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May 5, 2009

The Responsible Hysteric: An Analysis of Noam Chomsky's "A Special Supplement:  
The Responsibility of Intellectuals"

Noam Chomsky, in his article "A Special Supplement: The Responsibility of Intellectuals," distinguishes between two types of criticism: "responsible criticism," and "sentimental," or "emotional," or "hysterical criticism"(6). While Chomsky's project is not to defend the implications of either designation/categorization, I feel as though, ironically, the figure of the "hysterical" critic is able to more honestly fulfill the "responsibility of the intellectual" (1) as opposed to the "responsible" critic. Before I delve into the details of each characterization, I think it is wise to first delineate my reading of Chomsky's notion of the intellectual and his responsibility. Chomsky states that "intellectuals are in a position to expose the lies of governments, to analyze actions according to their causes and motives and often hidden intentions" (1). Moreover, "[i]n the Western world, at least, [intellectuals] have the power that comes from political liberty, from access to information and freedom of expression" (1), and are endowed with the "leisure, the facilities, and the training to seek the truth lying hidden behind the veil of distortion and misrepresentation, ideology and class interest, through which the events of current history are presented to us" (1). As such, it is the intellectual's duty to be suspicious of and question the supposed "'experts' with contacts in Washington", those whose "expertise" and "'expert knowledge' is applied to world affairs" (6): it is a necessity "to any person of integrity"(6) to question the "quality and the goals" (6) said

“expertise” serves. In other words, it is the intellectual’s responsibility to distrust these discourses of power. As such, the intellectual must break, counter, even subvert, the dominant metanarrative<sup>1</sup> maintained by governments. Intellectuals must dig under the surface to locate, unearth, and determine the truth of matters: the true “causes,” “motives,” and “hidden intentions” behind any and all actions.

Returning to the two types of criticism, Chomsky delineates that [t]he "hysterical critics" are to be identified, apparently, by their irrational refusal to accept one fundamental political axiom, namely that the United States has the right to extend its power and control without limit, insofar as is feasible.

Responsible criticism does not challenge this assumption, but argues, rather, that we probably can't "get away with it" at this particular time and place. (6)

This notion of “responsible criticism,” although it might be read as positive, is, in my opinion, problematic. “Responsible” suggests that one is, takes, and assumes responsibility for actions, outcomes, etc. However, Chomsky’s aforementioned definition of the “responsible critic” parallels, to me, the tradition of confession within Catholicism. Catholics practice the ritual of confession whereby they [temporarily] take ownership of their actions, acknowledge their sins, only to be absolved through this admittance/recognition of ‘wrong doing.’ Let’s use lying as an example: telling a lie is wrong, a good catholic knows that lying is wrong, and in knowing that it is wrong, he/she is on the path to make it right by admitting that he/she lies/has lied. Typically, he/she is served the punishment of reciting however many Hail-Mary’s, and is sent on his/her

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<sup>1</sup> While “metanarrative” is a totalizing term, here I am referring to the government’s apparatus of legitimation, or in Chomsky’s terms the “government's propaganda apparatus” (2); more specifically, the structures of “deceit and distortion” (3) that enshroud American life in attempts to explain and/or rationalize it.

merry way to sin again (hardly a penance worthy fearing). There is something fundamentally irresponsible about this dynamic. Is it responsible to make amends after one has knowingly done something wrong but proceeded to do it anyways (knowing in the back of one's mind that there is no real punishment in the eyes of God to those who are willing to fess up). This seems to be a Band-Aid effect that simply erases the scuffed surface as opposed to addressing the true issue at hand: the sin. Where is the lesson? Is this responsibility? In this sense, being responsible is admitting to one's sins while continuing to sin knowing that confession is tantamount to forgiveness/absolution. I realize that this is an extreme reading, but I feel as though the point is relevant; specifically, in light of Irving Kristol's characterization of the "responsible critic." Kristol offers Walter Lippmann as his example of this ethos, as he maintains a "*realpolitik* point of view; and he will apparently even contemplate the possibility of a *nuclear* war against China in extreme circumstances" (6). *Realpolitik* is concerned with practices, not ideologies, and is used pejoratively to imply a Machiavellian ethos<sup>2</sup>. In this respect, one is able to commit atrocities without really considering the implications/consequences that might ensue; the objective is clear, but the process is tainted. As such, one is responsible insofar as the end result can be rationalized (a quasi-utilitarian stance); everything along the way can be forgiven.

On the other hand, "hysterical criticism," albeit abrasive, seems much more honest and upfront. These critics challenge, refuse, and attack to defend their causes. They affront the situation for what it is as opposed to acting in bad faith only to rationalize, or admit their wrong doings later on. As Chomsky delineates, Kristol posits the "hysterical critic" as the

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<sup>2</sup> I.e. the well known Machiavellian position that the 'ends justify the means.'

"unreasonable, ideological type" in the teach-in movement, who often seem to be motivated by such absurdities as "simple, virtuous 'anti-imperialism,' "who deliver "harangues on 'the power structure,' " and who even sometimes stoop so low as to read "articles and reports from the foreign press on the American presence in Vietnam." (6)

Moreover, "these nasty types are often psychologists, mathematicians, chemists, or philosophers (just as, incidentally, those most vocal in protest in the Soviet Union are generally physicists, literary intellectuals, and others remote from the exercise of power)" (6). In other words, the "hysterical critic" seeks to bring awareness to their own ideological positions, and in most cases are anti-establishmentarians. Their project is motivated by the desire to educate and spread awareness, as opposed to exploit and rationalize. They seek to show alternate ideologies, a project more akin to the intellectual's responsibility to challenge and "expos[e] the lies of the government" (1). They provide the tools to exercise the limbs of ideas and questions, as opposed to rules and mandates.

Works Cited

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