Propaganda and the Public Mind

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Conversations with Noam Chonsky

David Barsamian
and Noam Chomsky

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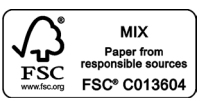

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Interview excerpts appeared in *The Nation, The Progressive, Z*, and on Z Net, and have aired on KGNU and "Making Contact." The first interview was recorded in Boulder during Chomsky's 1998 visit. The second, third, and sixth were all recorded at his home in Lexington, Massachusetts. Interviews four and five were done by phone from KGNU, with the East Timor one broadcast live at the height of the post-referendum crisis. The last interview was recorded at Z Media Institute in Woods Hole, Massachusetts.

Preface to the 2015 Edition

I have often wondered what it must be like to play in an orchestra conducted by a fine musician who leads the performance through the themes and variations, the cadences and nuances, and crescendos. Actually, I have a sense of what it must be like: being interviewed by David Barsamian. It's a rich and rewarding experience.

The collection that follows, guided by David's expert hand—which is also responsible for the valuable and informative notes—opens with a conversation about activist victories and ends with some reflections about the essential factor not only for successful activism but for a productive and fulfilling life: solidarity, mutual aid, sympathy, core values for the progressive tendencies in human thought in the modern world from the Enlightenment and the origins of classical liberalism through their natural left libertarian inheritors.

The final passages also bring up some painful reflections: "When I read things I've written twenty or thirty years ago, I say, My God, how did I forget all of that?" Very much my feeling while rereading this discussion from only fifteen years ago. So much has changed, so much remains the same, so much has been forgotten and should be remembered, if it was even grasped at the time.

The discussion that David conducted here leads through so many paths that an attempt to summarize would be hopeless. There are some parts that are really seared into memory and

impossible to forget. Among them are what David described—unfortunately all too accurately—as "rather esoteric information," beginning when he brought up the Hatfield Report on dioxin in Vietnam (55ff.). These crimes have been much on my mind since the earliest hints in Vietnam in the early 1960s, concerns—and to be honest torment—deepened by some direct experience with victims in Southeast Asia and Colombia, and enhanced by the cruelty, if not sheer sadism, of the non-reaction. It is perhaps best epitomized in the weary observation in the *Wall Street Journal* that "the United States, emotionally spent after losing the war, paid no heed" to the discovery that half a million children may have been born with dioxin-related deformities as a result of U.S. chemical warfare in South Vietnam, always the main target of the American assault.

We suffer so.

It is not hard to understand why the United States is regarded in the world as the biggest threat to peace by a huge margin, no one else even comes close.[1]

All the more reason to pay close attention to activist victories, and failures, the reasons and the prospects. And to attend with no less urgency to the pressing need for solidarity as we confront the vast range of challenges ahead.

Noam Chomsky
Lexington, Massachusetts
January 2015

Introduction

I first wrote to Noam Chomsky around 1980. Much to my surprise, he responded. We did our first interview four years later. We've done scores since, resulting in a series of books, as well as radio programs. The interview collections have sold in the hundreds of thousands, which is remarkable since they have had virtually no promotion and have not been reviewed, even in left journals. In working with Chomsky over the years, I've been struck by his consistency, patience, and equanimity. There are no power plays or superior airs. His rich and wry sense of humor often goes unnoticed in the fusillade of facts. In terms of his intellectual chops, he is awesome in his ability to take a wide and disparate amount of information and cobble it into a coherent analysis.

Chomsky is indefatigable. He is, "a rebel," as Bono of U2 calls him, "without a pause." In addition to producing a steady stream of articles and books on politics and linguistics, he maintains a heavy speaking schedule. He is in enormous demand and is often booked years in advance. He draws huge audiences wherever he goes, though not because of a flashy speaking style. As he once told me, "I'm not a charismatic speaker, and if I had the capacity to be one I wouldn't. I'm really not interested in persuading people. What I like to do is help people persuade themselves." And this he has done probably with more diligence over a longer period of time than any other intellectual alive.

To cite just one example of his solidarity, in 1998 I asked him to come to Boulder to speak at KGNU's twentieth anniversary

celebration. Notwithstanding being fatigued from recent surgery, he not only came but waived his fee.

Chomsky is a very special person to many people—not just in the United States, but around the world. Frequently he's introduced as someone who speaks truth to power. It's almost a cliché. But that's not really what he's about. He's about speaking truth to us, speaking truth to people. As he reminded us in a classic essay thirty years ago, "It is the responsibility of intellectuals to speak the truth and to expose lies."

Like the Sufi sages of West and South Asia, Noam Chomsky teaches by practice. His practice includes an egalitarian spirit, where the Nobel Prize winner will sit and wait outside his office until the student writing an article for the high school newspaper finishes. His practice includes alerting us to the depredations of language, terms like "free trade" and "national interest." His practice is exemplified in the solidarity and service he extends to people from East Timor to Palestine to Colombia to East Harlem. You need a speaker, you need a signature, you need help, Noam Chomsky is there. His practice is to tell you what he thinks, but not what you should think. His practice is to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable. Rather than simply curse the darkness, his practice is to light a candle for us to see.

Although decidedly secular, he is for many of us our rabbi, our preacher, our rinpoche, our pundit, our imam, our sensei.

—David Barsamian
Boulder, Colorado

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Activist Victories

Boulder, Colorado, May 10, 1998

Your busy speaking schedule has taken you recently to Toronto, Winona State University in Winona, Minnesota; Fort Wayne, Indiana; London, England; and today Boulder, Colorado. What's going on at these events? I know you've been getting huge crowds.

You can see that the tour is building up in significance and importance, finally reaching the peak in Boulder. You can't do better than this. *[Laughs.]* It's pretty much what's been going on for a number of years now. There are very large, enthusiastic, and interested audiences that participate actively. They ask serious questions and want to talk about important issues. Topics that I never would have thought of discussing twenty years ago are now perfectly accessible to anyone. I really never think twice about what I'm going to say to a particular audience. London is a different scene, but Fort Wayne was organized by the Northeast Indiana Labor Council, a collection of a couple of dozen unions in the industrial heartland. I don't know the Winona area very well, but I imagine it's mostly farming and small industry. In both cases, you couldn't ask for a more involved, energetic, and thoughtful audience. They want to think hard about what's happening in the world and what they can do about it.

Do you have a sense that you're talking to the choir, or are you reaching the congregation?

These aren't exactly places that are peppered with lefty activists. These are what are called ordinary people.

So, not a lot of Z Magazine *subscribers and readers of Common Courage Press books.*

You meet a few now and then, but they're scattered around. I met one or two people who had been at the Z Media Institute and who were familiar with the magazine, but certainly 99 percent are not.

The Fort Wayne event was singular in one particular respect.

Actually, it was unusual for me. I've spoken to labor groups elsewhere, in Canada and overseas, but it's the first time I can recall being invited by a mainstream labor grouping in the U.S. at a place like that. It is sort of right in the middle of what has been the industrial heartland of the country—in fact, it's considered a pretty right-wing area, but it sure didn't have that feel. After the talk there was a reception. They were raising money for the unions, twenty-five dollars a shot, but a lot of people were there. We stayed around for hours and had a great discussion until early in the morning.

In the May 1998 Z Magazine *you have an article entitled "Domestic Constituencies," where you talk about various free trade agreements and proposals. You comment that "it is always enlightening to seek out what is omitted in propaganda campaigns."*[1] *What did your investigations into the particular propaganda effort around the Multilateral Agreement on Investment reveal?*

The MAI is a major investment treaty. It has been planned and intensively negotiated now for three years, first at the World Trade Organization (WTO), and when they couldn't ram it

through there, it moved over to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development in Paris. The OECD consists of the twenty-nine rich countries. MAI has been going on there since May 1995. There's been extensive, intimate involvement of the corporate sector. There's a group called the U.S. Council for International Business which is essentially the main lobbying organization for internationally oriented corporations. They actually put out a monograph in January 1996 informing their constituency of the contents of MAI and its importance.[2] Congress hasn't been informed. In this same article, I reviewed the mainstream press. It's been astonishingly silent. It has yet to make the *New York Times*. The *Wall Street Journal* had a report.[3] In early April, the *Washington Post* had its first news article.[4] It reported the failure of the OECD to sign it after three years due in large measure to grassroots pressure. Though the matter was kept virtually secret, nevertheless enough pressure developed through nongovernmental organizations, public interest groups, and grassroots activists so that they felt they had to back down. It is quite an important victory. It shows that things can be done. Canada is the one country where it did break through into the public arena about a year ago. That's still after two years of intense negotiations. It's been on national television and in the mainstream press like the Toronto *Globe and Mail* and journals like *Maclean's*. In Australia it broke through this January and then there was a storm of protest and a lot of discussion. In Europe it was picked up just in the last few months.

But in the U.S., apart from what you might call statistical error, there's been essentially nothing. It's not that it's unknown. All media leaders of course know about it. The whole corporate world knows about it. It was almost certainly the main issue behind giving the president what's called "fast-track" authority to approve trade agreements. There was a lot of furor about fast track, but I couldn't find a single mention of this, although the media

must have known that this was a central issue. The *Miami Herald* did have an article last July on the MAI.[5] The fast-track legislation had not yet been introduced in Congress at that point but was being considered. The article pointed out that the U.S. Council for International Business had already approached the White House, asking them to make the MAI a central element of the fast-track negotiations with Congress. That's what they wanted to ram through. It surely was far more important than, say, extending the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) to South America. But if there was a mention of it, l couldn't find it. It's one of many things that was unreported. There are plenty of others. But, despite the suppression, somehow enough of the public was able to get organized to block it.

That's a very dramatic event—and it is important. *Business Week* had a report last February with the headline, "The Explosive Trade Deal You've Never Heard Of."[6] And if you are not reading the literature of the U.S. Council for International Business, you didn't hear of it. It is an explosive trade deal, or would be. It's now going to shift to a more secretive framework. It'll go on, and it'll require even more serious activism to try to expose what's happening, to debate it and oppose it if it ought to be opposed, and I think it should. People could decide that for themselves if they had the information.

Why were the negotiations so secretive?

There's a pretty good reason why the information is not being made available. Media and business leaders know perfectly well that the public is going to be strongly opposed. In fact, the public was so strongly opposed to fast track that its supporters couldn't get it through, even though the business world was virtually 100 percent in favor of it, the media were all in favor of it, and the White House was running a big propaganda campaign. Even people in Congress who favored it strongly voted against it because

their doors were being rammed down by their constituents. Even without knowing the facts, people have an instinctive and indeed rather healthy reaction of skepticism about these things.

Another thing that wasn't mentioned about fast track and which is worth bearing in mind is that the discussion about it was presented as if it were about free trade. It surely wasn't about free trade. First of all, the agreements that they're talking about are not free trade agreements. They are highly protectionist. They don't fall under free trade—virtually nothing does. But quite apart from that, even the most ardent free trader would have been against fast track if they happen to believe in democracy, because that's what it was about. The question was, "Should the president, the White House, have the right to negotiate trade agreements in secret and then present them to Congress with the privilege of saying 'yes' or 'no' but not discussing them and without the public ever being informed?" That's a question about democracy. It's not a question about trade agreements.

The official White House position was that we have to abide by the principle that the president alone, one person alone, can enter into international trade negotiations. That certainly is no principle. For example, on human rights issues, it's insisted that Congress have years to tear away at them, cut them back, put in reservations. In fact, that's one of the reasons the U.S. has probably the worst record in the industrial world in ratifying human rights conventions. They almost never get ratified. So on human rights that's certainly not a principle. On trade it may be a principle, but that's because of what they're trying to ram through. They know the public won't like it. The *Wall Street Journal* conceded that, sort of obliquely. In one of their news articles praising fast track as a no-brainer, something so obvious that anybody sensible would want it, they said that nevertheless the critics had what they called an "ultimate weapon": that the public is opposed.[7] So therefore you'd better keep them out of it. That's the implication.

On the MAI, they were afraid that the "ultimate weapon" might be unsheathed, and indeed it was, astonishingly. A lot of people feel that we can't do anything, that prospects are gloomy. I don't think that's true at all. This is a rather dramatic illustration of the opposite. Against tremendous odds, confronting the most concentrated power in the world, the richest, most powerful countries, transnational corporations, international financial institutions, and close to total control of the media. That's a consolidated power of a kind that you can't find in history. Despite that, grassroots activism was able to stop it.

Do you see a possible trend here beginning with the successful UPS strike and the widespread public support for the strikers, then the defeat of fast track, the reversal on MAI, and also the successful Columbus, Ohio, protest against the bombing of Iraq?

The only reservation I have is that 1 don't think it's new. I think it's been going on for a long time. Right through the 1980s, for example, popular activism was so strong that the Reagan administration was never able to intervene directly in Central America. They were unable to do anything remotely like what Kennedy and Johnson did in Southeast Asia in the 1960s. That's simply because there was far too much public opposition. So they had to do it indirectly, through clandestine terror.

You can see it in reporting that's going on now on the death of Bishop Juan Gerardi in Guatemala. Read that reporting. There's a slight omission. The fact that another leading church figure was murdered in Central America is not big news. That's been happening for a while. But he was killed right as he was about to release a big study done by the church called *Never Again,* which gave a very detailed analysis of the atrocities carried out in Guatemala.[8] It's one of the real horror stories of past years. They calculated that about 200,000 people had been killed, over a million and a half refugees, hundreds of thousands of orphans

and widows. They attributed about 80 percent of it to the government and the paramilitaries connected to it, only 10 percent to the guerrillas, the rest unknown.

Who is the government? The government was established, armed, trained, and supported by the United States. The U.S. government couldn't move in directly because of popular opposition, so they used mercenaries. The whole international terror network—Taiwan, Israel, Britain, Saudi Arabia, Argentinian neo-Nazis—was involved in Central America. The worst atrocities in Guatemala, the church report shows, were under the rule of Rios Montt, who was the favorite of Washington. Reagan was praising him all over the place as a real friend of democracy who was getting a "bum rap" from the human rights groups, meanwhile killing tens of thousands of people.[9]

The U.S. was pretty much excluded from the discussion, in some reports wasn't even mentioned at all. But it was behind the scenes. Crucially, it was not directly involved. The place was not being bombed by B-52s. There weren't hundreds of thousands of U.S. troops roaming around. That's because of the brake that was imposed by the popular activism of the 1980s, which was happening all over the country and was not concentrated in urban centers and college campuses. It was taking place in rural areas in the Southwest and Midwest. It was very strong. So there's nothing new about this.

It's right in front of our eyes. The big popular movements—the environmental, feminist, and other movements—are all developments of the past few decades. And they are achieving a lot. Fast track was very dramatic in this respect. As the White House correctly pointed out, that's an option that had been available for presidents all the time. Nobody had ever paid attention, because it was considered right. If the president wants to make important deals in secret and leave Congress and the public out of it, what could be wrong with that? Now people feel there's something

wrong with it, and that's a lot of progress. They not only feel that there's something wrong with it, but they feel that strongly enough that they are able to overcome the extraordinarily powerful forces that are trying to ram it through. This is a lot of progress.

One of the chapters in Manufacturing Consent*, which you coauthored with Edward Hennan, is entitled "Worthy and Unworthy Victims." The assassination of Juan Gerardi was covered on page 5 of the* New York Times.[10] *What might have been the coverage if he were a Cuban bishop, for example?*

There would have been huge headlines all over the front pages. We need not discuss it. It's obvious.

So that construct still holds.

That's just another example. In fact, in that book that Ed and I wrote, one of the chapters that he did compares a hundred religious martyrs in Central America with one Polish priest killed in Eastern Europe.11 The killers in Poland were immediately apprehended, sent to long jail sentences, unlike the hundred religious martyrs in Central America, including Archbishop Oscar Romero and four church women from the United States. Ed did a media review that showed that the coverage of the one Polish priest was more than that of 100 religious martyrs, and quite different in character. In that case, the press demanded that it be traced to the highest level. "The Kremlin can't escape blame," and so on. In the case of the archbishop, the nuns, and the laywomen from the United States, as well as lots of other religious martyrs, it was all some local accident. They can't figure out what it is. There was very little coverage and it was relegated to the back pages, with no graphic details. To this day, there has been no serious inquiry here into the death of Archbishop Romero.

When the six Jesuit intellectuals were murdered, it was reported. But ask people what their names were. Ask them to