

One of the most honest men in America  
as a propagandizing pamphleteer



# Chomsky, the State and the True Believer

John P. Sisk

The best way to begin Noam Chomsky's *For Reasons of State* is to read the epigraph, a lengthy quotation from the nineteenth-century anarchist saint, Mikhail Bakunin, from which the title is taken. Central to it is an impassioned assertion that "the entire history of ancient and modern states is merely a series of revolting crimes" and that kings, ministers, statesmen, bureaucrats and warriors, past and present, "if judged from the standpoint of simple morality and human justice, have a hundred, a thousand times over earned their sentence to hard labor or to the gallows." It is a fiery and, in more ways than Chomsky may have intended, an entirely appropriate invocation. This is the Bakunin who appears later in the book, in "Notes on Anarchism," as the eloquent sniffer-out of the coming "red bureaucracy," the confessed "fanatic lover of liberty," the prophet of that "intelligent and truly noble part of youth" that will ultimately adopt the cause of the people.

But there is another Bakunin, the one whom Edmund Wilson in *To the Finland Station* judges to be "a little cracked and politically irresponsible"—a bundle of inconsistencies and sexual frustrations intrigued with the idea of himself as the head of a vast underground organization. This Bakunin is a dreamer of ecstatic conflagrations in which the whole of European civilization would be transformed, as he put it, "into an enormous rubbish heap" from which man could start anew in purity and freedom. This Bakunin is the coauthor of *The Catechism of a Revolutionist* that advocated the same ruthless subordination of means to ends that he, along with Chomsky, abhors in kings, ministers and diplomats.

True, he had his softer side: The frogs in Italy reminded him of the frogs in his native Russian countryside, and Beethoven's *Ninth*, which a friend played for him in his last days, seemed to him the only thing in the world that would not perish.

As I made my way through his book I found myself constantly wondering how Chomsky would dispose of this other Bakunin if he were confronted with him. Would he stick by him, through thick and thin, as others have in the past stuck by Stalin or Louis Ferdinand Céline or Timothy Leary or the Weathermen even after they knew the worst, on the theory that exceptions must be made for people so obviously on the side of the angels? Would he perhaps proceed, as he does in "The Function of the University in a Time of Crisis," with complaints about student violence?—"Only one totally lacking in judgment could find himself offended by 'student extremism' and not, to an enormously greater extent, by the events and situations that motivate it." Most likely he would treat the barn-burning chiliastic Bakunin with a sympathetic understanding missing here from his treatment of B. F. Skinner, Richard Herrnstein and Nathan Glazer.

In any event it is Lenin at least as often as Bakunin who comes to mind when I think of Chomsky. Lenin too liked Beethoven, but, as he once said to Gorky as they were listening to the *Appassionata*, it was dangerous to listen to music too often because it made one want to say "stupid nice things and stroke the heads of people" when what you have to do is "hit them on the head without any mercy."

I don't mean that the author of *For Reasons of State* comes across to me as a ruthless revolutionary; indeed, I have no difficulty in accepting Ved Mehta's picture of him as disarmingly honest, unassuming and friendly. Nevertheless, as I read this collection

JOHN P. SISK is professor of English at Gonzaga University in Spokane, Wash.

of essays (having seen much of it before in such places as the *New York Review* and *Ramparts*), I was more than ever struck with the Lenin-like Puritanism not only of Chomsky but of that part of the New Left that is ascetical and political rather than sensate and swinging. He and it stand with the "sad and civil" Malvolio of *Twelfth Night* as Sir Toby Belch asks the famous question: "Dost thou think, because thou art virtuous, there shall be no more cakes and ale?"

Surely there is irony here, given the extent to which the New Left is compelled by visions of a world made radically new, turned upside down or inside out: pure, liberated, vital, creative, loving, honest, equal and authentic. That Chomsky is himself compelled by this vision is apparent from his 1971 Russell Lectures (published as *Problems of Knowledge and Freedom*), in which he agrees with Russell that anarchism is "the ultimate ideal to which society should approximate." Nevertheless, what he and Lenin (to say nothing of Robespierre, the early seventeenth-century Puritan radical Owen Winstanley and the abolitionist John Brown) have in common would, I suspect, make the environment in which such a vision had been realized a very dull place for them. It is the ironic fate of the Puritan to dream of an incompatible paradise. Besides, Sir Toby implied, you cannot build a habitable universe out of virtue triumphant; the attempt to do so, as Sidney Hook pointed out toward the end of the turbulent sixties, is likely to result in one of the worst forms of barbarism.

Some of the best examples of the Puritanic spirit of the New Left can be found in two anthologies, *The Dissenting Academy*, edited by Theodore Roszak, and *The Politics of Literature*, edited by Louis Kampf and Paul Lauter (both billed by Pantheon as antitextbooks). Chomsky has the longest and most footnoted piece in the first of these ("The Responsibility of the Intellectuals") and is much honored in the second, even though he is not present as a contributor. Both books are full of that combination of moral fervor and hyperbolic simplification that characterizes the aroused Puritan, and by the same token they give ample evidence of that possession by political or ideological passion that so disturbs Julien Benda in his *Betrayal of the Intellectuals*. Benda wants his intellectual to "set an example of a purely disinterested activity of the mind" and to state, like the clerk he once was: "My kingdom is not of this world." But for Roszak, Kampf, Lauter and most of their contributors the clerk who will not commit himself and his discipline to the cause of changing the world in some radical manner is simply not a serious and moral person—and is at the same time very likely a cynical one. For Roszak "nothing has so characterized the American academic as a condition of entrenched social

irrelevance" that would be comic if it were not "an act of criminal delinquency." Kampf, wandering about an MLA convention (not the one he later helped to take over), is overwhelmed with the thought of the emptiness and venality of literary academics, doubting that any of them are capable of casting their professional papers in terms of the war in Vietnam. In their introduction to *The Politics of Literature* Kampf and Lauter applaud Bruce Franklin's contribution for "its clear intent to agitate for a set of ideas in the most direct way possible." Franklin himself, a Marxist-Leninist dedicated to "the worldwide proletarian revolution" and late of Stanford University's English department, does indeed agitate—claiming among other things that the success of the Brooks and Warren *Understanding Poetry* in the early 1950's was "part of the triumph of anti-Communist ideology," and that the titles "Doctor" and "Professor" merely mean "that someone is an expert in anti-working class values."

Clearly Franklin (to say nothing of Kampf and Lauter) belongs rhetorically in Bakunin's camp, even though, as a Marxist-Leninist, he would not otherwise be at home there. Franklin is a propagandizing pamphleteer, and so indeed is Chomsky—apart from his purely professional work. This is no less true of *For Reasons of State* than it was for the earlier *American Power and the New Mandarins*. The famous footnotes (237 of them in "The Backroom Boys," a lengthy keelhauling of the Pentagon Papers) do not alter that fact, any more than footnotes altered the fact for the pamphleteering of the Radical Right in the 1950's.

Of course, "pamphleteer" ought not to be used as an automatic put-down term. Kampf and Lauter observe that we are unduly nervous about propaganda and quote Kenneth Burke on the inseparability of language use, rhetoric and propaganda. They have a point. A culture is in a bad way when a significant number of its intellectuals are afraid to be advocates of what they profess to value. Even Benda expects his intellectuals to be advocates of a good situated beyond the world of "sacred egotisms." Nor must one ever forget that Chomsky has advocated some good causes in the face of some very real corruptions. But those who see little reason to expect an early end to corruption may believe that there are other matters to be considered: that means can corrupt ends, that polemic clarification can become distorting simplification, that convenient fictions can become irrefutable facts. Now, as always, the devices of the advocate have a disconcerting habit of turning against him.

In the introduction to the present volume, for instance, I find this sentence: "Those who have marched and protested and resisted can compare what is with what would have been and credit themselves with the difference." Some of us

who have marched and protested (though perhaps not as frequently and not always with Chomsky's single-minded intensity) may believe that the marching and protesting did make a difference, but we wonder at such a statement. How can the "what is" of Chomsky's sentence be so simple in its genesis? Was there in the womb of time only *one* other potential present, a bad one? Shouldn't the marchers have marched and protested in such a way as to leave the future open to additional options?

The advocating true-believer has a survival instinct that keeps him from asking such attention-distracting and energy-dissipating questions. And here, as Chomsky handles his familiar subjects—hypocrisy and hugger-mugger in high places, anarchism, the function of the university in a time of crisis, civil disobedience, behaviorist psychology, the rule of force in the world, but above all the Vietnam war—he is the advocating true-believer who, time after time, frames the issue so narrowly that important questions simply do not come up. I am sure that Chomsky is one of the most honest men in America, yet I find myself applying to his writing very nearly the same rate of discount that I apply to Madison Avenue advertising or White House handouts.

Of course many of Chomsky's readers have had this feeling about him all along, and without ceasing to oppose some or all of the evils he opposes. Few, for instance, are more inclined to read Chomsky with sympathy on the Vietnam issue than Hans J. Morgenthau. Yet in his review of Chomsky's *At War With Asia*, Morgenthau notes the extent to which the "moral absolutism that is the driving force of the book also colors its factual reporting" and to which its simplicity of moral judgment simply reverses the operative polarities of ideological anti-communism. Similarly, Jan G. Deutsch, writing on *American Power and the New Mandarins*, finds Chomsky in the heat of his advocacy arguing for the very policy of total nonintervention that, given his commitments, he ought to be against. It is no wonder that a less sympathetic reviewer of this book, like William C. Havard, is struck with its "Calvinist sense of total degradation" and is led by Chomsky's extreme polemic to suspect "that certain indispensable attributes of democratic procedure would not be very safe in his hands."

The State," says the Bakunin of Chomsky's epigraph, is "the most flagrant, the most cynical, and the most complete negation of humanity." Here is that voice of revolutionary raised consciousness we have become familiar with in recent years. It rings with unshakable conviction and moral fervor, as if its possessor had just come down from a summit meeting with the Almighty: Now hear this and only this! It is an intimidating voice: Who are we to quibble with the message from on high? If we say to the people of the voice, let us take

a stand against this evil in *our context*, they are quite honestly and intransigently scornful; they have monopolized the best context, and only the best is legitimate. Chomsky, for instance, has nothing but Puritan scorn for someone like Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., who is against the Vietnam war for the wrong reason. On the subject of student activism, even of the more violent sort, Chomsky can leave the reader with the frustrating sense of being forced to choose between Chomsky and, say, Spiro Agnew—choices that, if one is in a peaceful frame of mind, may seem equally warlike. Of course this is the disjunctive way of passionate pamphleteers and passionless admen: When you are out of Schlitz you are out of beer.

But while the disjunctive true-believer is intimidating the half-persuaded, the lukewarm and the mildly skeptical, he may be isolating himself in a melodramatic formulation that is both cause and effect of the way things appear to him. For Bakunin the utterly malevolent State and the visionary anarchist paradise determine each other, and according to the classic formulation of melodrama the State must go; any other ending is esthetically unsatisfactory—and, for a Bakunin, that ending, if it is to be psychologically acceptable, had better be a blood-bath or a conflagration.

Chomsky obviously prefers a more civilized ending; but given his defining vision of a libertarian socialism, he is likely to be unimpressed by any efforts on the part of the State to correct or improve itself (see, for instance, his essay on the Watergate investigations in the September 20, 1973, *New York Review*). The State trying to improve itself is the State exasperatingly deluded into believing that it can reverse the polarity of the melodrama. This attitude understandably comes across to many readers as the version of New Left anti-Americanism that Denis Wrong explored at great length in his well-known *Commentary* essay (November, 1970) on the *New York Review*. What Wrong and others have identified as anti-Americanism is in a very real sense a *literary necessity*: In melodrama you are supposed to hate the villain; it is part of your way of loving the hero. And the hero of this story—the best America imaginable—simply makes the America of any present moment hateful and intolerable.

One might say that it is the revolutionary raised consciousness that brings this "best" and lovable America into view. Unfortunately, as should be apparent after a decade's experience with raised consciousnesses, the term can be misleadingly honorific. It suggests the corrected, new, larger and richer perspective: the effect of education, conversion or a visitation of grace. In actual fact many, perhaps most, raised consciousnesses are only consciousnesses in which the focus of attention has been shifted and concentrated on an object more or less worthy, so that the personality is exhilaratingly organized for action, but from a perspective that may be even more

limiting than the previous one—you can only passionately believe that all apparently broader perspectives are inauthentic or wrong.

This is the way it is with passionate lovers, true believers, fanatics and all literally or metaphorically intoxicated people. Benda's complaint about his betraying intellectuals is that their political fanaticism is the expression not of a raised but of a dangerously refocused and, in effect, lowered consciousness. The "best" America that the raised consciousness of the radical and Puritanic New Left brings into view is, in any event, an important factor in the recurrent despair of the Left, tossed as it is between its highs and its hangovers and repeatedly brought back to the predicament of Bakunin in his old age, when he was left to make what future he could out of Beethoven and his memories of the Russian frogs.

One might expect that the pamphleteering of the Puritanic true-believer will be both cause and effect of an intensely and narrowly focused consciousness by means of which certain things are seen with supreme clarity at the expense of not seeing other things at all. One of the best places to see this "double effect" in *For Reasons of State* is in the long attack on B. F. Skinner ("Psychology and Ideology"). Insofar as the whole truth about Skinner, from Chomsky's sharply focused point of assault, is what is wrong with him, Chomsky is simply overwhelming (let no one underestimate the amount of sheer intellectual energy he has at his command for moments like this). I was in a position to read this essay with a good deal of sympathy, having already concluded that Skinner was mainly in the wrong. But how can anyone other than a complete simpleton be as wrong as Chomsky believes Skinner to be? Why does Chomsky not see the significant relation between Skinner's highly questionable behaviorist contentions and the social, political and moral consequences of the modern dream of autonomous man that Skinner, in the interest of his own position, is forced to attack? Is it not possible to believe, with Daniel Ellsberg, that "a man can make a difference," and at the same time remember how dangerously prone people are to underestimate their difference-making capacities? But Chomsky, like a true pamphleteer, sees the issue too sharply for such a concession; Skinner brings the issue of human freedom and dignity to a point of crisis, so it must be Schlitz or no beer. Chomsky thus ends up fueling the faithful (always important, of course; there is no guarantee that they will remain faithful forever) but making many others suspect from the fury of his attack that important considerations have not surfaced in the argument at all.

In a valuable essay, "The Tongues of Men," which appeared in *The New Yorker* (November 15, 1969), George Steiner notes Chomsky's "passionate appetite

for unity, for complete logic and explanation" and the strong streak of monism in "his desire to get to the root of things, be they political or linguistic." This points, I think, to that paradox of the intellectual that the sixties made so dramatically apparent: his strong need to get back in some acceptable form the unifying true belief that his own analytical and skeptical spirit tends to deny him. It was this potentially explosive condition that the chemist-philosopher Michael Polanyi addressed himself to in an interview in *Psychology Today* (May, 1968), when he pointed out the connection in our times between the excess of moral fervor and the hybrid combination of extreme skepticism and moral perfectionism. This is close to Benda's much earlier perception that the analytic spirit of the intellectual would create (was indeed then creating) a vacuum into which would rush unifying salvational visions.

Chomsky's considerable influence with the intellectuals of the Left has a great deal to do with the way he has filled that vacuum for them. He has helped many of them keep or renew faith in that dream of the Left in which, as Renée Weingarten puts it, "the true and perfect world revolution is still somehow possible." But by the same token he has simplified their lives. The simplified intellectual is no doubt a more integrated and happier man; but as recent history has indicated, the more simplified he is the harder it will be for him to resist the conspiracy formulations of contemporary events that are preliminary to the purity and freedom of violent action.

In *American Power and the New Mandarins* Chomsky speaks of the importance of avoiding "the arrogance and divisiveness that have been the cure of the Left." What if, in the simplifying unification of true belief, the divisiveness goes but not the arrogance, leaving us with something like Bruce Franklin's rejection of "bourgeois" complexity, irony and ambiguity in favor of the proletarian simplicity? Indeed, the yearning for a simplicity beyond irony (which Chomsky, ironically, shares with Skinner) is a thematic one in these essays. To me, however, this yearning suggests less an anarchist utopia than a Procrustean bed, and I turn from it with relief to the end of Steiner's essay. "Man," he says, "looks a queerer, more diverse beast than Chomsky would have him."

No doubt the diversity has made its contribution to the agony of the Left. But what would the unified unagonized Left move toward if not a tyrannical establishment of virtue and the cancellation of itself as a critical adversary force? Steiner's queer diverse beast may never manage to be pure and free to a degree that would satisfy Chomsky, let alone Bakunin, but in his impurity and bondage he may still serve us well by continuing to consternate the efforts of those who overzealously aspire to save us from ourselves.