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# Chomsky in context

## A response to Gareth Morley

by Rae Murphy

**T**HE TRIGGER FOR GARETH MORLEY'S ARTICLE IS, IT APPEARS, THE reception given to *9-11*, a slight pamphlet made up of interviews Noam Chomsky gave to various media outlets on the terrorist attacks on September 11 and the response of the American government. However, Morley goes after Chomsky on the basis not so much of this war as of the last one and the one before that. The purpose appears to be twofold: to warn the unwary of the pernicious influence Chomsky holds over the Left in general and to blame Chomsky for the problems of the nascent anti-globalization movement, which seems to Morley interchangeable with the Left. Chomsky's political writing is far from being above criticism, but Morley's elaborate Bill of Particulars leaves out important elements of historical context that cast his work in a very different light.

Morley's main issue is with Chomsky's loyalty to "anti-imperialist orthodoxy":

*Since his appearance as a political activist during the Vietnam war, Chomsky has argued that the "liberal" media and the "liberal intelligentsia" are really just apologists for American corporate/state power. They "manufacture consent" by limiting the domain of acceptable criticism to instrumental issues of how best to accomplish the objectives of the American ruling class.*

Chomsky would probably mildly quibble and qualify that characterization by saying *some* liberals and *some* members of the liberal intelligentsia, some of the time. But instead of trying to refute what Chomsky actually says and writes, Morley instead decides to refute the man himself. The method is to cherry-pick through his work and some writings of contemporaries and critics and to delve into the epistemological, social and class roots of Chomsky's philosophical underpinnings. Morley makes this remarkable statement and reveals a Marxist/reductivist sensibility of his own: "Chomsky grew up in Philadelphia and was heavily influenced by the Jewish working class culture of New York in the depression. For a bright secular Jewish kid in Chomsky's circumstances, the question was not whether to be a socialist, but which kind." I bet a few of those kids in those circumstances grew up to be Democrats, even Republicans.

### Vietnam, Cambodia and genocide

In the course of building his case, Morley gallops through the history of the Left, situating Chomsky in the middle of everything, somewhat like the Woody Allen character Zelig. It begins in earnest with Vietnam when, as Christopher Hitchens suggests in parting company with Chomsky over *9-11*, he was at his best:

*I have begun to think that Noam Chomsky has lost or is losing the qualities that made him a great moral and political tutor in the years of the*

*Indochina war, and that enabled him to write such monumental essays as his critique of the Kahan Commission on Sabra and Shatila or his analysis of the situation in East Timor. I don't say this out of any "more in sorrow than anger" affectation: I have written several defenses of him and he knows it. But the last time we corresponded, some months ago, I was appalled by the robotic element both of his prose and of his opinions.*

In a sense, Hitchens is too kind to Chomsky. There has always been a robotic – I would say dogmatic – element in his writings, and never more so than when he is answering critics. Like many members of the professoriat Chomsky does not take criticism well, and he takes being contradicted not at all. His polemical style sometimes gets him into trouble, and never more so than in the debate on Pol Pot and "genocide" more than 20 years ago. Calling him an apologist for genocide, however, is an oversimplification. His extended exchange with Jean Lacouture focused on numbers and sources and who said what when. The articles are all on the public record – as Casey Stengel would say, "You could look it up" – and I believe Chomsky wins on points. But the context also needs to be understood.

While Chomsky never did condone genocide, he minimized and rationalized Pol Pot's murderous excesses. I think he did this for a number of reasons. He misjudged Pol Pot's peasant army and saw it as a genuine revolutionary force long after it had degenerated into a well-armed gang of murderers. The CIA knew their Pol Pot better

Rae Murphy visited Vietnam twice at the height of the war and has written widely on Canadian and international politics.

than Chomsky and they armed and fed him. Part of the political and ideological background for Chomsky's continued equivocation on the crimes of the Khmer Rouge is a longstanding and often prevalent view, not only among the Left, that there is something pure about the countryside – “the real America beyond the beltway.” Among the Left, particularly the more radical anarchists, the mythology always has the peasants marching on the cities. This romantic nonsense is part of Chomsky's baggage.

The larger point, however, is that in the whole colonial epoch in Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia, the term *genocide* is applied only on this one occasion in Cambodia, and not to the lengthy and highly destructive U.S. military presence in Southeast Asia. Morley's incorrect assertion that the war in Vietnam was the result of an insurgency helps obscure this point. In 1945, after the surrender of the Japanese, Ho Chi Minh declared a republic. He did so with the same legitimacy that underlay de Gaulle's declaration in Paris the summer before. The Americans had previously armed the Viet Minh and promised support for Vietnamese independence if Ho would fight the Japanese. Ho kept his word; the Americans didn't keep theirs. And so, considering the immense cost in life and treasure of the American betrayal of the Vietnamese, the mad inferno that was created in Southeast Asia by the wars waged by the Japanese, by the French and, most brutally, by the Americans is relevant here. What of the carpet bombings, defoliants, napalm, the total destruction of the social and political infrastructure of Laos and Cambodia as well as Vietnam? The Americans dropped more bombs on Vietnam than all the tonnage dropped by all the combatants in World

War II. And boasted loudly about it – bomb them into the Stone Age. Nothing wishy-washy then about mere collateral damage. The essential cause of the mass destruction – human, social, environmental – in all of southeast Asia was the rampaging American military machine.

Having destroyed every aspect of Vietnam's economy and killed, maimed and poisoned several million of its citizens, the Americans left the pieces behind – a forerunner of George W. Bush's mantra, “We don't nation-build, we fight wars.” Before they would lift their economic sanctions, they even forced the new government to repay the money the puppet government

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had borrowed to finance the American invasion. “After the Vietnam war ended, and the passions it had excited began to calm,” Morley writes, “much of the former student left began to see the dark side of the regimes that had displaced U.S colonialism... Chomsky used his authority to pronounce anathema on any American leftist who criticized the Hanoi regime.” What is it about Americans of every political persuasion, including members “of the former student left,” which gives them this moral superiority to pass judgement on the world? Passions did indeed cool rapidly among the student left, especially after they realized they would not be drafted. They did not cool as rapidly in Vietnam.

I was in Vietnam twice, in 1965 and 1967–68. I spent most of my time there in

the North, but I did go down to the DMZ and I saw part of the Ho Chi Minh Trail (a very busy place at the time – I was to learn later that this was about a month before the Tet Offensive). I was naive and carried some illusions (some of which I carry to this day, as I realized preparing this article). One incident stands out.

While hardly recommended, an air raid shelter is a good place to talk about a war – I was with an elderly French journalist who seemed to have spent a great deal of his life in Vietnam, although he was more interested in Quebec and de Gaulle's aborted visit. He gave me a long description of the rivalries and struggles within the various factions of the Communist parties, the merging and dissolution of alliances between socialist and quasi-socialist groups, even the manoeuvring of the Buddhists and Catholics. The upshot of it all was that, as the war was intensifying, the Communists in North Vietnam were gaining absolute control throughout Vietnam, and this was scaring the Laotians and the Cambodians, who were secretly supporting the Americans. I knew then about the split within the Vietnam Communist Party, which reflected the split between the USSR and China as well as the ambivalence of Ho Chi Minh, who by 1967 was on the margins. I also



Vietnam war protesters in the United States of America Pavilion at Expo 67 in Montreal. NATIONAL ARCHIVES OF CANADA PHOTO

knew there were tensions within the broad alliance which Ho had constructed as far back as the mid-1940s. But now, my French friend told me, the military was in control and General Giap had his own agenda: “Once these little Prussians deal with the Yanks they have a few matters to settle with those princelings in Laos and Cambodia. If the Russians and Chinese think they are going to get the oil in the gulf they will also learn otherwise.”

I didn't really pay much attention to what I was told. Wars tend to simplify and obscure a complex reality. Rereading Chomsky's writing of those times, I think he captured this complex reality better than anybody else writing on either side. Chomsky's straightforward style, his insist-

ence and persistence and “numbing detail,” often prove the issue he is debating. It is not surprising that Morley, who appears to be more partial to sweeping indictments, should find him “incomprehensible.”

## Intellectuals under attack

Morley’s account of Chomsky’s involvement in the intellectual debates of the past year also suffers from the same one-sidedness and lack of attention to historical context.

9-11 is typical Chomsky, and the response to it from conservative critics is typical and expected – vindictive, hysterical and ad hominem. Although the book was ignored by the mainstream press, it quickly became a bestseller – at the end of July, as this is being written. It is number one on the Globe and Mail bestseller list and has been on the list for 27 weeks. However, the response from some current and lapsed liberals, notably Hitchens in *The Nation* and Jeffrey Isaac in *The American Prospect*, was somewhat surprising. Surprising in the sense that they didn’t really review the Chomsky booklet or challenge his position that the American response to the attack was illegal, wrongheaded and dangerous, but instead took the opportunity to rather aggressively support the war on Afghanistan.

Chomsky’s booklet was published in the first weeks after the 9-11 attack and he was uncharacteristically tentative in his responses – partly, I believe, because the full range of Bush’s so-called War on Terror was yet to be revealed. Both Hitchens’s and Isaac’s responses were remarkably defensive, but they were also written in the early going when the flag-waving hysteria was at its peak. This hysteria appears to be abating. As Americans are beginning to believe they

have more to fear from Arthur Andersen than from Saddam Hussein, perhaps their government will be restrained and perhaps the attack of 2001 and the response will be seen in perspective. If this is mere wishful thinking and the Bush Doctrine of pre-emptive war, any time any place, is to be put into practice, this particular crisis of American liberalism will deepen indeed. The Axis of Evil replaces the Evil Empire and John Ashcroft will make J. Edgar Hoover look like a civil libertarian.

At a number of points, Morley refers to an American judge, Richard Posner. Posner is a very prolific writer on legal matters, such as his justifications of the Supreme Court’s

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appointment of George W. Bush to the presidency, but also on cultural and political issues. His most recent book, quoted by Morley, is *Public Intellectuals: A Study in Decline*. It contains a quite arbitrary and rather quirky list of “public intellectuals,” how prominent they are, and his comments on them. Most reviewers have dismissed it as being either merely stupid or an unintended satire. Others have taken him much more seriously, notably his demand that public intellectuals – especially tenured and untenured professors – be held somehow accountable for their writings beyond the discipline they teach. Civil liberties are under attack in the United States. Terms like “Patriotism” and “America Haters” are flung

around while constitutional guarantees are cast aside. There is a war on, a war against evil, and intellectuals are the first to feel the bite.

Morley evokes the old-time “badly dressed CP hack, defending orthodox Leninism from its critics.” With the minor caveat that I always thought of myself as well dressed, I did defend “orthodox Leninism” until I gave up the struggle thirtysome years ago, so I think I’m qualified to say that

**A campaign is underway to use the war on terror to put an end to the new Left internationalism which is beginning to define these new times.**

Gareth Morley misunderstands the essence of Lenin’s *Left-Wing Communism: An Infantile Disorder*. The tract was aimed at members and supporters of those Communist parties affiliated with the Third International, and its aim was to encourage them to build and work within a broader social movement. In particular it was aimed at Communist workers in the nascent industrial trade union movement – not to split off into “pure” organizations but to work within existing unions and to build new ones. The idea was that through their efforts the Communists would win the support of the majority of workers, especially organized workers.

The tract was very much a product of its time. It was translated into English and circulated in America and England at a time when Lenin, as the leader of the only (apparently) successful socialist revolution, was at the height of his prestige, and Soviet Russia (much like Cuba in the 1960s) was the exemplar for all varieties of socialists and – dare we use the term – progressives. It was also the time when the British labour movement and Labour Party were establishing links between industrial organization and political action. In Canada and the United States, the irresistible demand for a new militant form of industrial unionism was leading to the creation of “pure” unions like the IWW and the OBU. Taking Lenin’s advice, Communists and their supporters forced the birth of modern industrial unions from the existing labour establishment. Non-Communists like John L. Lewis and Walter Reuther were quite willing to work with Communists toward common ends. So were thousands of others who organized the war effort and established the New Deal as well as the social services network now under attack in Canada.

The war against the Evil Empire put an end to that. Now a campaign is underway to use the war on terror to put an end to the new Left internationalism which is beginning to define these new times. The attack on Chomsky and other intellectuals is part of that campaign, and it needs to be resisted. ■

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## GARETH MORLEY REPLIES

MURPHY PROVIDES LESS A DEFENCE of Chomsky than an attack on the motives of his critics. Dispute on this level is tedious. Fair readers of the article will find no evidence that I either support the “war on terror” as defined by Messrs Bush and Ashcroft or have proposed the imposition of loyalty oaths in universities. Certainly Michael Walzer, Salman Rushdie and Todd Gitlin – to name a few of Chomsky’s recent, and harsh, critics – would be surprised to be informed of Murphy’s conscription of them in a campaign against internationalism, the Left and the postwar welfare state.

What Murphy effectively concedes – that Chomsky romanticized the “peasant armies” of both Pol Pot and Milosevic, and that he does not react well to criticism – renders any further Bill of Particulars redundant. Whether similar charges can be levelled against academics as a class can be left to readers to judge based on their personal experience; mine has not been as dire as Murphy’s seems to have been.

I suspect that one of Murphy’s criticisms, at least, will attract the agreement of many Inroads subscribers with the patience to read this far. Surely, an elaborate dissection of the political history of a single Old Leftist is fighting not even the last war, but the one before that. What do the ancient disputes of the traditional Left have to do with today’s issues of biotechnology, branding and the frontiers of intellectual property? In the wake of September 11, the language of identity and difference seems dated, the language

of class war and revolution merely embarrassing. If it is necessary to explore this context to make sense of Chomsky’s political thinking, as I have argued, can the enterprise have any value for the present at all?

Chomsky’s commercial success, built on an undeserved reputation for political integrity, is one answer. Another answer, perhaps more personal, derives precisely from the times we are in the process of defining. During the decade between the collapse of the Soviet Union and that of the Twin Towers, it did indeed seem as though the fierce battles between the democratic and antidemocratic Left were of historic interest at most. The only issue was whether a mild social democracy could maintain its identity against a hegemonic neoliberalism. Surely there were no enemies on the Left.

One of the less-noted ripples of September 11 is the demonstration that this is not so. On September 11, the world faced an indisputably reactionary movement, totally hostile to the Western imperium, and the resources of cultural relativism were inadequate to comprehend it. The breach in the Left already opened up by the war in Kosovo reached a crisis. In that crisis, Chomsky stood as one pole in the dispute – indisputably influential (unlike the tiny remnants of orthodox Leninism), a bridge between the generations of ’36, ’68 and ’99, and now finally a figure of popular culture. The future of the “Seattle” Left depends very much on how it reacts to him, and to the tradition he embodies. ■

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