

The greatest intellectual?

Q: Do you regret supporting those who say the Srebrenica massacre was exaggerated?

A: My only regret is that I didn't do it strongly enough.

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Despite his belief that most journalists are unwitting upholders of western imperialism, Noam Chomsky, the radical's radical, agrees to see me at his office in Boston. He works here as a professor of linguistics, a sort of Clark Kent alter ego to his activist Superman, in a nubbly old jumper, big white trainers and a grand-dad jacket with pockets designed to accommodate a Thermos. There is a half-finished packet of fig rolls on the desk. Such is the effect of an hour spent with Chomsky that, writing this, I wonder: is it wrong to mention the fig rolls when there is undocumented suffering going on in El Salvador?

Ostensibly I am here because Chomsky, 76, has been voted the world's top public intellectual by Prospect magazine, but he has no interest in that. He believes that there is a misconception about what it means to be smart. It is not a question of wit, as with no 5 on the list (Christopher Hitchens) or poetic dash like no. 4 (Vaclav Havel), or the sort of articulacy that lends itself to television appearances, like no. 37, the thinking girl's pin-up Michael Ignatieff, whom Chomsky calls an apologist for the establishment and dispenser of "garbage". Chomsky, by contrast, speaks in a barely audible croak and of his own, largely unsuccessful, television appearances has written dismissively: "The beauty of concision is that you can only repeat conventional thoughts." Being smart, he believes, is a function of a plodding, unsexy, application to the facts and "using your intelligence to decide what's right".

This is, of course, what Chomsky has been doing for the last 35 years, and his conclusions remain controversial: that practically every US president since the second world war has been guilty of war crimes; that in the overall context of Cambodian history, the Khmer Rouge weren't as bad as everyone makes out; that during the Bosnian war the "massacre" at Srebrenica was probably overstated. (Chomsky uses quotations marks to undermine things he disagrees with and, in print at least, it can come across less as academic than as witheringly teenage; like, Srebrenica was so not a massacre.)

While his critics regard him as an almost compulsive revisionist, Chomsky is more mainstream now than ever as disgust with the Bush government grows; the book he put out after the twin towers attacks, called 9-11, sold 300,000 copies. Given that until recently he worked full-time at Massachusetts Institute of Technology, there remain suspicions over how he has managed to become an expert, seemingly, on every conflict since the second world war; it is assumed by his critics that he plugs the gaps in his knowledge with ideology.

Chomsky says this is just laziness on their part and besides, "the best scientists aren't the ones who know the most data; they're the ones who know what they're looking for."

Still, of all the intellectuals on the Prospect list, it is Chomsky who is most often accused of miring a debate in intellectual spam, what the writer Paul Berman calls his “customary blizzard of obscure sources”. I ask if he has a photographic memory and Chomsky smiles. “It’s the other way round. I can’t remember names, can’t remember faces. I don’t have any particular talents that everybody else doesn’t have.”

His daily news intake is the regular national press and he dips in and out of specialist journals. I imagine he is a fan of the internet, given his low opinion of the mainstream media (to summarize: it is undermined by a “systematic bias in terms of structural economic causes rather than a conspiracy of people”. I would argue individual agency overrides this, but get into it with Chomsky and your allocated hour goes up in smoke). So I am surprised when he says he only goes online if he is “hunting for documents, or historical data. It’s a hideous time-waster. One of the good things about the internet is you can put up anything you like, but that also means you can put up any kind of nonsense. If the intelligence agencies knew what they were doing, they would stimulate conspiracy theories just to drive people out of political life, to keep them from asking more serious questions ... There’s a kind of an assumption that if somebody wrote it on the internet, it’s true.”

Is there? It’s clear, suddenly, that Chomsky’s opinion can be as flaky as the next person’s; he just states it more forcefully. I tell him that most people I know don’t believe anything they read on the internet and he says, seamlessly, “you see, that’s dangerous, too.” His responses to criticism vary from this sort of mild absorption to, during our subsequent ratty exchange about Bosnia, the childish habit of trashing his opponents whom he calls “hysterical”, “fanatics” and “tantrum throwers”. I suspect that being on the receiving end of lots “half-crazed” nut-mail, as he calls it (he gets at least four daily emails accusing him of being a Mossad agent, a CIA agent or a member of al-Qaida), has made his defensive position rather entrenched. Chomsky sighs and says that he has never claimed to have a monopoly on the truth, then looks merry for a moment and says that the only person who does is his wife, Carol. “My grandchildren call her Truth Teller. When I tease them and they’re not sure if I’m telling the truth, they turn to her and say: ‘Truth Teller, is it really true?’”

Chomsky’s activism has its roots in his childhood. He grew up in the depression of the 1930s, the son of William Chomsky and Elsie Simonofsky, Russian immigrants to Philadelphia. He describes the family as “working-class Jews”, most of who were unemployed, although his parents, both teachers, were lucky enough to work. There was no sense of America as the promised land: “It wasn’t much of an opportunity-giver in my immediate family,” he says, although it was an improvement on the pogroms of Russia, which none the less Chomsky can’t help qualifying as “not very bad, by contemporary standards. In the worst of the major massacres, I think about 49 people were killed.”

The house in Philadelphia was crowded, full of aunts and cousins, many of them seamstresses who weathered the depression thanks to the help of the International Ladies Garment Union. Chomsky was four years old when he witnessed, from a passing trolley car, strikers outside a textile plant being beaten by the police. At 10 he wrote his first political pamphlet, against the rise of fascism in Spain. “It was all part of the atmosphere,” he says.

The Chomskys were one of the few Jewish families in an Irish and German neighbourhood, and Chomsky and his brother fought often in the street; he remembers there were celebrations when Paris fell to the Germans. His parents kept their heads down and until their deaths, he says, “never had an idea of what was going on outside”.

Chomsky had a choice of role models. There was his father's family in Baltimore, who were "super-orthodox". "They regressed back to the stage they were at even before they were in the shtetl, which is not uncommon among immigrant communities; a tendency to close in and go back to an exaggerated form of what you came from." He smiles. "It's a hostile world."

Or there was his mother's family in New York, who crowded into a big government apartment and got by solely on the wages of a disabled uncle, who on the basis of his disability was awarded a small newsstand by the state. Chomsky chose the latter and his radicalism grew out of the time he spent, from the age of 12, commuting to New York at weekends to help on the newsstand.

"It became a kind of salon," he says. "My uncle had no formal education but he was an extremely intelligent man - he'd been through all the leftwing groups, from the Communists to the Trotskyists to the anti-Leninists; he was very much involved in psychoanalysis. There were a lot of German emigres in New York at the time and in the evening they would hang around the newsstand and talk. My uncle finally ended up being a pretty wealthy lay analyst on Riverside Drive." He bursts out laughing.

It was a time, says Chomsky, when no one knew what was going to happen. They discussed the possibility of a socialist revolution, or of the country collapsing entirely. Anything seemed possible. Compared with these sorts of discussion, he found high school and, later, college, "dumb and stupid". He was thinking of dropping out of the University of Pennsylvania when he met his second mentor, Zellig Harris, a linguistics professor who encouraged him to pursue his own academic interests. Chomsky had grown up in a household where language was important; his parents spoke Yiddish and his father wrote a PhD on 14th-century Hebrew, which the young Chomsky read with interest. And so he pursued a study of linguistics and many years down the line formulated a ground-breaking theory, that of "universal grammar", the idea that the brain's facility for language is innate rather than a function of behaviourism. It sounds to me as if he was an arrogant young man who thought, with some justification, that he knew more than his teachers. Chomsky bristles at the word arrogant and says: "No. I assumed I was wrong and took for granted that the standard approach [to linguistics] was correct."

Even though he went on to study at Harvard, he still, in a rare concession to the romance of outsidership, describes himself as "self-taught".

There were only a couple of years in the mid-1950s when he gave up activism altogether. He had met and married Carol Schatz, a fellow linguist, and they had three young children. Chomsky had to choose whether to commit himself to activism or to let it go. The Vietnam war protests were getting under way and, if he chose the former, there was a real danger of a jail sentence, so much so that Carol re-enrolled at college in case she had to become the sole breadwinner. But Chomsky was not, he says, the sort of person who could attend the occasional demo and then hope the world would fix itself.

"Yeah, my wife tried to talk me out of it, just as she does now. But she knows I can be stubborn and that I'll carry on with it as long as I'm ambulatory or whatever."

These days, Carol accompanies her husband to most of his public appearances. He is asked to lend his name to all sorts of crackpot causes and she tries to intervene to keep his schedule under control. As some see it, one ill-judged choice of cause was the accusation made by Living Marxism magazine that during the

Bosnian war, shots used by ITN of a Serb-run detention camp were faked. The magazine folded after ITN sued, but the controversy flared up again in 2003 when a journalist called Diane Johnstone made similar allegations in a Swedish magazine, Ordfront, taking issue with the official number of victims of the Srebrenica massacre. (She said they were exaggerated.) In the ensuing outcry, Chomsky lent his name to a letter praising Johnstone's "outstanding work". Does he regret signing it?

"No," he says indignantly. "It is outstanding. My only regret is that I didn't do it strongly enough. It may be wrong; but it is very careful and outstanding work."

How, I wonder, can journalism be wrong and still outstanding?

"Look," says Chomsky, "there was a hysterical fanaticism about Bosnia in western culture which was very much like a passionate religious conviction. It was like old-fashioned Stalinism: if you depart a couple of millimetres from the party line, you're a traitor, you're destroyed. It's totally irrational. And Diane Johnstone, whether you like it or not, has done serious, honest work. And in the case of Living Marxism, for a big corporation to put a small newspaper out of business because they think something they reported was false, is outrageous."

They didn't "think" it was false; it was proven to be so in a court of law.

But Chomsky insists that "LM was probably correct" and that, in any case, it is irrelevant. "It had nothing to do with whether LM or Diane Johnstone were right or wrong." It is a question, he says, of freedom of speech. "And if they were wrong, sure; but don't just scream well, if you say you're in favour of that you're in favour of putting Jews in gas chambers."

Eh? Not everyone who disagrees with him is a "fanatic", I say. These are serious, trustworthy people.

"Like who?"

"Like my colleague, Ed Vulliamy."

Vulliamy's reporting for the Guardian from the war in Bosnia won him the international reporter of the year award in 1993 and 1994. He was present when the ITN footage of the Bosnian Serb concentration camp was filmed and supported their case against LM magazine.

"Ed Vulliamy is a very good journalist, but he happened to be caught up in a story which is probably not true."

But Karadic's number two herself [Biljana Plavsic] pleaded guilty to crimes against humanity.

"Well, she certainly did. But if you want critical work on the party line, General Lewis MacKenzie who was the Canadian general in charge, has written that most of the stories were complete nonsense."

And so it goes on, Chomsky fairly vibrating with anger at Vulliamy and co's "tantrums" over his questioning of their account of the war. I suggest that if they are having tantrums it's because they have contact with the survivors of Srebrenica and witness the impact of the downplaying of their experiences. He fairly explodes. "That's such a western European position. We are used to having our jackboot on people's necks, so we don't see our victims. I've seen them: go to Laos, go to Haiti, go to El Salvador. You'll see people who are really suffering brutally. This does not give us the

right to lie about that suffering.” Which is, I imagine, why ITN went to court in the first place.

You could pick any number of other conflicts over which to have a barney with Chomsky. Seeing as we have entered the bad-tempered part of the interview, I figure we may as well continue and ask if he finds it ironic that, given his views on the capitalist system, he is a beneficiary of it. “Well, what capitalist system? Do you use a computer? Do you use the internet? Do you take an aeroplane? That comes from the state sector of the economy. I’m certainly a beneficiary of this state-based, quasi-market system; does that mean that I shouldn’t try to make it a better society?”

OK, let’s look at the non-state based, quasi-market system. Does he have a share portfolio? He looks cross. “You’d have to ask my wife about that. I’m sure she does. I don’t see any reason why she shouldn’t. Would it help people if I went to Montana and lived on a mountain? It’s only rich, privileged westerners - who are well educated and therefore deeply irrational - in whose minds this idea could ever arise. When I visit peasants in southern Colombia, they don’t ask me these questions.”

I suggest that people don’t like being told off about their lives by someone they consider a hypocrite. “There’s no element of hypocrisy.” He suddenly smiles at me, benign again, and we end it there.