinism in Western society, something that in his sense can be demonstrated by certain legal decisions on many levels (as we will see in chapter 4), American foreign policy in, for example, Latin America, French foreign policy in Rwanda or Algeria, or through careful analysis of corporate culture. In other words, it would be erroneous to think that the end of World War II led Western society away from the impulses that led to Nazism and fascism. On the contrary, we must be on guard in our daily lives against all forms of behavior in any way similar to what has been conveniently appropriated to certain countries or certain eras. We have enough evidence to suggest that the active French collaboration on a plethora of fronts, the Swiss collaboration through banking practices, the American collaboration through their refusal to act on early knowledge of the Nazi death camps, the Vatican collaboration if only through their silence, the Soviet collaboration with Hitler through the Hitler-Stalin pact, even the Canadian collaboration that came as a result of Mackenzie King’s refusal to grant asylum to Jews, was well known and systematically carried out during World War II.

So another effect that Chomsky has upon those willing to entertain his speculations is that the society in which we live is not the liberal Mecca we would like to think it is. This of course flies in the face of the “feel good” attitude promulgated by contemporary politicians, and by many versions of popular culture (especially cinema). This is not necessarily a positive realization for all citizens, who’d like to feel that they have some say in the government, and that it does, or at least aspires to, act in the interests of those who have empowered it. It may seem to some that we are safer and more secure when blinded, and gagged, by the sand in which our heads are buried.

But not for Chomsky.

