

## The Responsible Intellectual?

by Martyn Oliver

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Noam Chomsky

*Powers and Prospects: Reflections on Human Nature and the Social Order*  
London: Pluto Press, 1996

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Chomsky's latest work of hard-nosed anti-establishment empiricism appears at a time when the guilt that many intellectuals feel about not being politically engaged seems to have been relieved by a wonderful array of post-ironic therapy in the human and social sciences. Some may not want, therefore, to read his latest offering. Those who do should expect more of his typical outraged radicalism.

*Power and Prospects* contains two chapters on language. But, like much of Chomsky's work, it is essentially about intellectual responsibility, or, more accurately, intellectual *irresponsibility* in the face of the glaring atrocities and abuses of power committed by the capitalist ruling elites. Faced with the propaganda machine that is the mass media, the 'responsibility of the writer as a *moral agent*', says Chomsky, should be 'to try to bring the truth about matters of *human significance to an audience that can do something about them.*' But, Chomsky argues, although this proposal ought to be an uncontentious truism, the intellectual communities to which we belong, are rejecting it more passionately than ever before.

In his usual provocative tones, Chomsky lists some disturbing facts: for example, the West's significant responsibility for the atrocities in East Timor, which have been either ignored or denied by his contemporaries but which, as facts, should be uncontroversial 'among people with a shred of rationality and integrity'. Chomsky is right to suggest that the meagre recognition given to the case of East Timor is

shameful. But this case and the others that Chomsky cites cannot be given as examples of 'intellectual irresponsibility'.

This is so because - Chomsky implies - 'intellectual responsibility' entails agreeing with his definition of the truth. In order to guarantee one's intellectual responsibility one would need, therefore, to consult Chomsky about what constituted the truth. For Chomsky, to *believe* that one is telling the truth isn't good enough because to be responsible one needs to tell the truth as it is - that is, as he understands it (which means recognising the nature of the global capitalist system). If one decided that contacting Chomsky before declaring the truth was too expensive, and sought the truth by collecting the facts about global capitalism oneself, then one would simply be verifying the truth against a particular world-view.

It is one thing to ask for certain democratically conscious intellectual standards, and for higher levels of effective participation in the political debates that count, and quite another to demand that we all write 'the truth'. Moreover, applying permanent and unconditional criteria for intellectual responsibility would surely be undesirable because this would further reduce our receptiveness to irresponsible intellectuals whose contributions we cherish. In Chomsky's terms, Hannah Arendt, Michel Foucault and Václav Havel are all wildly irresponsible intellectuals.

Chomsky also exaggerates his own radicalism. He seems to view his own isolation as a clear indication of the scale of global capitalist domination. But one of the reasons why Chomsky is not taken as seriously as he would wish by his contemporaries is that, in fact, versions of his arguments have been mulled over by a sizeable portion of the academic-intellectual community for much of the twentieth century. Such views are neither shocking nor on the outer

margins of academic-intellectual discourse; they are, in fact, rather mundane in their familiarity.

Nonetheless, Chomsky's efforts, refreshingly exemplified in this book, to write clearly and for readers beyond the academy, do bolster his insistence that intellectuals should speak to audiences that can do something about matters of human significance. Identifying those audiences is arguably difficult, but considerably less so than knowing when audiences have been told the truth. In this respect Chomsky's writing is a necessary counter to the dominance of the self-perpetuating and exclusive academic language games of contemporary social and political theory.

If we are to have some kind of normative basis for the role of the intellectual we ought to drop the term 'truth' altogether, be more careful about 'responsibility', and worry much more about creating democratised channels of communication that have an effective relationship to structures of power. This is not to say that there is no place for hard-nosed empiricism. Indeed, Chomsky's perceptive descriptions of the vested interests behind decision-making processes are vitally necessary.

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*Martyn Oliver is a PhD candidate at CSD and a Visiting Lecturer in Politics at the University of Westminster.*

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*Editor: Patrick Burke*

*Centre for the Study of Democracy  
University of Westminster  
309 Regent Street  
London W1R 8AL*

*Phone: (+44) 0171 911 5138  
FAX: (+44) 0171 911 5164  
e-mail: csd@westminster.ac.uk*

*Director: Professor John Keane*

*The Editorial Board for this issue was Patrick Burke, Virginia Williams, and John Keane.*

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