

The Mainstream and the Margins: Noam Chomsky vs. Michael Parenti

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By Lorenzo

[Popaganda](#): Pop culture is soft-power

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Our thanks to our comrade Hiroyuki Hamada for finding this gem.



Noam Chomsky

Noam Chomsky is, as anyone reading this knows, a linguist, MIT professor, and the English-speaking world's foremost radical dissident intellectual. Chomsky's work in this latter capacity is so well-documented that it's not necessary to recapitulate too much—however, a few choice high notes include decades of criticism of US foreign policy, [some decent commentary](#) on then-President-elect Barack Obama at a time nearly all of the Western commentariat had turned into a deranged Borg-like collective, and producing the second comprehensive study of corporate constraints on the media along with Edward Herman. As co-author of *Manufacturing Consent*, Chomsky provided a model illuminating the “political economy of the mass media,” and from this research came a great deal of very useful and incisive media criticism on issues like how [concision and sound-bites](#) help the status quo and why a journalist can be both [genuine and compromised](#). Herman and Chomsky's propaganda model purports to show how five corporate filters enable the mass media's owners to ensure that their interests are expressed. In this way, according to the two, democracies manufacture consent through seamlessly delivered propaganda, the way totalitarian societies do so by coercion and force.

According to Chomsky's many high-profile boosters, his own experiences belie the myth of a “free” American press. “You'd hardly need a clearer example of his model of how dissenting views are filtered out of the western media than his own case,” [writes](#) *Guardian* columnist Seumas Milne, “Not surprisingly, he has been repaid with either denunciation or, far more typically, silence.” According to [physicist Mano Singham](#), on the subject of “the attempted silencing of Noam Chomsky,” “growing up in Sri Lanka, I would find his articles and essays in the mainstream media quite regularly. But when I first came to the US in 1975, I found him completely absent from the major print and TV media and discovered that his writings were confined to niche publications.” For all his alleged silencing, by Singham's own account, Chomsky was a relatively constant presence in Sri Lankan media. If an American intellectual enjoys a prominent platform in a country 10,000 miles from the US, where only 10% of the population speaks fluent English, it makes one wonder what the margins or obscurity actually look like. Similarly, while he may not be a daily fixture on cable news, Chomsky is regularly asked to

opine at length on the issues of the day for a slew of venues ranging from centrist to lefty, from *The Guardian* and countless university symposia to *Democracy Now!* and *Jacobin* magazine. Right now, Netflix is recommending me two feature-length documentaries on the great dissident, both released in the past few years (*Is the Man Who is Tall Happy?* and the grimly named *Requiem for the American Dream*), with another seven currently in production according to [IMDb](#). By way of adducing Chomsky's invisibility, Milne says that the professor "is the closest thing in the English-speaking world to an intellectual superstar...he is entertained by presidents, addresses the UN general assembly and commands a mass international audience...His books sell in their hundreds of thousands, [and] he is mobbed by students as a celebrity." I can't speak for my fellow WordPress radicals, but as someone who has made precisely zero dollars after writing hundreds of thousands of words of criticism, being even a micron as ignored as Chomsky sounds both lucrative and validating.

As mentioned earlier, Herman and Chomsky's *Manufacturing Consent* was the *second* comprehensive look at how the media's owners determine what is broadcast. As early as 1845, Karl Marx [explained that](#) "the ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas, i.e. the class which is the ruling material force of society, is at the same time its ruling intellectual force. **The class which has the means of material production at its disposal, has control at the same time over the means of mental production,** so that thereby, generally speaking, the ideas of those who lack the means of mental production are subject to it." Though there are many books probing the nature of broadcast media, Michael Parenti's *Inventing Reality* (1986) was the first to provide an in-depth analysis of the corporate nature of the media using Marx's dictum as a thesis. Despite Herman and Chomsky's book coming two years later, the two don't mention Parenti at all, instead thanking Australian psychologist Alex Carey for inspiring their work (John Pilger, perhaps revealingly, [credits](#) Carey as a "second Orwell"). Even a cursory glance at [Inventing Reality's contents](#) reveals extensive similarities between Parenti's analysis and that of Herman and Chomsky—hearing [Parenti discuss his book at length](#) further cements the commonalities. In fact, beyond these two works, Chomsky and Parenti share a great deal alike. Like his superstar counterpart, Parenti has produced mountains of scholarship and given dozens of [easily accessible speeches and presentations](#). Parenti has been a strident critic of

capitalism and imperialism for decades, writing over [two dozen books](#) on nearly every conceivable issue that relates to those subjects. In a neat biographical synchronicity, both are even octogenarian New Yorkers. However, unlike Chomsky, Parenti can't claim everyone from [Bono to Radiohead](#) as prominent fans. Chomsky's influence is particularly felt now during the interminable American election cycle; as Kevin Dooley points out in an excellent [post on Chomsky](#), he "is always at his most visible during election season," when he can be found churning out almost-weekly interviews warning about the dangers of not voting Democrat. Video of Noam Chomsky's [latest event](#) was uploaded less than a week ago, from a discussion with former Greek finance minister Yanis Varoufakis held at the New York Public Library; in contrast, Parenti's [last uploaded speech](#) was from a decidedly more low-key affair held at a Canadian university in 2014.

All this is to say that, despite their similar territory and Chomsky's reputation, Noam Chomsky looks very much like a mainstream figure, and the label of marginalized outsider would be applied more appropriately to Parenti. A 2005 issue of the liberal *American Prospect* magazine, for instance, defined [Chomsky and Dick Cheney](#) as the two extremes in American political life. To one who is skeptical of Chomsky's outsider reputation, he looks less like a silenced dissident and more like the leftmost margin of permissible criticism—the point at which an idea decisively departs the realm of mainstream acceptability and automatically becomes tinfoil-hat territory. If their scholarship on media filters and corporate ownership is to mean *anything*, it means that there is a reason for this, and it has to do with their respective positions and service (or lack thereof) to those in power. This piece is not meant to be a comprehensive analysis of Chomsky's career, or the history that brought him to his sinecure as the West's pre-eminent radical thinker. There are much more focused pieces touching on these issues, which will be linked throughout and shared again at the end. This is meant as a look at some of the areas where Noam Chomsky and Michael Parenti differ most visibly in their analysis and biases. Given their similarities, comparing the two provides a rare opportunity at substitution analysis: to quote Chomsky himself, "[you can't do experiments](#) in history, but here history was kind enough to set one up for us." In short, the differences in Chomsky versus Parenti's positions makes for a useful case study in what ideas genuinely make one a candidate for marginalization, versus what ideas are

actually quite acceptable despite their transgressive veneers.

This post will be quite long, as it is made of six different parts. A table of contents is below.

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Inept Empire

There's a very popular theory of politics that sees the destruction and misery wrought by regimes like the Wars on Terror and Drugs, compares the professed motives with the outcomes, and concludes that those in power are some combination of utterly incompetent, shortsighted, and ignorant of how to build a decent world. The image offered by journalist Jeremy Scahill, in response to yet another US military intervention in the Middle East/North Africa region (MENA) in 2014, was the classic gag of *Simpsons* villain Sideshow Bob repeatedly stepping on dozens of garden rakes. Kevin Dooley termed this idea the "[Inept Empire](#)" theory, and "the implication is, of course, that the ruling elite is a bunch of fucking morons." According to proponents of "inept empire," real-world proof is everywhere. The fact that the War on Drugs has had no impact on drug use, but instead created a permanent, almost-entirely black underclass comprised of many millions is such proof. The fact that the War on Terror has destroyed multiple societies and only created more terror is further evidence. The old sawhorse-turned-bumper sticker that schools have to hold bake sales to raise money but the air force has unlimited funds to buy bombers is essentially an iteration of

this idea.

This theory of power finds the greatest purchase among prominent liberals *and the permissible left*. Chomsky is currently an advocate of this theory, [arguing in 2015](#) that “destabilization and what I call the ‘creation of black holes’ is the principal aim of the Empire of Chaos in the Middle East and elsewhere, but it is also clear that the US is sailing in a turbulent sea with no sense of direction and is, in fact, quite clueless in terms of what needs to be done once the task of destruction has been completed.” In other words, “chaos and destabilization are real, but I don’t think that’s the aim. Rather, it is a consequence of hitting fragile systems that one does not understand with the sledgehammer that is the main tool, as in Iraq, Libya, Afghanistan and elsewhere.”

Vijay Prashad, a Marxist historian who enjoys a large platform courtesy of institutions like AlterNet, Verso Books, and Trinity College among others, argued over the course of a week that “[Obama said something](#) about success of US strategy in Yemen and Somalia? Somalia continues in distress; Houthi rebels just seized state TV. [US bombing is](#) an easy way to ‘do something.’ Won’t improve situation on the ground. Increases chaos, moves more fighters to extremism. [I fear this bombing](#) run is going to escalate frenzy on the ground—price for this bombing is going to be paid with terrible violence. [Obama didn’t mention](#) Libya in his speech (once briefly at end on Israel-Palestine). US policy in Syria is set to produce another Libya.” Prashad typically issues what sound like scathing criticisms of the existing system, as in a 2013 speech with Noam Chomsky when Prashad said “[the political establishment is full of shit](#).” Still, for Chomsky, Prashad, Scahill, [Wire creator David Simon](#), [John “the War Nerd” Dolan](#), and countless other high-profile commentators, as bad as the ruling elites are, the idea that their functionaries would *intentionally* make the world as it is seems a bridge too far.

Chomsky has not always taken this position. In 2002, speaking on comparisons between the upcoming invasion of Iraq and the war on Vietnam, [Chomsky argued that](#) “The United States went to war in Vietnam for a very good reason. They were afraid Vietnam would be a successful model of independent development and that would have a virus effect—*infect* others who might try to follow the same course. There was a very simple war aim—destroy Vietnam. And they did

it. The United States basically achieved its war aims in Vietnam by [1967]. It's called a loss, a defeat, because they didn't achieve the maximal aims, the maximal aims being turning it into something like the Philippines. [But] they did achieve the major aims." What Chomsky is pointing out is that there are often hidden rationales for doing things like destroying an entire country and unleashing almost-genocidal violence against its people. Though the outcome would seem like a human rights-atrocity to any decent person, the ruling class that drives policy sees a handsome return-on-investment. It's no stretch of imagination that a capitalist state will act to maximize profits of its corporations. It's a fundamental rule of economics that one is either making money or not, and in any capitalist society, the profit motive is paramount. That's why corporations are legally required to maximize profits, and while most corporations willingly maximize shareholder value, a company can be taken to court for not doing so. One sees corporations make mistakes, even New Coke-sized ones, but the biggest and most successful ones don't repeatedly act contrary to their own interests—and if something enriches their shareholders, that means it's working. Even single-celled organisms are capable of avoiding negative stimuli, and will do so in order to prolong their survival. A state and its executive bureaucracy is a gargantuan and often-unwieldy entity, but there's no reason to assume that this is the only body that isn't governed by simple laws of cause and effect.

Michael Parenti's comments on IMF structural adjustment programs "not working" apply just as easily on the subject of imperial ineptitude: "[In their perpetual confusion](#), some liberal critics conclude that foreign aid and IMF and World Bank structural adjustments 'do not work'; the end result is less self-sufficiency and more poverty for the recipient nations, they point out. Why then do the rich member states continue to fund the IMF and World Bank? Are their leaders just less intelligent than the critics who keep pointing out to them that their policies are having the opposite effect? No, it is the critics who are stupid not the western leaders and investors who own so much of the world and enjoy such immense wealth and success. They pursue their aid and foreign loan programs because such programs do work. The question is, work for whom? Cui bono?"

When looking at the Wars on Drugs or Terror, it's worth asking the same question. Indeed, when one drops the comforting notion that the elites are

gravely concerned about the lives of Iraqis, Hondurans, or black Americans, there's ample evidence that things are working, and little evidence of ineptitude. It's true that decades into the Drug War, Americans have access to more and higher-potency drugs than ever. To proponents of the Inept Empire theory, this is often singled out as a tremendous waste of police resources and taxpayer dollars—a multi-generational, trillion-dollar testament to the Empire's ineptitude. However, this system was also developed as the consensus around Jim Crow collapsed and evolved into a “colorblind” war on crime. Prior to the official inauguration of the War on Drugs, the FBI claimed in [one of its leaked COINTELPRO documents](#) that “for maximum effectiveness of the Counterintelligence Program, and to prevent wasted effort, long-range goals are being set” for “spying & disruption” of black radical groups. That this preceded the ultimate incarceration of one-in-nine African American men is an argument that when it comes to protecting its own interests and that of its owners, the state generally demonstrates great foresight and efficiency.

For more than two decades, influential people have been advocating the carving-up of the greater Middle East into pliant rump states. In 1992, only a year after arrival of unchallenged American global hegemony, influential trans-Atlantic intellectual Bernard Lewis published an article in *Foreign Affairs* magazine titled “[Rethinking the Middle East](#).” In it, Lewis called for the “Lebanonization” of states throughout MENA, in a reference to Israel's policies in the Lebanon War of the 1980s. According to Lewis, “most of the states of the Middle East—Egypt is an obvious exception—are of recent and artificial construction and are vulnerable to such a process. If the central power is sufficiently weakened, there is no real civil society to hold the polity together, no real sense of common identity...The state then disintegrates—as happened in Lebanon—into a chaos of squabbling, feuding, fighting sects, tribes, regions, and parties.” Lewis specified that Lebanonization “could even be precipitated by [Islamic] fundamentalism.” By 1996, prominent neoconservatives had codified Lewis's ideas into policy.

By the mid-'90s, “Lebanonization” became known more commonly as “Balkanization,” a reference to the fate of the Socialist Federative Republic of Yugoslavia. According to Michael Parenti, “[the US goal](#) has been to transform the Yugoslav nation into a Third-World region, a cluster of weak right-wing principalities with the following characteristics: incapable of

charting an independent course of self-development; a shattered economy and natural resources completely accessible to multinational corporate exploitation; an impoverished, but literate and skilled population forced to work at subsistence wages, constituting a cheap labor pool that will help depress wages elsewhere; dismantled petroleum, engineering, mining, fertilizer, and automobile industries, and various light industries, that offer no further competition with existing Western producers. US policymakers also want to abolish Yugoslavia's public sector services and social programs—for the same reason they want to abolish our public sector services and social programs. The ultimate goal is the privatization and Third Worldization of Yugoslavia, as it is the Third Worldization of the United States and every other nation." Similar effects have been felt throughout the War on Terror. Former NATO Supreme Commander Wesley Clark [tells a story](#) of being present in the Pentagon days after the 11 September attacks, and being privy to plans to attack 7 nations in 5 years (Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, and Iran). Though all those countries have not been subjected to actual large-scale invasions, all have had varying degrees of destruction and deprivation imposed on them. Most have been split into smaller and weaker states, been rendered unable to resist Western designs, and seen their material wealth stolen.

So there is ample evidence that things are turning out quite well for the class of super-wealthy capitalists who disproportionately influence the course of Western governance. The fact that plans for Middle Eastern "chaos" have been on the books for decades, and these policies have made the world's richest much richer, compel a serious thinker to treat the notion that the Empire's functionaries are largely bumbling and myopic as facile. On this subject, Michael Parenti has been a lucid and incisive critic for years. Parenti has long advocated that progressives and leftists drop the idea that Republicans like Ronald Reagan and George W. Bush are stupid. In a 2004 interview, [Parenti claimed](#) "I'm not one of those critics that believes U.S. foreign policy is confused, or stupid, or misinformed, or well-intentioned but it goes awry. I think it's a brilliant policy filled with many brilliant, terrible, horrible victories." In order to further the interests of the super-rich, destruction is imposed when it "systematically undermines any movement, any country, any leadership, any popular group that tries an alternative way of self-defining, self-developing, using the resources, the

markets, the labor of their society for their own needs, rather than for a multi-corporate global system, a neo-liberal system, which seems to be the goal of this reactionary clique in office today.” For this reason, according to Parenti in 2011, [“the Iraq war has not been a mistake.”](#) The US invasion was not quick, easy, or dearly welcomed by Iraqis, but it “destroyed a country that had the audacity to retain control of its own oil supply, kept its entire economy under state control, did not invite the IMF or the giant transnational corporations in [and] charted an independent course. So he and his country have been correctly destroyed in keeping with the interests of the US-led global empire.” The same is true in Afghanistan. When an interviewer asked Parenti how Afghanistan could be seen as a success rather than a quagmire, Parenti responded that [“They are going to lose Afghanistan,](#) but they do succeed, they succeeded in stopping the betterment of the masses of people.” Parenti explains that [“When the productive social capital](#) of any part of the world is obliterated, the potential value of private capital elsewhere is enhanced – especially when the crisis faced today by western capitalism is one of overcapacity.” Thus, “To destroy publicly-run Yugoslav factories that produced auto parts, appliances, or fertilizer—or a publicly financed Sudanese plant that produced pharmaceuticals at prices substantially below their western competitors—is to enhance the investment value of western producers.” In concrete terms, this happened in Yugoslavia when NATO bombed the state-owned DIN tobacco company and the local Zastava motor works for the sake of Phillip Morris and Ford; Greg Elich recounts how DIN was rebuilt and [“made fit for privatization](#) by a new Western-friendly government, as 1,400 employees were thrown out of work. In October 2003, DIN was purchased by Philip Morris, which six years later eliminated a third of the remaining workforce.”

“The national policies of an imperialist country reflect the interests of that country’s dominant class,” argues **Parenti** in [“Costs of Empire and Role of IMF”](#):

Class, rather than nation-state, is often the crucial unit of analysis for studying imperialism. And if you understand that then you will avoid the mistake of a lot of liberal writers who say ‘empire doesn’t make sense, it costs too much! It’s irrational.’ It’s been pointed out that from 1950 to 1970, the US government gave the Philippines \$3 billion in aid when the US

has only a billion dollars of investments in the Philippines. 'See, it's irrational, it costs more than what we're getting back!' That's the liberal view. Now, if you think with Marx, if you think in terms of class, you understand that that is not irrational at all, because the people who are paying the 3 billion are not the same as the people who are making the 1 billion investment. The people who are paying the 3 billion are us. And the people who are making the 1 billion are Exxon and ITT and IBM and General Dynamics and General Motors and General Electric and all the other Generals! And they'll spend 3 dollars of your money to protect 1 dollar of their money. They'll spend 4 dollars of your money, 5 dollars, 6 dollars—in fact, when it comes to protecting their money, your money is no object!

Stephen Gowans observes that ["the costs of military intervention](#) are what economists call externalities—costs created by a firm, an industry or a class, but borne by others." If these costs are internalized then it makes no sense economically since its costs exceed its returns. But if the costs are externalized—left to society as a whole to absorb—a policy becomes an attractive way for oil companies to turn a profit.

Here's the parallel with military intervention. The giant engineering firm Bechtel would absorb virtually none of the costs of a successful war on Iran, but if one happens, Bechtel is likely to reap enormous profits in contracts to rebuild the infrastructure that the US Air Force would raze to the ground. For Bechtel, then, US military intervention in Iran would be highly profitable, even though it might not make sense economically when viewed from the perspective of the United States as a whole. Lockheed-Martin, Boeing, Northrop Grumman, General Dynamics and Raytheon—the top five defense contractors—don't foot the Pentagon's massive \$700B per annum bill, but large portions of that budget are transferred to them in the form of contracts for military hardware. While bloated military expenditures make no sense from the point of view of the country as a collectivity, major defense contractors reap enormous profits from them.

The problem, then, of arguing that military intervention in Iran would make no sense because the costs would exceed the economic gains that would accrue to the United States as a whole, is failure to recognize that the country is class-divided, and that the gains of war are internalized within

the dominant class while the costs are externalized to the bottom 99 percent. Hence, war doesn't make sense for the bulk of us, but the problem is that decisions about military expenditures, foreign policy and war are in the hands of the top one percent and their loyal servants, who privatize the benefits and socialize the costs. When liberals say US foreign policy makes no sense, they're being misguided by a set of erroneous assumptions: that the United States has only one class, the middle-class, that it is not class-divided, that everyone within it has the same middle-class interests, and that the state rules in the interests of all.

Unlike Vijay Prashad's works, Stephen Gowans' two books are self-published and offered free on his blog. When looking at what ideas render a thinker a candidate for marginalization, it's clear that belief in the Empire's ineptitude is one of the prerequisites for some sort of mainstream acceptance. As Parenti and Gowans point out, this is because the Inept Empire theory is a liberal one, premised on a nation-based reading of society rather than a socialist, class-based one. As such, the liberal theory creates an artificial sense of identification between the different classes of a nation, whitewashing the class antagonisms that would motivate upheavals for a more equitable system. Even a relatively clear-eyed critic of Empire must believe good faith-motivation on the part of our rulers—at worst, they must be incompetent, rather than evil.

“Conspiracy theorism”

When journalist Michael Hastings died in a June 2013 car crash, many people saw possible foul play behind his death. According to news reports, Hastings, most famous for a *Rolling Stone* story that led to the resignation of General Stanley McChrystal, had been harried and behaving erratically before his death. The day before the crash, Wikileaks tweeted that Hastings had sought their attorney's help, claiming to be under investigation from the FBI. The strange circumstances around his death included the fact that his new-model car was capable of being externally hacked. Speculation was further fueled when former federal counterterrorism czar Richard Clarke said that Hastings' accident was [“consistent with a car cyber attack.”](#) In response, Noam Chomsky

claimed that “conspiracy theories” around Hastings’ death were counterproductive, and it was a better use of one’s mental energies to focus on the plight of imprisoned activists like Barrett Brown.

Here, Chomsky is recommending that people not speculate on a tentative matter when they could be focusing on something that’s been decisively proven, and this sort of recommendation is standard operating procedure for the professor. To be sure, it’s possible for investigations rooting out “conspiracies” to go wildly wrong. This is what happened in the case of Marcel Lehel, the Romanian better known as the hacker “Guccifer.” [Guccifer gained illicit access](#) to the private online accounts of Hillary Clinton, Colin Powell, and George W. Bush, amongst many others. As he was reading then-Secretary of State Clinton’s personal emails, many exchanged with the CIA on the subject of Libya, Guccifer was looking for evidence of Illuminati connections. In Guccifer’s case, the bad conspiracism was blinding him to the valid conspiracism—he was watching the regime change-sausage get made, and he was distracted in his search for a non-existent cabal. This is an object lesson in the dangers of attributing blame to one set of actors in contravention of existing evidence. The most insidious such theory in history is likely anti-Semitism: an idea that attributes the predatory behavior of a capitalist ruling class to a group that has been victimized throughout history, namely Jews. The perversion of class-based analysis earned anti-Semitism the nickname “the socialism of fools,” and similar tropes pop up in many instances. Any time that blame is taken off the ruling class and diverted onto a set of bad apples is an example of bad theorizing—like the minimizing focus on Saudi Arabia and the Bush family in Michael Moore’s *Fahrenheit 9/11*, or the crypto-anti-Semitism of popular misinformation agit-prop *Zeitgeist*.

The “conspiracy theorism” accusation is an effective one because it renders an idea, and those who believe it, as patently insane and unworthy of attention. The label makes those engaging in the task of criticism (and the constituent marshalling of evidence) axiomatically worthy of expulsion from the bounds of normalcy. Chomsky offers what sounds like a tentative defense of informed speculation against accusations of conspiracy theorism. In the 1992 documentary *Manufacturing Consent*, Chomsky says “[If I give an analysis of](#), say the economic system, and I point out that GM tries to maximize profit

and market share – that’s not a conspiracy theory; that’s an institutional analysis. It has nothing to do with conspiracies. That’s precisely the sense in which we’ve been talking about the media. The phrase ‘conspiracy theory’ is one of those that’s constantly brought up, and I think its effect simply is to discourage institutional analysis.” I got called a conspiracy theorist in real life last year, around the time of the Sony leaks. I’d made the claim that *The Interview* getting pulled from theaters was awesome, since Hollywood is an American propaganda (or “soft power,” in the politically correct parlance) factory, and a film depicting the murder of a head of state of a perennial regime change target was extremely repulsive. I was a “conspiracy theorist” for believing that cultural products pumped out by multi-billion dollar corporations carry cognizable messages, and these messages are for the benefit of their creators. The idea that this was a “conspiracy theory” speaks to Chomsky’s point about how systems work—it is not absurd to believe such a thing, but the natural outcome of how these systems are set up and whom they exist to serve.

However, Chomsky’s premise is at least partially incorrect. Chomsky says that his GM example “has nothing to do with conspiracies,” but a corporate board colluding to subvert the public interest for their own sake is literally a conspiracy, if the word means anything at all. Moreover, his “defense” of conspiracy analysis is actually very limited. Chomsky focuses on the functioning of systems while excluding individual actors. Under the Chomsky definition, suspicions of foul play perpetrated by individual agents are a distraction; this is why the professor cautioned his listeners to ignore counter-theories about the death of Michael Hastings. Similarly, while Chomsky sees the birth of ISIS as an outcome of US involvement in the Middle East, he [derides the idea](#) that the US played a more direct role as an absurd conspiracy theory, “one of the thousands of them that goes around the Middle East.” (Elsewhere, Chomsky sees the fact that Iraqis believe the 2003 invasion to be about oil as proof of how obvious it is; here, it’s proof of Arab irrationality) Chomsky’s dismissal of this particular theory is strange, given the extensive history of US aid to al Qaeda—from the “Afghan Arabs” of the anti-Soviet jihad to the covert alliance with the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group during the NATO attack on Libya. There is also the fact that ISIS was born in US military prison camps in Iraq at the same time the US government decided to destroy Syria through more covert military action. So while

Chomsky's defense of conspiracy analysis in certain circumstances is reasonable, he is just as quick as the *New York Times* to relegate certain plausible theories to the realm of the absurd ("conspiracy theories still circulat[e] that the CIA is secretly behind the same extremists that it is now attacking" [-NYT, 20 Sep 2014](#))

Here, the example of *The Interview* is useful once more. Behind the scenes, *The Interview* looked less like a silly stoner movie and more like a PsyOp against the government of North Korea. The film was initially supposed to take place in a fake dictatorship, but that was changed to North Korea after [discussions between Sony executives](#) and members of the national security state. Leaked Sony emails revealed that an analyst named Bruce Bennett of the RAND Corporation, author of *Preparing for the Possibility of a North Korean Collapse*, [had been in consultation](#) with the studio pushing for an ever-more gruesome ending. Bennett advised that "while toning down the ending may reduce the North Korean response, I believe that a story that talks about the removal of the Kim family regime and the creation of a new government by the North Korean people will start some real thinking in South Korea and, I believe, in the North once the DVD leaks into the North." According to the leaked emails, Sony Pictures Entertainment CEO Michael Lynton was simultaneously in consultation with additional high-level State Department personnel, and both Lynton and the unnamed officials signed off on Bennett's assessment. In other words, the film was made more bellicose, on the suggestion of government agents, in hopes that it would make Koreans more receptive to regime change. The month of the film's initially abortive release, star Seth Rogen claimed that he "[made relationships with certain people...who I'm convinced are in the CIA.](#)" Researcher Tom Secker points out that of all the studios, Sony has perhaps the [deepest CIA](#) and Defense Department connections, with studio head Lynton having the "biography of a textbook intelligence asset." What this attests to is the fact that conspiracies carried out by individual actors, supplementing the larger systems, happen all the time. Institutional analysis is necessary, but institutions are staffed by people who carry out all manner of clandestine chicanery, including very real and extensively substantiated conspiracies like assassinations, non-consensual human experimentation, and [false-flag terror attacks](#).

It's worth noting that everyone who believes anything about power believes in all manner of conspiracy theories. The biggest and most reputable Western newspapers will print any [patently absurd conspiracy theory](#) when the target is one of Washington's designated enemies. Any serious liberal with an opinion on Syria will repeat an [easily disprovable conspiracy theory](#) that Bashar al-Assad created ISIS. In addition to the conspiracy theories that target foreign demons, Walter Glass explains that "[there are three essential characteristics](#) that render a conspiracy theory acceptable to the kind of people who read *The New York Times*: 1. the theory ignores inconvenient and confusing context; 2. the theory is partisan; 3. the theory is harmless [to the ruling class]." So in addition to Vladimir Putin and Assad, acceptable perpetrators of conspiracies include the Koch brothers, Blackwater/Xe/Academi, the Heritage Foundation, the Project for a New American Century, and other frequent members of the MSNBC rogues' gallery. Among high-status clerks, mainstream tastemakers, and other very serious people, there is simply a list of people and groups who axiomatically do not engage in conspiracies, due to their decency and acting in good faith. These entities include popular Democratic politicians; "good" billionaires like George Soros, Bill Gates, and Pierre Omidyar; "liberal" institutions like the CIA and State Department; and "humanitarian" organizations like Teach For America, Doctors Without Borders, and Human Rights Watch.

This is essentially an injunction against inductive reasoning applied to a large swathe of the ruling class and their servants, and it has a stranglehold over the permissible left. The Future Journalism Project, for example calls the well-documented NSA subversion of encryption "[tinfoil hat](#)" territory, in a story on *Reuters* reporting this news. For a very serious liberal outfit like the FJP, even an extremely well-substantiated story, reported on by a mainstream journalism outfit, is as outré as a faked moon landing when the US regime's secret police are the culprit. Black Lives Matter-celebrity turned Baltimore mayoral candidate Deray McKesson has made a career as a "[ruthless administrator](#)" for school privatization-outfit Teach For America. On the web site for his candidacy, McKesson [claims](#) that his well-documented TFA connections are equivalent to speculation about Illuminati membership, and boils down objections to his neoliberal politics as "[akin to me being part of a CIA operation](#)." The underlying idea here is that while systems operate, individuals play little-to-no role. Of course,

individuals do operate, so if this is absurd then it's surely no stretch to smear all criticism as mere craziness. Tarzie points out that "[we hear variations](#) on this all the time on the Left, among people desperate to align themselves with the serious people for *good* radical reasons, no matter how blatantly non-analytical it requires them to be. A variation on the above is that conspiracy theories 'ignore/obfuscate systemic analysis,' which if you haven't noticed is a concept that's all the rage among people who like to tell people to shut up in fancy schmancy ways, not just about conspiracies. Surely the most dramatic manifestation of this bullshit—and surely the inspiration for a lot of it—is Noam Chomsky's famous insistence that it really doesn't matter who brought down the World Trade Center [or killed John F. Kennedy]. '[Who cares?](#)' the world's most important intellectual said around the time."

In contrast to Chomsky's stunning incuriosity, Michael Parenti has written the best material in defense of substantive conspiracy analysis—really, inductive reasoning—as has been produced in the English language. Deploying his trademark wit in a speech titled "[Understanding Deep Politics](#)," Parenti explains:

Whenever you ascribe conscious intent and pursuit of self interest at the top, you will hear someone say: 'What are you, a conspiracy theorist?' You can say farmers consciously organize to pursue their interests and everybody will say 'Uh huh, farmers are organized.' You can say machinists or auto workers are organizing and everybody will say 'Uh huh, they're consciously organizing and pursuing their own interests,' or school teachers, and other people. But if you say the people who own most of America and most of the world – if you say they consciously organize and pursue things to get what they want, then you hear people say 'Oh, you have a Conspiracy theory? You think they really do that?'

The alternative to a conspiracy theory is an Innocence theory. That is, they do all of this stuff but they're not pursuing self interest. They just do it, you know. The other alternative is a Somnambulist theory. Somnambulism is the tendency to walk in your sleep. David Rockefeller gets up in the morning and says, 'What am I going to do, to advance and protect my interests? No, no, that would be conspiratorial.' Another alternative would be Coincidence theory: it's just coincidence that this happened. A

variation of coincidence theory is Uncanny theory. Then there's Stupidity theory and Incompetence theory. There's also Stochastic theory. It means everything happening by random... there's really no causality, as such. Stuff just happens. History is just these eventualities that tumble down on top of each other.

Parenti is particularly dismissive of the artificial boundaries between structural causes and individual conspirators pushed by people like Noam Chomsky. In his book [*Dirty Truths*](#), Parenti writes that

left critics like Cockburn and Chomsky allow that some conspiracies do exist but they usually are of minor importance, a distraction from the real problems of institutional and structural power. A structural analysis, as I understand it, maintains that events are determined by the larger configurations of power and interest and not by the whims of happenstance or the connivance of a few incidental political actors. There is no denying that larger structural trends impose limits on policy and exert strong pressures on leaders. But this does not mean that all important policy is predetermined.

It is an either-or world for those on the Left who harbor an aversion for any kind of conspiracy investigation: either you are a structuralist in your approach to politics or a "conspiracist" who reduces historical developments to the machinations of secret cabals, thereby causing us to lose sight of the larger systemic forces. As Chomsky notes: "However unpleasant and difficult it may be, there is no escape from the need to confront the reality of institutions and the policies and actions they largely shape."

I trust that one of the institutions he has in mind is the CIA. In most of its operations, the CIA is by definition a conspiracy, using covert actions and secret plans, many of which are of the most unsavory kind. What are covert operations if not conspiracies? At the same time, the CIA is an institution, a structural part of the national security state. In sum, the agency is an institutionalized conspiracy.

As I pointed out in published exchanges with Cockburn and Chomsky (neither of whom responded to the argument), conspiracy and structure are not

mutually exclusive dynamics...Conspiracies are a component of the national security political system, not deviations from it. Ruling elites use both conspiratorial covert actions and overtly legitimating procedures at home and abroad. They finance everything from electoral campaigns and publishing houses to mobsters and death squads. They utilize every conceivable stratagem, including killing one of their own if they perceive him to be a barrier to their larger agenda of making the world safe for those who own it.

Parenti even eviscerates the smears and insinuations of people like Marcy Wheeler, who sought to stigmatize critics by including "[cue scary Hollywood villain music](#)" in a defense of her boss's involvement in the Maidan color revolution. Wheeler's jab was a typical tactic of anti-conspiracism, meant to paint critics as simpletons who have arrived at their worldview after watching too many cartoons. In response to this substance-free nonsense, Parenti says in his "[Conspiracy and Class Power](#)" talk "*Conspiracy theorists, how do you like that? 'I mean do you think there's actually, do you think there's actually a group of men sitting in a ROOM? Who sit there and are plotting these things, for some reason? Do you think there's a group of people sitting around in a room?' Because somehow that image is supposed to be—very compelling, you know, it's so improbable, and I always say 'oh no no they don't sit around in a ROOM! They meet on carousels and they talk to each other that way. Or they go skydiving, they all lock arms, what do you think they are talking about when they lock arms like that? That's where they meet. OF COURSE THEY MEET IN ROOMS! Where the hell else you think they're gonna meet?*

In "[Conspiracy Theories and Conventional Wisdom](#)," Charles Pigden explains that the stigma attached to certain theories is a way of cordoning off certain critiques as beyond the realms of mainstream acceptability. This is done, Pigden claims, through a traditional appeal to status quo ideas about conventional wisdom. They are also extremely pernicious, "For the idea that conspiracy theories as such are intellectually suspect helps conspirators, quite literally, to get away with murder (of which killing people in an unjust war is an instance)." If the mainstream ideas about what constitutes "conspiracy theories" were to be believed, "We would be allowed to understand natural phenomena and open actions, openly arrived at. And we might even

treat ourselves to unintended consequences provided these did not involve secret plotting. But we would be officially blind to covert actions and secret plans.” Only when a plot was openly acknowledged would it become an acceptable idea. “Again it is worth stressing just how catastrophic the strategy of conspiratorial skepticism would be if we applied it consistently, rather than using it from time to time to get out of political difficulties or to rubbish allegations that we find inconvenient,” writes Pigden, “But epistemically disastrous as conspiratorial skepticism would be, its political consequences would be catastrophic. For when it comes to conspiracy we would be both officially blind and officially incurious.”

If I am right, the conventional wisdom on conspiracy theories is not just misguided, but absurd. For it implies an epistemic principle that flies in the face of history and would be politically catastrophic if put into practice. It would blind us to the machinations of torturers and scheming politicians, and would convert a large part of the political realm into a chaos of incoherent effects whose causes were beyond the reach of rational enquiry.

Of course, this is not an unfortunate outcome, but by design. The idea that any idea too critical of the ruling class should be automatically disqualified is extremely appealing to the ruling class. Anti-communist intellectuals Karl Popper and Richard Hofstadter popularized the idea of “conspiracy theorism,” and their idea found so much support since it was used to delegitimize Marxist governments as driven by “conspiracy theories,” and thus identical to Nazism. It was given a further boost by the CIA in the 1960s—even the oh-so-knowing serious folks on Skeptics.com concede that the “crackpots” are supported by academic evidence that the label “was deliberately deployed by the CIA.” Conspiracy theory as it’s used today does not mean an evidence-free, insane idea; rather, any idea the ruling class wants placed outside of the realm of consideration. That’s why powerful apparatchiks like [David Cameron](#) and [Cass Sunstein](#) publicly mull some kind of state sanction for those they label “conspiracy theorists.”

Ultimately, the average conspiracy theorist has a better grasp of how the world works than the average liberal. Even the most outlandish “conspiracy theory” in existence—that people like George W. Bush and Queen Elizabeth are

shape-shifting, extra-dimensional reptilians—is closer to the truth than what liberals believe. The reality is that the ruling class and its public servants *really do* have a parasitic and predatory relationship to the vast majority of humanity; if anyone should be laughed at and publicly excoriated for their wacky ideas, it's those who think Hillary is *su abuela* and Barack Obama is a nice guy who would enjoy [hanging out](#) with them. When it comes to conspiracy theories, Noam Chomsky's ideas comfort power and Michael Parenti's ideas expose it.

Support For “Actually Existing” Systems: Anti-Communism

When Vladimir Ilyich Lenin was just Vladimir Ulyanov, the future revolutionary saw a world riven by class exploitation. In his eyes, predatory colonial wars and the robbery of the workers by their masters shared a root cause, which was the existence of a small ruling class that enjoyed great wealth by exploiting the masses. In his text *What Is To Be Done?*, the answer to the eponymous question was Marxism, spread amongst the workers by a vanguard party. This party would lead a proletarian revolution and create a state in which “all power belongs to the working people,” as defined by the future Soviet constitution. On the same question, Noam Chomsky is typically vague, generally answering with some form of “become an activist.” However, he is unequivocal that those seeking to change the world should *not* do what Lenin and the Bolsheviks did.

Noam Chomsky is, [according to Stephen Gowans](#), “an endless source of slurs against Leninism, which he equates with ‘counterrevolution,’ a heterodox view of what revolution is.” Gowans further argues that “Chomsky has enormous respect for those who have failed at revolution, and enormous contempt for those who have succeeded.” While it is true that Chomsky has provided a [very good defense](#) of the People's Republic of China, it is also true that he has spent a great deal of his career blasting the USSR. In the course of his career, many listeners have heard the litany of Western horrors enumerated by Chomsky and asked him why conscientious people should not organize along Marxist lines. Notable communist achievements in the realm of anti-imperialism include Lenin's theoretical work on Empire, the USSR's support for decolonization and national liberation movements worldwide, Cuba and

North Korea's support of post-colonial African nations, and the general discourse around world peace and harmony as the ultimate goal of socialism. [Chomsky's response](#) from a 1989 lecture is a typical one. The professor argues that he has no qualms about agreeing with the mainstream media on the subject of the USSR, adduces Trotsky's agreement with fascists, and then essentially repeats the mainline anti-Communist narrative. Chomsky claims that Bolshevism was not "mainstream Marxism," but a "right-wing deviation," that Lenin devolved from "left-libertarian socialism" that was "closer to the essence of what socialism was understood to be" *into an anti-democratic tyrant*, that the October revolution "ought to be called a coup," and that "some of the first [post-Revolutionary] moves" were "opportunistic" power-hungry moves to "destroy socialism." Essentially, Chomsky argues that the Soviet Union doesn't merit a socialist defense because it is not socialist. In Chomsky's eyes, the USSR was just another "totalitarian" state.

Chomsky pursues this line of attack throughout his career. In the *Manufacturing Consent* documentary, he equates [Joseph Stalin and Goebbels](#). As Michael Parenti writes in his essay "[Another View on Chomsky](#)," "Like Orwell and most bourgeois opinion makers and academics, Chomsky treats Communism and fascism as totalitarian twins, offering no class analysis of either, except to assert that they are both rooted in some unspecified way to today's corporate domination. In *Z Magazine*, four years after the Soviet Union had been overthrown, Chomsky warns us of 'left intellectuals' who try to 'rise to power on the backs of mass popular movements' and 'then beat the people into submission...You start off as basically a Leninist who is going to be part of the Red bureaucracy. You see later that power doesn't lie that way, and you very quickly become an ideologist of the Right'." As in the case of Lenin, the right-wing deviant. And while Chomsky treats communism as identical to fascism, it's often the case that the worst thing that Chomsky can say about the excesses of the American system is that it resembles communism (as he perceives it). Chomsky criticizes the secret negotiations and lobbying work that went into crafting the Trans-Pacific Partnership as "[adopted in good Stalinist style](#)." Chomsky blasts the mainstream media spectacle surrounding the 1999 NATO aggression against Yugoslavia as "[a virtual orgy of self-glorification](#) and awe of power that might have impressed Kim Il-Sung."

Chomsky's class-free conflation of communism and fascism is a continual

feature of his work. In a subsequent *Z Magazine* article on "[Market Democracy in a Neoliberal Order](#)," Chomsky again claims that the configuration of modern corporations links socialism to the Nazis: "The intellectual backgrounds for granting such extraordinary rights to 'collectivist legal entities' lie in neo-Hegelian doctrines that also underlie Bolshevism and fascism." Now, I'm as ill-equipped to discuss "neo-Hegelian doctrines" as I am to analyze what strand (or *deviation*) of Marxism was practiced by Lenin, but I do know history, and Chomsky is espousing a thoroughly ahistorical perspective on the relationship between fascism and capitalism, or fascism and liberalism. The ruling classes in various powers have often enjoyed the utility that fascism serves against restive working-class elements. In speeches like "[The Functions of Fascism](#)" and "[The Real Causes of World War II](#)," Parenti elaborates on this through substantive historical exegesis. Parenti explains why the US, UK, and France chose to reject Stalin's offer of an anti-fascist alliance, and how rich industrialists throughout the West benefited from fascist strikebreakers. Not for nothing does Martin Niemöller's famous poem begin with "first they came for the Socialists..." There are [mountains of historical evidence](#) that capitalist states tolerate or even prefer fascism in times of crisis—admiration which is often reciprocated, as in the case of Adolf Hitler drawing inspiration for Nazi race laws from Western colonialism and Jim Crow. The latter is one of the comparisons made by Domenico Losurdo in his text "[Stalin and Hitler: Twin Brothers or Mortal Enemies?](#)," which finds in favor of the latter interpretation by marshalling a great deal of evidence, in stark contrast to Chomsky's vague references to "neo-Hegelian doctrines." In fact, Chomsky's conception of modern corporatism as a truly *bad* kind of capitalism places him in the company of doctrinaire liberals, who argue that capitalism was mostly fine [until Ronald Reagan came](#) and ruined it. Chomsky's claims that American democracy has become unmoored and is "[drifting](#)" towards plutocracy situates his criticism as a liberal one—the idea that a country born as slaveholding settler-colonial empire could function in an essentially benign way is plenty of things, but *socialist* is not on the list.

In post-9/11 editions of Herman and Chomsky's *Manufacturing Consent*, the "anti-communism" filter has been updated to "counter-terrorism" for the War on Terror era. This might seem a reasonable enough change, though it now aligns communism with both the nihilistic killings of al Qaeda as well as

Nazism. However, two articles in 2015 show that Chomsky's tweak to *Manufacturing Consent* might have some shortcomings. First was the article "Flakes Alive!" in *Baffler* magazine, deriding the "truthers, tankies, and tofu" that ruin socialism for decent Democrats. By way of smearing these "flakes" at New York's annual Left Forum, the author identified the "wackjob nadir" as a panel that "featured at least one 'tankie,' slang for Soviet apologist, or actual Stalinist." Left Forum [bills itself](#) as the "largest annual conference of a broad spectrum of left and progressive intellectuals, activists, academics, organizations and the interested public." Left Forum is the largest conference for Leftists, but even a single defender of the Soviet Union is outré enough to earn smears from even a progressivey-leftish publication. The USSR was both the first large-scale experiment in a worker's state, and the largest socialist nation in the world—why shouldn't defenders of the Soviet Union, even defenders of Stalin, be present at such a gathering, numbering in the dozens or the hundreds? Unlike communists, discouraged even from attending something called "Left Forum," terrorists will get bylines depending on political expediency. In July 2015, as part of a [wider Western rebranding effort](#), a representative of the bin Ladenist group and al Qaeda-ally Ahrar al-Sham was [invited](#) to make his organization's case at length in *The Washington Post*. So a decade and a half into the War on Terror, the media is still more comfortable with terrorists than they are with communists, even a quarter-century after the end of the Soviet Union. In fact, even al Qaeda-types get their own bylines when they are aligned with the goals of the US State Department. Just as fascists have historically been used by capitalists as strikebreakers and shock troops, so have Western governments utilized terrorist groups as proxies. As in the case of fascism, though, the relationship of the ruling class to various reactionary paramilitaries only figures into Chomsky's speechifying when he is listing a disempoweringly long list of atrocious hypocrisies. Due to the professor's anti-communism, "terrorism" is merely another totalitarian category along with Marxism-Leninism.

Chomsky's virulent anti-communism is said to be an outcome of his "anarchist" politics. Chomsky often describes himself as a "[libertarian socialist](#)" who opposes any form of coercion. Since Chomsky purports to believe that "[the burden of proof](#) for anyone in a position of power and authority lies on them" (like any anarchist), the professor claims that his ideal government

configuration is an [anarcho-syndicalist configuration](#), like those in Spain during the Spanish Civil War. It isn't true that Chomsky dismisses all unjust forms of oppression—the professor displays a stunning glibness on [the subject of eating meat](#), demonstrating a lack of knowledge with even the basics of animal exploitation or the voluntary nature of carnivorousness. Kevin Dooley also explains that [Chomsky's anti-imperialism](#) is situated in a nation-based critique, rather than a class-based one. This comports with the largely class-free analysis that brings Chomsky to embrace the Inept Empire theory. This is significant, since a class-based perspective is the cornerstone of socialism, libertarian or otherwise. Chomsky's advocacy for voting for the Democratic party—so-called “lesser-evilism”—is also a ratification of certain power structures. His anti-communism, which conflates communism with Nazism, precludes him from similar advocacy in defense of actually existing socialism. However, for all his talk of American horrors, Chomsky suggests a tactical alliance with certain perpetrators of these crimes. In his essential text [“Left Anti-Communism: the Unkindest Cut,”](#) Parenti points out that

Left anticommunists find any association with communist organizations to be morally unacceptable because of the “crimes of communism.” Yet many of them are themselves associated with the Democratic Party in this country, either as voters or members, seemingly unconcerned about the morally unacceptable political crimes committed by leaders of that organization. Under one or another Democratic administration, 120,000 Japanese Americans were torn from their homes and livelihoods and thrown into detention camps; atomic bombs were dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki with an enormous loss of innocent life; the FBI was given authority to infiltrate political groups; the Smith Act was used to imprison leaders of the Trotskyist Socialist Workers Party and later on leaders of the Communist Party for their political beliefs; detention camps were established to round up political dissidents in the event of a “national emergency”; during the late 1940s and 1950s, eight thousand federal workers were purged from government because of their political associations and views, with thousands more in all walks of life witchhunted out of their careers; the Neutrality Act was used to impose an embargo on the Spanish Republic that worked in favor of Franco's fascist legions; homicidal counterinsurgency programs were initiated in various Third World countries; and the Vietnam War was pursued and escalated. And for the better part of a century, the Congressional

leadership of the Democratic Party protected racial segregation and stymied all anti-lynching and fair employment bills. Yet all these crimes, bringing ruination and death to many, have not moved the liberals, the social democrats, and the “democratic socialist” anticommunists to insist repeatedly that we issue blanket condemnations of either the Democratic Party or the political system that produced it, certainly not with the intolerant fervor that has been directed against existing communism.

Like the other left anti-communists, while Chomsky tolerates these Democratic horrors, the actions of socialist People’s Democracies are too horrifying to support in even an anguished manner. Chomsky supports a tactical alliance with liberalism, but never such a tactical alliance with Bolshevism. Chomsky concedes, for instance, that [the treatment of Latin Americans by the US](#) is worse than what many suffered under the USSR, going so far as to claim that “Soviet dominion was in fact that unique historical perversity, an empire in which the center bled itself for the sake of its colonies, or rather, for the sake of tranquility in those colonies.” Had Chomsky been more open to the work of Lenin, he may have concluded that exploitation of colonies is a *sine qua non* of empire. However, the facts often do not compel a reassessment of what constitute the “lesser evil.”

Marxist critics like Michael Parenti and Stephen Gowans argue that contemporary anti-communism is closer to a religion than a concrete analytical framework. In “Left Anti-Communism,” Parenti claims that “Many on the US Left have exhibited a Soviet bashing and Red baiting that matches anything on the Right in its enmity and crudity. Listen to Noam Chomsky [whose] imagery is heavily indebted to the same US corporate political culture he so frequently criticizes on other issues.” Calling Chomsky “an inexhaustible fount of anticommunist caricatures,” Parenti takes Chomsky and others to task for cheering the end of the USSR: “In [Chomsky’s] mind, the revolution was betrayed by a coterie of ‘communist thugs’ who merely hunger for power rather than wanting the power to end hunger. In fact, the communists did not ‘very quickly’ switch to the Right but struggled in the face of a momentous onslaught to keep Soviet socialism alive for more than seventy years. To be sure, in the Soviet Union’s waning days some, like Boris Yeltsin, crossed over to capitalist ranks, but others continued to resist free-market incursions at great cost to themselves, many meeting their deaths

during Yeltsin's violent repression of the Russian parliament in 1993."

In contrast to Chomsky and the other left anticommunists who celebrated the dissolution of the USSR ([against the wishes of three-quarters its people](#)), Parenti presents the end of socialism in Europe as the beginning of a great tragedy. In his speech "[Reflections on the Overthrow of Communism](#)," Parenti describes the service to foreign investors rendered by Boris Yeltsin and his government and what a catastrophe it was for the Russian people. Indeed, under the neoliberal pillage of the former USSR, the most conservative [UNICEF estimates](#) hold that 3.5 million citizens were killed Union-wide (A [Bureau of Medical Journalism report](#) puts the number at 5 million Russians alone). In a class-based analysis one will never find reading Chomsky, Parenti connects the end of the USSR to the decline of social democracy in North America and Western Europe. As Stephen Gowans points out, "[The Soviet Union was a concrete example](#) of what a publicly owned, planned economy could produce: full employment, guaranteed pensions, paid maternity leave, limits on working hours, free healthcare and education (including higher education), subsidized vacations, inexpensive housing, low-cost childcare, subsidized public transportation, and rough income equality." This provided what Michael Parenti calls "[the threat of a good example](#)." Parenti says

One of the things that helped workers win concessions was 'the threat of communism.' The pressure of being in competition with socialist nations for the allegiance of peoples at home and abroad helped to set limits on how thoroughly Western leaders dared to mistreat their own working populations...That competition also helped the civil rights struggle. During the 1950s and 1960s, when US leaders were said to be competing with Moscow for the hearts and minds of non-white in Asia, Africa, and Latin America, it was considered imperative that we rid ourselves of Jim Crow and grant equality to people of color in the US...With the overthrow of socialism in 1989-91, transnational corporate capitalism now seemed to have its grip on the entire globe. Yet an impatient plaint soon could be detected in conservative publications. It went something like this: 'If everywhere socialism is being rolled back by the free market, why is there no rollback here in the United States? Why do we have to continue tolerating all sorts of collectivist regulations and services?'

The brutality of neoliberalism and the evisceration of Western welfare systems are not the result of an aberrant version of capitalism, but the end of socialism's "good example." Gowans quotes Joseph Stalin, who issued a prophetic warning in 1954: "What would happen if capitalism succeeded in smashing the Republic of Soviets? There would set in an era of the blackest reaction in all the capitalist and colonial countries. The working class and the oppressed peoples would be seized by the throat, the positions of international communism would be lost." Stalin's prediction came true, though one isn't likely to know it from reading Chomsky. Unlike Marxist critics writing in relative obscurity, Chomsky sees profound national divisions between the workers of different states.

All of this—his comfort with liberalism and the Democratic part, his mostly class-free analysis, his tolerance of numerous hierarchical forms of oppression, his deference to American nationalist mythology—beg the question about what sort of "libertarian socialist" Chomsky is. These factors on aggregate support the idea that Chomsky is hardly an anarchist at all, but rather a social democrat with an atypically lucid critique of America's foreign policy and corporate media.

In 2011, Noam Chomsky criticized his friend and fan Hugo Chávez for "possibly" assaulting Venezuelan democracy and veering too close to a "pathology of *caudillismo*." In the face of criticism by supporters of the Bolivarian revolution, Chomsky and Media Lens criticized *The Guardian* for a "dishonest" and "deceptive" misrepresentation. However, as Stephen Gowans points out, [there was nothing dishonest](#) or deceptive about *The Guardian's* reporting; Chomsky did indeed make the case that the Chávez administration was veering towards authoritarianism. Chomsky's description of Chávez's putative *caudillismo* is shot-through with the same anti-communist non-analysis that hobbles his discussion of actually existing socialism. Chomsky claims that "anywhere in Latin America there is a potential threat of the pathology of *caudillismo*," situating the pathology of a certain type of strongman as something immanent to that part of the world. What makes a *caudillo* so unique to Latin America—is it the caudillo's hat, or his love of cigars? Chomsky doesn't say what makes the Spanish-speaking world such fertile ground for this kind of tyranny. Instead, one is left to wonder if it's more of Chomsky's frequent nation-based rather than class-based

analysis, along with the anti-communist nonsense that would equate a democratic socialist like Chávez with the brutal fascist dictators of Operation Condor. For someone who could probably give a rough history of every US intervention in Latin America, from the first Northern filibusters to Honduras, 2009—and include everyone from Jacobo Arbenz to Salvador Allende—Chomsky seems unwilling to make any concessions to the reality of imperial meddling. The degree to which a state uses its productive forces for the betterment of its people, rather than foreign investors, is the degree to which it will find itself under attack. As Jean Bricmont writes in *Humanitarian Imperialism* “If it is true, as often said, that most socialist regimes turn out to be dictatorships that is largely because a dictatorship is much harder to overthrow or subvert than a democracy. It follows that the repeated assaults by the Western ruling classes against every form of socialism have provoked a sort of artificial selection that allows only dictatorial forms to survive” (p. 47). However, as accurate as Bricmont may be, it has remained the case that elections in 21st century Venezuela are very free, and Chomsky is essentially [repeating State Department propaganda](#) in the first place. Gowans continues:

it doesn't take a high-profile intellectual of Chomsky's caliber to figure out that the establishment press will use all the ammunition it can lay its hands on to vilify Chavez, and the best ammunition of all is that which comes from the Left. It's one thing for a US state official to raise concerns about Chavez. You expect it. It's quite another for a leftist intellectual to do the same. It's hard to swallow the canard that poor old Noam—whose understanding of the media is second to none—blindly stumbled into an ambush...hadn't the co-author of Manufacturing Consent figured this out long ago?

I think it would be fair to suppose he has. That he went ahead anyway, and allowed the press to add his criticisms of Chavez to what he himself calls the “vicious, unremitting attack by the United States and the west generally” on Venezuela, could mean one of two things.

Either Chomsky is a press-hound. Or he's not as much of a friend of Chavez as Carroll—and a good number of leftists—think. Or both.

When the people who own everything are interested in selling something to the rest of us, they go through media proxies. These vectors deliver the desired messages to their target audiences, and these vectors are salespeople chosen for their appeal to the demographic. The same principles apply for selling anything; *Breaking Bad* delivers viewers who are interested in stories of entrepreneurial artisanal craftsmen to advertisers the same way Barack Obama delivered progressive college students to Wall Street and the Pentagon. As a perceptive media critic, Noam Chomsky understands this, explaining that [the ruling class requires](#):

something to tame the bewildered herd and that is public relations or manufactured consent... the media, the schools, the popular culture has to divide for the political class... it has to instill the proper beliefs. And if the specialized class (politicians and media figures) can come along and say 'I will serve your interests' (to the elites) then they will be allowed to be part of that group... that means they have to have instilled in them the beliefs and the doctrines that will serve the interests of private power. Unless they can master that skill they are not part of the specialized class.

However, Chomsky typically exempts himself from this system and the specialized class that serves elite interests—proving once again Tarzie’s contention that [“I don’t think Chomsky gets](#) how Chomsky applies to Chomsky.” From his strident left anti-communism, it’s clear that one of the services Chomsky renders is selling unrelenting enmity for actually existing socialism to his readers. As Stephen Gowans observes, “If we were to follow his lead and emulate the failures, while eschewing the successes, we would be sure to arrive at...a political dead-end.” All the more reason for Chomsky to enjoy such a prominent platform. This is in stark contrast to Michael Parenti, who defends socialism—the system that capitalists fear the most, since it has the power to erase the privileges and plenty they enjoy at the expense of humanity.

Support For “Actually Existing” Systems: Humanitarian

Interventions

[dropcap]I[/dropcap]n a piece titled "[Scholars or Bamboozlers?](#)," Stephen Gowans discusses several lefty figures who embraced the 2011 NATO War on Libya, and their professed rationales for doing so. Gowans describes one of these pieces, Paul Street's "[Libya: the Left and Losing Our Way](#)," as an example of an author "making a case whose support was largely that his position was based on what Chomsky told him. He was hoping to earn instant credibility by exploiting the cognitive heuristic that makes you deem anything Chomsky says as probably true (or probably wrong if you dislike him) without actually having to do the leg-work to figure it out yourself." Chomsky occupies this position for many people: one of Street's commenters laments that "I'm a little upset with Chomsky being so relatively silent about this. His guidance on this issue has been sorely needed." Street begins by placing his own position between the US State Department on one end and "the knee-jerk, almost self-caricaturing" "so-called radical left" that "says that it's all about Washington' desire to grab Libya's oil" on the other. Street explains that his position is "significantly influenced by the reflections of the two leading left intellectuals on U.S. policy in the Middle East": Gilbert Achcar and Noam Chomsky. In private correspondence, Chomsky informed Street that "the humanitarian talk is too cynical even to discuss," and the "no-fly zone (NFZ) was from the first...a cover for participation in the rebellion." Chomsky continued, "'It's a French and British affair, primarily, with virtually no international support, incidentally, in the region or beyond.'" This sounds critical enough so far, as Chomsky rejects ideas that the US's motives were purely humanitarian and the idea that the war enjoyed broad international legitimacy. He continues, "The older colonial powers have led the way and the U.S. was 'dragged in reluctantly,' trying to 'move into the background' at a rapid pace—no doubt part of why Obama did not feel compelled to obtain authorization to use force from the U.S. Congress. There's no prolonged U.S. occupation being planned, of course." Street also points out that "the United States stayed with Gaddafi 'until the last minute' (Chomsky) – very different than its long-term demonization of evil Saddam Hussein...At the same time, the White House is certainly aware that, as Chomsky told me, 'a massacre in Benghazi would have been blamed on Washington, something they didn't want to face.' Think like Obama from a realpolitik perspective on the potential deadly political

consequences of letting Gaddafi move forward with a massacre: significant global and Western public outrage over standing to the side + a worsened economic situation exacerbated by an inevitable embargo = a no-brainer self-interested equation for 'humanitarian intervention.'

Chomsky's position on Libya was publicly expounded-upon in a few other places. He argued that the NFZ was "cover for participation in the rebellion," a rebellion which he elsewhere called "wonderful" and "liberation" (quoted in [Max Forte's Slouching Towards Sirte](#)). Chomsky tacitly criticized the war for enjoying little international legitimacy, while presenting it as "a French and British affair, primarily," which Washington was "dragged in reluctantly." According to Chomsky, unlike Saddam Hussein in Iraq, Gaddafi enjoyed US backing "until the last minute," and the US only intervened in order to stop "a massacre in Benghazi," which would have been politically unpalatable for the Obama administration. In an interview from the same time, [Chomsky reiterated](#) that "Libya is rich in oil, and though the US and UK have often given quite remarkable support to its cruel dictator, right to the present, he is not reliable." According to Chomsky, the prime motivator for intervention was the fact that "When a non-violent uprising began, Qaddafi crushed it violently, and a rebellion broke out that liberated Benghazi," which faced an imminent "slaughter" at the hands of Qaddafi's forces, which would have reflected poorly on the White House. Chomsky was asked if there are grounds for progressives to support the destruction of the Libyan Arab Jamahiriya. He replied that "In the case of intervention by [NATO in Libya], the burden is particularly heavy," but "it would be too strong to hold that it can never be satisfied in principle" and that "Preventing a likely massacre in Benghazi is no small matter, whatever one thinks of the motives." Chomsky concluded that post-war Libya would likely be composed "an oil-rich Eastern region heavily dependent on the Western imperial powers and an impoverished West under the control of a brutal tyrant with fading capacity, or a victory by the Western-backed forces." Chomsky advised that "Those concerned for peace, justice, freedom and democracy should try to find ways to lend support and assistance to Libyans who seek to shape their own future."

Chomsky's counsel on the Libyan War is quite remarkable for the broad strokes with which it corroborates the official story. For something coming from

America's most strident foreign policy critic, there sure is a lot of repetition of the mainstream narrative going on here. Beyond his existing reputation, Chomsky's radical credibility is conferred by impugning the US's motivation for intervening, which he says have more to do with resource exploitation than saving lives. However, Chomsky accepts that saving lives will be a by-product of a NATO war—as Street argued, Operation Odyssey Dawn accomplished a genuine “humanitarian intervention,” just one motivated by a “self-interested equation.” Here as elsewhere, Chomsky adheres to the demonology school of foreign policy, reducing the Libyan state to “Qaddafi” and deriding him as a “brutal” and “cruel dictator,” one who was about to massacre an initially non-violent, democratic opposition movement. Though he frames it as part of a long discussion on Western perfidy, Chomsky tentatively concludes that while “the burden is particularly heavy” and NATO's motives are not angelic, a NATO war would stop a “slaughter” and rescue the freedom fighters trying to save Libya. In other words, despite the hand-wringing, Chomsky differs from Samantha Powers mostly to the degree that they have faith in Washington's declared motivations. In various venues, Chomsky's positions are usually comfortably aligned with the status-quo. The idea that the US is not motivated by pure humanitarian idealism, but by naked self-interest, is not a new perspective. This is the cornerstone of so-called foreign policy “realists,” one of the three prominent intellectual trends in American Empire-maintenance (along with liberal interventionists and neoconservatives). Prominent foreign policy realists include Colin Powell, Henry Kissinger, Brent Scowcroft, and Robert Gates; and the Obama White House has been full of such functionaries. Even liberal hawk Richard Haass, the president of the Council on Foreign Relations, admitted that [the goal was regime change](#), rather than protecting civilians, halfway through Operation Odyssey Dawn. Chomsky supports the idea that American wars can sometimes achieve humanitarian ends; he merely argues that ulterior motives are at play. Chomsky also ratifies the idea that Washington was a reluctant participant in the Libya War (after all, according to Chomsky, Gaddafi was essentially a US ally). This idea was pushed by the White House itself, which claimed to be “[leading from behind.](#)” In a recent legacy-crafting interview for *The Atlantic*, Obama himself blamed France and the UK once again for the “[shit show](#)” of turning Libya into a failed state, offloading responsibility onto Paris and London. To summarize, regardless of his radical reputation, Chomsky's positions largely echo those of former Defense Secretary Robert

Gates, CFR head Richard Haass, and President Barack Obama. So nothing that the great dissident is espousing here is outside the mainstream—in fact, much of it is literally establishment wisdom.

The worst thing Chomsky has to say about the War on Libya is that it will provide preferential conditions for Western investors. However, Chomsky fails to delve into the specifics of what exploitation by the imperialist powers entails. The description of life under a brutal, putatively genocidal regime is sketched out in stark terms; life as a neo-colony of North American and Western European ruling interests is relatively bloodless. Where Chomsky is nondescript about post-intervention societies, Michael Parenti describes in great factual detail what awaits the citizens of countries post-regime change. After the murder of Gaddafi, Parenti posted a list to his Facebook page of [“16 Things Libya Will Never See Again.”](#) While Chomsky doesn't burden himself with any facts about Libya's social welfare system whatsoever, Parenti actually explains the deprivation that will follow the victory of the new Western-backed regime. Parenti reminds his readers that “1) There was no electricity bill in Libya; electricity was free for all its citizens, 2) There was no interest on loans, banks in Libya were state-owned and loans given to all its citizens at zero percent interest by law, 3) Having a home was considered a human right in Libya, 4) All newlyweds in Libya used to receive \$60,000 dinar (U.S.\$50,000) by the government to buy their first apartment so to help start up the family,” and so on. In other words, where Chomsky presents the victory of Western investors in vague and antiseptic terms, Parenti unequivocally presents it as the human rights tragedy that it is. As [Parenti told an interviewer](#) for Russia Today: “There will be a massive privatization taking place. The public economy that the Gaddafi government had built over 40 years, which included public subsidies for housing, for education, for healthcare—all those things will be privatized. The oil fields will be handed over to private companies for private profit. Death squads will come in to clean up those who might still have a commitment to a social wage or a communal wage. This is what we have to look forward to, and that was the real intention.”

Every subsequent year has further vindicated what Paul Street called the knee-jerk, almost self-caricaturing so-called radical left, and brought further shame to the ambivalent progressives who took their cues from

Chomsky. The impending Benghazi bloodbath-story sold by Washington via Chomsky was [as fictitious](#) as Kuwait's incubator babies. Equally fictitious was the idea that Gaddafi had become a darling of the West, an idea that likely assuaged many progressives' concerns about intervention. Journalist Dan Glazebrook calls this "[a myth.](#)" While Street and others derided those that defended the Jamahiriya as a local bulwark against imperial meddling, leaked emails revealed that this was precisely the thinking in the NATO capitals. In France, a major factor behind the war was [plans for a pan-African currency](#) based on the Libyan gold dinar, which Paris perceived as a threat to its African sphere of influence. [Stephen Gowans observes](#) that Western investors strongly objected to the Jamahiriya's efforts to "Libyanize" the economy, making the fruits of Libya's wealth redound to its people instead of foreign investors. Rather than "leading from behind," the vaunted rapprochement with Libya allowed the United States to begin [funding and arming](#) the local al Qaeda branch, who would become many of the NATO shock troops that Chomsky and others hailed as freedom fighters. The outcome was one that Chomsky failed to predict: Libya was converted from a country with the [highest GDP per capita](#) and standard of living on the African continent to a failed state ruled by several armed factions including ISIS. While Chomsky foresaw no long-term occupation, the NATO presence in the country [continues to grow.](#)

Chomsky's many fans might chalk his Libya commentary up to a momentary misfire, but it fits in with a larger pattern. In recent years, Chomsky has incorporated the lessons of the 1999 Kosovo War into his repertoire. As a result, defenders of that war label him a "Milosevic apologist," while last year he was honored by Serbia for [pointing out American hypocrisy](#) (there's gold in those hills). However, Jared Israel argues that in 1999, Chomsky "criticized" NATO by largely repeating the mainstream narrative with a few changes. Israel points out that this lent his comments a critical air while "Chomsky's description of events is essentially the same as that of NATO commander Wesley Clark." When pressed on this point by Israel [in an email exchange](#), Chomsky points out that "in the past 10 years the Milosevic regime has committed many crimes," eventually deriding his interlocutor as "completely beyond any rational discussion." Those who would speculate that Chomsky was chastened by the experience of Libya (or learned some lesson) would do well to read a 2015 exchange concerning Syria. On the blog "[The Wall](#)

[Will Fall](#),” Jay Therappel posts an email exchange with Chomsky regarding the War in Syria, which is similar in both tone and content to that between Chomsky and Israel on Yugoslavia. As in Libya, Chomsky has largely adhered to the US State Department line; Therappel’s email exchange began when he pressed Chomsky on the professor’s claim that the Syrian Arab Army had played a minor role if any in fighting ISIS—Chomsky claims that the Syrian Army’s primary goals has heretofore been killing civilians. When pressed on a point relating to his position, he claims that “Assad’s own objectives are to stay in power no matter how many Syrians he kills and how much damage he does,” refers to the Syrian government as the “vicious” and “monstrous Assad regime,” and exculpates the US’s role in Syria as “rather ambiguous.” To an unsympathetic onlooker, it appears as though Chomsky misunderstands one point—possibly willfully—and then fixates on it in order to obfuscate his position, while imputing all manner of bad faith to Therappel. Though his position on Syria is more superficially ambiguous than on Libya, [Chomsky claims that](#) forcefully implementing “No-fly zones, humanitarian corridors, support for the Kurds, and some other measures would be likely to be helpful.” In other words: bombs, bombs, and support for local proxies.

Stephen Gowans explains that “Noam Chomsky’s gravitas is based on his reputation as a high profile linguist, his connection to MIT, and his prolific book-writing. A short-cut to evaluating whether what he says makes sense is to refer to his credentials. Wow, a guy like this must know what he’s talking about.” On the latter point—Chomsky’s prolificacy—there’s not a lot of evidence that voluminous scholarship is a pre-requisite for expertise. Parenti has written dozens of books and is not asked to comment on every new humanitarian war by *In These Times* and *Pacifica*. Several of these books debunk the myths built up around humanitarian wars—though as in the case of the Kosovo War, Chomsky refers to nearly every left-wing author except for Parenti. On the other end of the spectrum are the Molly Crabapples of the world, overnight experts on Washington’s designated enemies who boast little background knowledge prior to their ascensions. In other words, his past work is largely irrelevant, and the real sources of Chomsky’s prestige are his extant profile and his position at MIT—both of which just mean the position he has been granted by people in high places. Judging from Chomsky’s work in Libya, Syria, and to some degree Kosovo, it’s clear that this position is available to those who mostly hew to the State Department line. Criticisms

like “the war is really about oil” are allowed, since commentators like Chomsky seldom go deeper than that and provide useful equivocations between the Empire and its targets.

Lesser Evilism

[dropcap]C[/dropcap]homsky is never more visible than during the presidential elections season, and there’s one reason why: “As the electoral spectacle kicks into full gear and forces itself into every sector of American political discourse, Noam Chomsky, one of the world’s most celebrated dissident intellectuals, continues his longstanding tradition of reminding us that the looming apocalypse must be delayed by any means necessary,” [writes Kevin Dooley](#), “which really means voting for the certain Democratic nominee, Hillary Clinton.”

Just as he is never more visible than during this quadrennial spectacle, he is never more prescriptive. Here is a sample of what Chomsky says and how he says it:

- January 2016: In an interview with Al Jazeera’s *UpFront*, Chomsky says “[he would ‘absolutely’ vote](#) for Hillary Clinton over any Republican candidate” and “there are ‘enormous differences’ between the policies of the Democrats and the Republicans.”
- March 2016: Chomsky says Hillary Clinton is “[kind of hawkish](#)” and “much more militant than the centrist democrats,” but “If Republicans are elected, there could be major changes that will be awful. I have never seen such lunatics in the political system. For instance, Ted Cruz’s response to terrorism is to carpet-bomb everyone.”
- May 2016: Chomsky calls Donald Trump’s ideas “[almost a death knell for the species](#),” telling his readers “If I were in a swing state, a state that matters, and the choice were Clinton or Trump, I would vote against Trump. And by arithmetic that means hold your nose and vote for Clinton.”

This is similar rhetoric to the previous election, at which time Chomsky said “[the worst didn’t happen, and it might have...](#)I mean, there are some differences; it’s not zero impact, you know.” This year, “almost a death

knell for the species” is extraordinarily strong language coming from the professor, and many of Chomsky’s readers likely take his counsel to heart come voting day. Chomsky is indeed correct that global warming will likely kill the majority of aerobic life on Earth within several human generations, making it an effective cudgel. He proffers that global warming is an urgent reason to show up next November and vote for Hillary Clinton, but it’s anyone’s guess how a Clinton presidency will lead to a more stable climate. Chomsky says that Donald Trump is too close to climate change deniers, but the same is true for Clinton, a fracking enthusiast whom Chomsky concedes is [“more militant”](#) than Obama and who is Wall Street’s preferred candidate. The US military rivals animal agriculture for the world’s most egregious polluter, and a servant of big business would never meaningfully threaten the continued operation of capitalism. So voters are left with tonal differences: Trump adjoins people who say climate change isn’t real, while Clinton will admit it’s real and perpetuate it. There is no practical difference between these two positions whatsoever—any capitalist may as well be a climate change denier. Like the many urgent reasons Chomsky offers, this is a small superficial change the brilliant professor is inflating into a life-or-death matter with verbal smoke-and-mirrors.

Much of the media hyperventilating over Trump and the Republicans is to distract from the Democrats actually in power doing much the same. Trump horrifies liberals and thrills many supporters by calling for the deportation of 11 million Latinos; meanwhile, Barack Obama has deported more Latin Americans than all the presidents in the 20th century combined. Trump calls for murdering the family members of accused terrorists, [Obama actually does it](#). Chomsky performs much the same service for Hillary Clinton now. He diminishingly describes Hillary Clinton as “kind of hawkish” and “more militant than centrist Democrats”—an extremely minimizing way to describe one of the most bellicose people in American politics, and by extension, the world. Calling Clinton “kind of” a hawk is a rather brazen whitewash of a politician whose record is [fundamentally neoconservative](#), and thus [the preferred candidate](#) of neoconservatives. Clinton is not only “more militant than centrist Democrats,” she’s more militant than many right-wing Republicans. If one wants to make a case that a particular candidate heralds the “death knell” for humanity, Clinton is a more compelling candidate based on her militarism alone. As Eric Draitser explains, [Trump’s alleged](#)

[isolationism](#) is mostly marketing, and one need only go back to 2000 to hear a Republican candidate decry military adventurism and advocate a humble foreign policy. However, given Hillary Clinton's extant record and current campaign rhetoric, a solid case could be made that Clinton is the candidate most likely to start a nuclear war. So when Chomsky says to vote for Hillary because Ted Cruz's "carpet-bomb everyone" foreign policy is crazy, it must be understood as something other than a factual argument.

The constant imputation of good intentions to Democrats, regardless of evidence, is something Chomsky does quite often—for instance, he speculates that Senator Elizabeth Warren supports Israel because "[She probably knows nothing about the Middle East.](#)" However, Chomsky extends these good graces to the internal affairs of the United States itself. Chomsky is well-known as a trenchant critic of US foreign policy, going so far as to observe that if [the Nuremberg Standard were applied](#) evenly, then every post-war American would have been hanged. Chomsky will expound upon legions of horrors, but his conclusions in the past several years generally go something like this—by way of telling Americans that the "2016 election puts us at risk of utter disaster," Chomsky says:

[With all its flaws](#), America is still a very free and open society, by comparative standards. Elections surely matter. It would, in my opinion, be an utter disaster for the country, the world and future generations if any of the viable Republican candidates were to reach the White House, and if they continue to control Congress. Consideration of the overwhelmingly important questions we discussed earlier suffices to reach that conclusion, and it's not all. For such reasons as those I alluded to earlier, American democracy, always limited, has been drifting substantially toward plutocracy. But these tendencies are not graven in stone. We enjoy an unusual legacy of freedom and rights left to us by predecessors who did not give up, often under far harsher conditions than we face now. And it provides ample opportunities for work that is badly needed, in many ways, in direct activism and pressures in support of significant policy choices, in building viable and effective community organizations, revitalizing the labor movement, and also in the political arena, from school boards to state legislatures and much more.

This is quite typical. Tarzie refers to this as “Chomsky’s persistent whitewashing of domestic repression,” and there’s no more accurate way to describe it. The professor calls US repression “undetectable” in comparison with the rest of the world, thus “temporarily disappear[ing], for rhetorical effect, two million people languishing in US prisons, based on a percentage contest with Palestinians.” Elsewhere, Chomsky claims that “the number of dissenters that are pushed aside is almost universal, either they’re in jail... if it’s Latin America they get their heads blown off. In the United States they’re marginalized in various ways. **The United States is a free country**...there is more protection for freedom of speech [than in Britain]...But essentially they can’t get jobs, they’re marginalized, they’re vilified. All sort of things, **not much punishment, frankly**, but, it’s real.” Tarzie writes that:

First of all, being vilified and made unable to support oneself is actually quite a lot of punishment, if your baseline is ‘not persecuted’ as opposed to ‘not murdered.’ But the repression of US dissenters doesn’t end with extreme marginalization. It’s beyond scope here to list all the US political dissidents whose persecution exceeds trifles like ostracism and financial ruin, especially if we don’t limit our timeframe, but the following should suffice to make the point:

- *Ali al-Timimi, a Muslim cleric in Virginia, sentenced to life in prison for exhorting his followers to fight for the Taliban following 9/11*
- *Anwar al-Awlaki, executed without due process for extolling violent resistance to the United States. His 16-year-old son was murdered a few weeks later with no official justification.*
- *Samir Khan, executed without due process for editing a magazine allegedly connected to al-Qaeda.*
- *Tarek Mehanna, sentenced to 17 years in prison for translating publicly available pro-jihadist documents and posting them online.*
- *Chelsea Manning, at the time of the interview, in prison for almost three years without trial and subjected to brutal conditions. She recently received a 35-year sentence for leaking military and State Department documents.*
- *John Kiriakou, former CIA officer, sentenced to 2 1/2 years for*

disclosing classified information to journalists while blowing the whistle on waterboarding.

Any consideration of how “free” US society is must also factor in the harassment, raids and stings used against Muslims, anarchists, hacktivists, militant environmentalists and animal rights activists; the brutality and arrests routinely unleashed by militarized police on peaceful protesters; and the mass incarceration of African-Americans and other marginalized communities which is, among other things, a pre-emptive measure against political mobilization. Chomsky is aware of these particulars, which is why his overall sanguine assessment is, at first glance, extremely odd.

In a later post, Tarzie highlights yet another Chomsky video vindicating the idea that [“among his many services](#) to power is the rosy view he offers of state repression in the US. In the video, Chomsky answers the perennial question, ‘What Can We Do?’ not with concrete suggestions for political engagement, but with a starry-eyed assessment of how hard it’s become for the state to persecute dissenters. ‘I think there’s a lot of excessive concern in activist groups about state repression,’ he announces at one point in this sunny tribute to American political freedom.” Chomsky ignores the myriad examples of domestic repression highlighted above, “cheerfully announcing that the ‘opportunities’ for political engagement are ‘almost boundless’ and admonishing gloomy comrades for their ‘paranoia about concentration camps.’ ‘The state may try to repress you,’ he says, ‘but they can’t do a lot.’”

Fantasy author Robin Hobb said that if an author wants to make the reader believe what dragons can and can not do in their narrative world, the author needs to accurately depict what horses can and can not do. In order to make a fantasy convincing, the author needs to be faithful to the real elements—the more convincingly these real elements are depicted, the more it authenticates the fantasy. This is how Chomsky works in his foreign versus domestic critiques. His readers are accustomed to Chomsky as the most clear-eyed and incisive critic of American foreign policy and media in the public eye. This lucidity lends him the credibility he needs to render a stunningly ahistorical and utterly baseless picture of domestic repression, convincingly pass off his whitewashes of Democratic politicians, and to quadrennially spin democratic gold from the plutocratic election straw.

The reality is that Democratic politicians and high-status liberal figures are in no way “lesser” evils. Chomsky and others selling the election scam are right that there are differences between the two parties. There are crucial differences, both in tone and in the way they deliver distinct constituencies to the ruling class’s agenda. Many Democratic party voters might even be repulsed by the realities of capitalism and settler-colonialism, so they require fundamentally different rhetoric than an open xenophobe. However, throughout history, centrist parties have been able to advance agendas that the far-right can not. According to Joshua Bloom and Waldo E. Martin, Jr.’s *Black Against Empire*, a history of the Black Panther Party, the authors explain that “The hard-core right wing was not the main threat to the Party. Rather concessions to blacks and opponents of the war reestablished the credibility of liberalism to key constituencies...when the Democratic Party began fighting to end the war, the Nixon administration rolled back the draft and created affirmative action programs, the United States normalized relations with revolutionary governments abroad, and black electoral representation ballooned, the Party had to work harder to maintain allied support” (pp. 393-4). Progressive-branded NGOs supplemented the Democrats in this task. “[Such organizations vacuumed up](#) the flotsam and jetsam of the resistance movements of the 60s and 70s, gave them paid staff positions, and neutered them,” explains Michael Novick of the Anti-Racist Action Network. “This was true long before the emergence of the current round of the ‘anti-war movement.’ It happened to the women’s movement and the Black and Chicano liberation struggles as far back as the 70s. In the late 80s, most of the anti-racist projects that sprung up to deal with the first wave of Neo-Nazism went the board and staff, grant-writing model, with the result that they lost both their militancy and their anti-establishment spark, making them politically irrelevant. Most went out of business as other vogues took precedence with funders.”

In the United States, the Democratic party and its offshoots have historically proven not only more effective at co-opting social movements, but in many instances advancing capital’s agenda at the expense of humanity. This has lead Glen Ford—another socialist whose analysis bests Chomsky and thus relegates him to obscurity—to reject the idea that Barack Obama and the Democrats are a *lesser* evil and instead call them a *more effective* evil. Unlike Chomsky’s rosy view of Democratic politicians, Ford backs up his

contention with hard facts:

[Obama] has been more effective in Evil-Doing than Bush in terms of protecting the citadels of corporate power, and advancing the imperial agenda. He has put both Wall Street and U.S. imperial power on new and more aggressive tracks – just as he hired himself out to do.

That was always Wall Street's expectation of Obama, and his promise to them. That's why they gave him far more money in 2008 than they gave John McCain. They were buying Obama futures on the electoral political market – and they made out like bandits. He was the bankers' guy in the Democratic presidential primary race. Among the last three standing in 2008, it was Obama who opposed any moratorium on home foreclosures. Let it run its course, said candidate Obama. And, true to his word, he has let the foreclosures run their catastrophic course.

Only a few months later, when the crunch came and Finance Capital was in meltdown, who rescued Wall Street? Not George Bush. Bush tried, but he was spent, discredited, ineffective. Not John McCain. He was in a coma, coming unglued, totally ineffective.

Bush's bailout failed on a Monday. By Friday, Obama had convinced enough Democrats in opposition to roll over – and the bailout passed, setting the stage for a new dispensation between the American State and Wall Street, in which a permanent pipeline of tens of trillions of dollars would flow directly into Wall Street accounts, via the Federal Reserve.

And Obama had not even been elected yet.

Obama put Social Security and Medicaid and all Entitlements on the table, in mid-January. The Republicans had suffered resounding defeat. Nobody was pressuring Obama from the Right. When the Right was on its ass, Obama stood up and spoke in their stead. There was no Evil Devil forcing him to put Entitlements on the chopping block. It was HIM. He was the Evil One – and it was not a Lesser Evil. It was a very Effective Evil, because the current Age of Austerity began on that day, in January, 2009.

And Obama had not even been sworn in as president, yet.

Stephen Gowans makes a similar argument in “Obama Better Than Bush? Yes, But For Who?”:

“Obama’s just a handmaiden of the establishment, but even if he’s only a little better than a Republican president, he’s still a little better.” And a little better can, as Noam Chomsky once said, make a big difference. I guess that’s true, depending on what your goal is. If your goal is to keep public pensions intact for another three years instead of one, little differences do count.

But there’s a point at which goals can go from difficult to reach but achievable to so modest that setting them amounts to capitulation. What’s more, it’s doubtful that the Democrats are even a little better. The view on the left that they are comes from the belief that the Democrats and Republicans differ only in the degree to which they’re willing to make concessions to labor to buy social peace. Democrats will go further, we’re told.

But there’s another view, which liberals, progressives and timid radicals impatiently dismiss as “ultra-left.” It says that because they’re widely but erroneously supposed to be the party of the common man, the Democrats can go further in advancing the agenda of the ultra-wealthy—and do. The reason why is that once in office the common man goes to sleep. Ultra-left or not, this view seems to more closely fit the facts than the competing view that the Democrats are friendlier to the average person (if only to serve ruling class purposes) compared to the Republicans.

Commenting on the difference between Labour and Conservative governments in Britain, the radical sociologist Albert Szymanski once remarked that Labour “followed the same sort of conservative economic policies vis-a-vis balancing the budget, reducing the trade deficit and resisting workers’ demands for wage increases as the Conservative and Liberal governments that came before and after.” But the “main difference between the two types of governments was that a Labour prime minister was better able to get the working class to accept” sacrifices that benefited banks, investors and corporations. In other words, if you want to pacify labor and the left while ramming through measures that advance the interests of capital at the expense of everyone else, bring in a Labour or Democrat or (in Canada) NDP

government. Sure, they're more apt to guarantee social peace, but only because voters think they're in their corner.

This is the reality behind the so-called "lesser evils." Americans in particular are subjected to a never-ending torrent of lies, so they are never exposed to the fact that liberal parties are able to more effectively immiserate humanity by virtue of their progressive reputations. Noam Chomsky joins the rest of the mainstream media establishment in shamelessly, brazenly selling these lies to the public. However, those who follow Michael Parenti received a welcome respite. In a Facebook post titled "Bernie and Me," Parenti discussed his relationship with the Independent Senator from Vermont:

[People have asked me](#) *what I think of the Bernie Sanders campaign. Bernie and I used to be close political friends up in Vermont in the early 1970s. We ran together on a third party ticket (the Liberty Union Party). I ran for the U.S. House of Representatives and Bernie ran for the U.S. Senate... I remained good friends with Bernie. I gave him moral and monetary support in his successful campaigns for Mayor of Burlington, then U.S. House of Representatives.*

But I eventually broke with him because of his position on the Yugoslavia war, the "humanitarian war" as Bill Clinton and his national security state people called it. As did many liberals and some Trotskyites and anarchists, Bernie stood shoulder to shoulder with NATO and the CIA and the Clinton White House in the destruction of Yugoslavia, the 78 days of bombing, drenching Serbia in depleted uranium, leaving Serbia with the highest cancer rate in Europe and breaking up Yugoslavia, one of the best social democracies in Europe, though not without its serious blemishes.

Today, I wish Bernie the best. He is a Democrat although he calls himself a socialist and an independent. But he takes very good stands on Social Security, human services, and curbing the banksters. However, he has voiced not a word about what his foreign policy might be. I suspect it has not improved. I will most likely not be voting for him. Probably I will support some third-party candidate who will run a hard hopeless campaign—of the kind we used to do in Vermont years ago. --MICHAEL PARENTI

Similar sentiments are invariably sneered at by many vaguely self-identified progressives, dismissed as preening ideological purity, a circular firing squad, or the elitism of the coffee shop/humanities department/drum circle (pick your cliché). “[The existence of principles](#) that you then chose to follow through on with actions is often confusing to liberals who imagine themselves socialists,” writes Kevin Dooley. For some of those who object to things like the mass-murder of civilians in order to benefit foreign investors, it is unacceptable, even unconscionable and grotesque, to vote for politicians who have supported and indicate a continued willingness to do that very thing. Many of the liberals-who-believe-they’re-radicals simply don’t have any strong objection to such a thing, and sneer at those who do because it would be gauche to admit their feelings. Through their stance towards the Democrats’ “lesser” evil, Parenti proves to be the former, while Chomsky reveals himself as the latter. As Dooley writes:

In the face of all this reactionary pressure, the importance of maintaining actual socialist principles can't be overstated. The reason why things like lesser-evil advocacy need to be resisted so strongly is because of its pernicious effect on many people's ability to reject the spectacle and see how their class interests are being sabotaged by people who present themselves as allies of progress. Ceding ourselves to a Democrat that signals towards our politics or public intellectuals who constantly use their platforms to counsel the tactical wisdom of compromise instead of the urgent necessity of revolution will continue to lead us exactly where we are. The sooner we remove these influences and start building something based on our own principles the better.

Description vs. Prescription

If you haven't seen it before, and even if you have, take the opportunity to watch this brief clip of Michael Parenti discussing the Cuban Revolution, from [a 1986 lecture](#):

While this clip represents Parenti at his best, it's quite typical of his work. In addition to being well-informed and well-argued, Parenti is

passionate and inspiring. Watching this video would make most listeners feel quite good about what humanity is capable of when we band together and demand our fair share. If this segment has any shortcomings, it's that it doesn't convey how funny Michael Parenti is. It also contains a clear prescription: if people want to enjoy lives of safety, welfare, and dignity, they can do as Cubans did in 1959—organize and seize society's productive forces from the exploitative ruling class, and employ those forces for the good of the many. Keep this clip in mind for later.

Unlike Parenti but like his fellow [extremely anguished liberal](#) thinkers, Noam Chomsky is vague about the best way to create a progressive society. However, he's quite clear on what people should *not* do. Of course, Chomsky has two sets of standards, one for the United States and one for the rest of the world (and possibly a third for Latin America, for which Chomsky like many progressives has a soft spot). So while Chomsky praises the [Sandinista "guerilla force"](#) for fighting a "brutal dictatorship," that prescription carries no weight beyond Nicaragua—after all, he claims the West is very free. He presents socialism as akin to fascism, so communism is unacceptable. Chomsky also argues against many forms of direct action, as in the case of deceased hacker Aaron Swartz. Swartz committed suicide in the midst of an extremely punitive federal prosecution relating to Swartz's downloading and sharing of JSTOR documents—an action that Chomsky slams as theft, among other things. "There's a lot of misrepresentation" in Chomsky's account, according to Tarzie:

[We know by the end of Chomsky's reply](#) what he meant at the outset when he said Swartz is 'a different case.' He meant he wasn't a real dissident. He was a 'kid,' in thrall to the anti-collective 'spirit of the age,' out for himself, too young and selfish to realize that there is only one way to democratize academic information: spend a lifetime petitioning the state to subsidize it. If he were a real dissident, he might have only been marginalized, subject to 'not much punishment, frankly' instead of driven to bankruptcy and suicide by vindictive prosecutors. What happened to Swartz was a tragedy, 'a terrible event,' but it wasn't repression. The United States is a free country.

There are more items on Chomsky's list of undesirable resistance. In an

interview on the anti-Vietnam War movement, Chomsky says "[you have to make a distinction](#) between two kinds of tactics: you could call them feel-good tactics – makes me feel good about myself – and do-good tactics, does something for somebody else. Well, you know, the antiwar movement dissolved to a large extent into feel-good tactics, which were harmful." Chomsky is ostensibly prioritizing tactics that are effective and actually do good over things that are performative and useless. This is a reasonable distinction, but Chomsky continues: "In fact, the Vietnamese were aware of it. I talked to them. What they liked was quiet, non-violent demonstrations which, you know, a group of women standing quietly somewhere. What they didn't like was what was being done. Say, Weathermen... They were frustrated, they were bitter, nothing was working, OK, let's go out and smash some windows. Or let's go out and have a fight in a 3rd Avenue Bar and show the people we're authentic and so on... So, a lot of it was just self-destructive." Chomsky is eliding the vast majority of anti-war activism with his bizarre dichotomy of women standing silently versus someone randomly starting a bar fight. However, much of the anti-war agitation that most scared the US regime was far closer to the latter than the former. Joshua Bloom and Waldo E. Martin, Jr.'s *Black Against Empire* describes some of these protests:

A quarter million people turned out on April 15, 1967, for the Spring Mobilizations against the War in New York and San Francisco—the largest antiwar protest to date in American history. As [Stokely] Carmichael spoke, members of the crowd shouted out "Black Power!" He called the war "brutal and racist" and demanded an end to the draft. Many marchers took up the chant started by SNCC: "Hell No, We Won't Go!" Some protestors displayed flags of the National Liberation Front of Vietnam. In San Francisco, a contingent of black nationalists led the march carrying a streamer that read "The Vietnam N.L.F. Never Called Us Niggers." [p. 130]

Following the ghetto rebellions in July, the National Mobilization Committee to End the War in Vietnam (MOBE), a national coalition of peace organizations [and the largest antiwar coalition in the US at the time], announced at a press conference that it supported the urban uprisings and said that the actions planned for October would "obstruct the war machine." MOBE proclaimed there was "only one struggle—for self determination—and we support it in Vietnam and in black America." A new spirit had swept the

antiwar movement. That October, draft card burnings increased almost tenfold... Thousands of draft resisters stormed the Pentagon. Military police and US marshals beat the demonstrators and released tear gas, reoccupying the grounds yard by yard. Among the protestors, 647 were arrested and 47 hospitalized. A line had been crossed. No longer were the students and antiwar activists simply Americans expressing their view within established channels. Now, inspired by Black Power and emboldened by the ghetto rebellions, many antiwar activists declared themselves revolutionaries, seeking self-determination through resistance. [p.133]

A component of resistance to American imperialism in Indochina was the [revolt of black GIs](#), violent uprisings that occurred [throughout the military](#) and [among veterans at home](#), and included the now-infamous “fragging” of superior officers in-theatre. All this is to say that historical facts would indicate that much of the most effective resistance was strident, loud, and forceful, *contre* Chomsky’s claim that it was quiet people peacefully holding signs that made a difference. As is the case when he is preaching compliance, Chomsky stops burdening himself with any of the voluminous evidence he applies elsewhere. The best he can offer is claiming to know the feelings of “the Vietnamese”—he talked to “them,” after all. If these Vietnamese are any more real than [Slavoj Žižek’s black friend](#), it’s a mystery who “they” are. Bigger still is the mystery of how “the Vietnamese” came to see “a group of women standing quietly somewhere” as *the* indispensable American allies in the anti-imperialist struggle, over the activists and resisters who actually threw themselves on the gears in order to make the machine stop, [to quote](#) an activist of the era. Chomsky’s statement, which his interviewer accepts at face value, is a very clumsy inversion of reality; defining resistance as harmful “feel-good” nonsense, and building an ineffective tactic into a brave and decisive act that “the Vietnamese” love.

Even certain forms of non-violent action are out of bounds for the dissident academic. Chomsky [opposes a cultural boycott of Israel](#), part of the Boycott, Divest, and Sanction (BDS) movement, itself a non-violent international solidarity component of the Palestinian liberation struggle. “Just as I do not suggest boycotting Harvard University and my own university, even though the United States is involved in horrific acts. [...] You might as well boycott the United States,” the academic adds. This comparison, often trotted out in

defense of the Israeli settler-colony, betrays a lack of rudimentary knowledge of the contours of the Palestinian freedom movement, and the role that BDS plays in this struggle. However, if the American Indian Movement, Aztlán, and the Republic of New Afrika were waging a liberation struggle that foreigners could aid by boycotting American institutions, then Chomsky's analogy would make more sense. And if this were the case, and Chomsky rejected this non-violent struggle, one would have to wonder how much of an ally he really was. It would certainly invite questions of how much he knows beyond casualty figures trotted out on [Democracy Now](#) for the purpose of wringing anguish from his audience.

For those seeking to substitute the American regime for something more progressive, Chomsky is largely at ease with doing what he does best: imparting information. In a 2006 interview with Michael Hastings, the late correspondent asks Chomsky why the antiwar movement of the 1960s was so much more successful than the modern antiwar movement. Chomsky replied "[I think it's the other way around](#)". The United States attacked Vietnam in 1962. It took years before any protest developed. Iraq is the first time in hundreds of years of European and American history that a war was massively protested before it was launched. There was huge protest in February 2003. It had never happened in the history of the West." This reflects ideas Chomsky articulates elsewhere, about how "[popular reaction](#)" keeps the state from going too far. In discussing reasons for optimism in a 2001 interview, Chomsky [cites changing perceptions](#) of the conquest of the Americas. The academic explains that for most of American history, the mainstream perception totally whitewashed the staggering genocide of the New World's indigenous people. However, "In the 1960s, that changed. For the first time in hundreds of years of American history, consciousness changed significantly about that. It is still pretty awful—I do not want to say it is utopia—but for the first time there was a willingness to recognize that something pretty horrible had happened. Those are big changes—a lot to be optimistic about." As of this month, things seem to getting even better in the "power of public perception" department. Just as Chomsky claims that public opinion makes us freer than ever at home, so too does it worldwide. In a wide-ranging piece promoting his new book *Who Rules The World?*, the professor reports that as "[the US is losing its tight grip on power](#)," world public opinion has become a "second superpower," which is able to constrain the worst impulses of men

like Dick Cheney and Donald Rumsfeld. This is a breath of fresh air for readers given to despair over contemporaneous pronouncements like "[The world that we're creating](#) for our grandchildren is grim," and his accurate perception that climate change threatens to exterminate most life on Earth.

Chomsky's take on the 2003 anti-war movement seems naïve in retrospect, as the [vast majority of protestors](#) were merely liberals objecting to one particular Connecticut Texan and his neocon buddies prosecuting the war. Today, protests are increasingly skipping directly to [the arrests and brand-building](#) spectacle without any of the controversial defiance whatsoever. The "consciousness shift" Chomsky saw taking hold in the '60s and '70s didn't effect any material benefits for American Indians, either. It didn't free or resurrect any of the activists who fell victim to COINTELPRO, and today Pine Ridge Indian Reservation has the lowest standard of living in the Western hemisphere after Haiti. So despite Chomsky's optimism, these don't seem like big changes at all; in fact, the evidence suggests these changes are entirely superficial. Just like the professor can issue a damning indictment of the American system and then describe things as freer and more democratic than ever, so does he see a grim, almost Apocalyptic vision of the future made rosier by vague grassroots tempering influences. In Chomsky's class-free view of the world, the fact that the American military empire is being challenged by regional powers equals a victory for wider humanity. Over the course of his long "Who Rules the World?" disquisition, he hits on many of headlines familiar to regular news readers: the American War of Independence, the rise of China, Ukraine's "Orange Revolution," the War on Terror, the Monroe Doctrine, Cuba, the TPP, NATO, 9/11, etc. This all sounds very substantive, but at no point does Chomsky explain how these or any other event demonstrates a victory for the rest of us. The headline asks "Who rules the world? America is no longer the obvious answer," and the reader is left with a mishmash of historical events and a vague feeling that they have learned something.

In contrast, Michael Parenti holds no such comforting, baseless illusions. As someone who rightly perceives the cause of human freedom in class terms, Parenti sees that "[the empire is doing very well](#). The empire is racking up victory after victory." The destruction of intransigent states, the presence of fascists backed by American oligarchs in the Ukraine and India, the

dominance of neoliberal and neoconservative forces throughout the North Atlantic treaty powers, the counter-revolutionary forces arrayed against Latin America's fledgling social democracies—these are successes “because the goal or the function of the state in the empire is to advance the interests of the empire, and those interests are to make sure that the—as I said—the land, the labor, the natural resources, the human resources, the social organization of culture. The markets of every country should be a part of, and in the orbit of this giant US imperial state.” This is the goal that is being pursued regardless of whatever momentary inconveniences are so heartening Chomsky. Neither is the US government in any way going to tolerate these challenges. As @Cordeliers points out: a “[bloodcurdling new defense budget](#) request indicates US has abandoned ‘strategic rebalance’ and intends to pursue Full Spectrum Dominance on multiple fronts. No more redistribution of assets and relying on proxies. US imperialism is going for broke.”

Let's return to the clip of Parenti that opened this section, and contrast it with typical commentary from Noam Chomsky. If one so wishes, they can watch a bit of this clip from a 2014 appearance on *Democracy Now*, discussing Gaza:

This clip is essentially everything that Parenti's comments were not. It's neither passionate nor inspiring. It is also quite long, continuing for several repetitive minutes where a briefer recapitulation would suffice. Chomsky's comments contain a lot of information, presented as a succession of gruesome things. Tarzie memorably dubbed Chomsky “the merchant of horror” for this sort of misery-heavy engagement. It reminds me most of a joke from *Futurama*, where the professor takes a phone call that takes a hilariously grim turn: “[Oh how awful](#). Did he at least die painlessly? *To shreds*, you say? Well, how is his wife holding up? *To shreds*, you say?” There is no effort at offering a solution, only more bathos. Where Parenti's comments are inspirational and provide a clear path, Chomsky's only offer more hand-wringing. The only thing they'll inspire a listener to do is feel terrible about the state of the world—and maybe open a new browser tab in the meantime, or take a nap.

With these two kinds of speaking in such stark contrast, it's necessary to descend momentarily into the gutter of style critique. This sort of analysis is only done grudgingly, since style criticisms are usually substance-free tone policing, as is often the case with Chomsky's critics from the right. However, it's necessary to discuss Chomsky's style because with him, the medium is very much the message. For discerning, progressive media consumers, Chomsky stands in stark contrast to the typical, banal offerings of *Faux Snooze* and the corporate news giants. There is a spectrum, with bright lights and sexy graphics on one end and substantive, methodical speech on the other. This December 2006 [Daily Show segment](#) illustrates the attitude. In it, correspondent Samantha Bee meets with the anchors of the then-new Al Jazeera English channel, and offers them tips to make their network more appealing. By recommending that they adopt pretty trifles like insipid theme music, scrolling news chyrons, cynical scaremongering tactics, and folksy affectations, Bee conveys that these things mark news as "unserious" for the type of people who watch *The Daily Show*. Chomsky presents the other ends of the spectrum. The fact that he speaks monotonically and dispassionately while sharing a river of information is proof that he is the real deal in much the same way that a shaky camera in a film conveys *verité*-style realism.

Chomsky himself ratifies this perception. Asked by an interviewer if he ever considers sounding more exhortative, Chomsky replied: "[No. People say](#), 'Look, he's not a good speaker,' and I'm happy about that. If I knew how to do it, I wouldn't. I really dislike good speakers. I think they're dangerous people. Because you shouldn't be exhorting people by the force of your rhetoric. You should be getting them to think about it so they can figure out what they want to do. The best way to do that, that I can imagine, is to say, 'Why don't you think about these questions?' Quietly, not screaming. 'Think about these questions. Figure out for yourself what's the best way to deal with them.'" Chomsky believes that inspiring speakers are likely snake-oil salesmen trying to push a bad bill of goods. In this, Chomsky is very much like America's democracy-abominating founders, who feared masses animated by passions and sought to rule their empire through the "cool" faculties of reason.

This is part of Chomsky's service that lends him such a platform. As Tarzie explains, "[Chomsky's celebrity](#) marks a turning point, or an innovation, in

the containment and shaping of middle class dissent, through the commoditization of revulsion, and the reconfiguration of handwringing as resistance.” Chomsky was given his perch when previous generations of radicals were all murdered, jailed, intimidated away, or co-opted. Many of these activists were unalloyedly socialist and committed to their causes, since they had no other choice. They wielded megaphones, advocated clear paths to a better world, and came to prominence with the rise of their mass movements. Chomsky heralded a new generation of prominent critics. These critics came to the public eye from journalism or academia, had less invested in radical change, and like Chomsky were overwhelmingly rich, white, and male. In lieu of prescription, they had information—ever more news, leaks, and reports. Today, as Tarzie has said, the permissible left looks more like a cargo cult, devoted to the perpetual release of more information. New generations look more like what Tarzie calls “the mutant love child of liberalism and libertarianism,” with the liberal’s love of American military power as a civilizing force and the libertarian love of private-sector solutions. With his comments about knowing “the Vietnamese,” Chomsky even anticipated today’s State Department-adjacent liberaltarian hawks, who claim that 1) they know Syrians; 2) their Syrian friends want US intervention; so 3) they can plausibly claim to speak for the Syrian people collectively when they demand foreign regime change in Syria.

The current left (whether one calls it the *Celebrity Left*, the *pseudo-Left*, or something else) is increasingly distant from the ruling class’s worst nightmare: socialism. In this, Chomsky was an innovator. That Chomsky’s analysis is generally nation-based rather than class-based has been discussed before, but it’s worth touching on one last time. In a typical essay, Chomsky will promise to expose the US government’s real motives behind what it does. What American “[motives actually are](#) is rarely discussed, and one has to look at the documentary and historical record to unearth them,” he will tantalizingly offer: “What then are US motives? At a very general level, the evidence seems to me to show that they have not changed much since the high-level planning studies undertaken during World War II,” when the US consolidated its superpower position and decided to maintain it. So the American system was instituted post-WWII, and it has been perpetuating itself ever since in order to remain on top. But why? After several hundred words, Chomsky offers that the US sought terms in Iraq that would grant “indefinite

access and must privilege American investors.” Later, he mentions “hydrocarbon reserves.” To summarize, in an interview purporting to expose the truth behind US motives, there are scattershot mentions of the ruling class’s rapacious economic hungers. Chomsky often refers to “[the mafia principle](#)” as the theory underlying US global hegemony, which sounds lucid enough on first glance. However, as he uses it, it has a tautological quality that erases the ruling class (the latter three being words he uses extraordinarily rarely): the US brooks no opposition because it is hegemonic, the US is hegemonic because it brooks no opposition. While he will make reference to “business interests,” they are interwoven occasionally with the rest of the information presented. To read Chomsky, US power sounds like a dynamo that has been set in motion and continues due to existing momentum and nudges from various vague sources. That US foreign policy is structured in order to benefit the super-rich is a primary concern for Marxist commentators like Parenti, while it is at best an aside for Chomsky. Chomsky’s new book, *Who Rules the World?*, looks to be much of the same mealy-mouthed, largely class-free analysis. If an article titled “[Who Runs the World?](#)” answers anything but “the ruling class,” then the reader is being bamboozled; Chomsky includes a jab at “The neoliberal programs of the past generation [which] have concentrated wealth and power in far fewer hands while undermining functioning democracy,” and nothing else useful or new.

In an [interview on Manufacturing Consent](#) with David Barsamian, Barsamian asks the celebrity academic:

Antonio Gramsci, who helped popularize the term “hegemony,” wrote in 1925, “A main obstacle to change is the reproduction by the dominating forces of elements of the hegemonic ideology. It’s an important and urgent task to develop alternative interpretations of reality.” How does someone develop “alternative interpretations of reality,” as Gramsci suggests?

Noam Chomsky: *I respect Gramsci a lot, but I think it’s possible to paraphrase that comment, namely, just tell the truth. Instead of repeating ideological fanaticism, dismantle it, try to find out the truth, and tell the truth. Does that say anything different? It’s something any one of us can do. Remember, intellectuals internalize the conception that they have to make things look complicated, otherwise what are they around for? But it’s worth asking yourself how much of it really is complicated. Gramsci is*

a very admirable person, but take that statement and try to translate it into simple English. Is it complicated to understand, or to know how to act?

All the information needed to damn the current system a thousand times over is already available: people need it synthesized and they need a solution. They need what Gramsci called “alternative interpretations of reality.” As a Marxist commentator who is Chomsky’s superior *in every conceivable way*, Michael Parenti offers such an alternative to the status quo. Chomsky, in contrast, see much of the same conditions as does Parenti, and leads others away from solutions which might actually threaten to change the system too much. As Tarzie points out, “[Chomsky has been given](#) a wide berth because he helpfully provides a Marxist analysis free of a Marxist solution.” Chomsky makes clear that a lucid analysis without a firmly socialist solution scares the ruling class not one whit. If humanity is to kill capital before it kills humanity, it’s time to realize that and keep it perpetually in the foreground.

A warm thanks to the authors linked below for their pre-existing work, as well as [@IranNewsNotes](#), “[Crypto Cuttlefish](#),” and [@BrandishVT](#) for feeding ideas.

Recommended Reading:

Michael Parenti:

[Left Anticommunism—the Unkindest Cut](#): “Many on the U.S. Left have exhibited a Soviet bashing and Red baiting that matches anything on the Right in its enmity and crudity.”

[Another View of Chomsky](#): “when talking about the corporations, Chomsky can sound as good as Ralph Nader, and when talking about existing Communist movements and society, he can sound as bad as any right-wing pundit.”

Tarzie:

[Passing Noam On My Way Out, Part 1](#): on Chomsky’s consistent pattern of whitewashing domestic US repression.

[*Passing Noam On My Way Out, Part 2*](#): discussing Chomsky's posthumous smears against Aaron Schwartz, and how it ties into his whitewashing US repression.

[*White Supremacy and Magic Paper*](#): a must-read piece on the power-serving doctrine often called "free speech absolutism," and Chomsky's embrace of it ([Part 3: Magic Paper Theory](#)).

[*Chomsky's Insistent Whitewashing of Domestic Repression*](#): more on Chomsky's stunningly ahistoric view of the conditions faced by American resisters.

[*Chomsky's Provisional Fascism*](#): "There is no limit, apparently, to how many ways Chomsky, an alleged anarchist, can tout a provisional alliance with state authority. This finds its most extreme expression in a willingness to make common cause with fascism."

[*Passing Noam On My Way Out—Intermission*](#): a bit on Chomsky as a template for "dissent mediated by elite-anointed rebels."

Kevin Dooley:

[*The Responsibility of Radicals*](#): on Chomsky's "lesser" evilism and the quadrennial prominence this earns him.

[*The Limits of Chomsky's Anti-Imperialism*](#): on Chomsky's nation- rather than class-based anti-imperialism and its implications.

Stephen Gowans:

[*The Revolution Will Not Be Televised—Nor Will it be Brought to You By Russell Brand, Oliver Stone or Noam Chomsky*](#): self-explanatory and essential reading.

[*The Responsibility of Intellectuals*](#): on Chomsky's utility as a delivery vector for imperialist propaganda to leftists.

[post-views]



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