What makes Chomsky different from nearly all other American anarchists is that his identification with our label originates with the Spanish Civil War, which, born in 1928, he must have followed as a precocious young American. As he writes on page 42, in this book's longest essay, "The Spanish Civil War is one of the crucial events of modern history...In it we find the interplay of forces and ideas that have dominated European history since the industrial revolution." Since prior anarchist writers cited in these pages are mostly Spanish, it is indicative that he doesn't to my memory cite exemplary Americans such as Emma Goldman or Paul Goodman. (Since this book lacks an index, I can't be entirely sure about this.) Precisely because of these origins, Chomsky was never seduced by Communism that was influential upon impressionable young radicals when he was growing up. I can't think of any other English-writing anarchist of note who is essentially Spanish in his orientation not even Murray Bookchin, who is only a few years older than Chomsky, who actually wrote a whole book about Spanish anarchism.

Those already familiar with, or committed to, anarchism will be disappointed to note that Chomsky doesn't touch about a whole range of issues important to us, such as ecology term limitations, access to personal weapons, academic tenure, financial survival in a disaffecting economy, affirmative action, immigration, or political secession of the coastal states. Indeed, sometimes Chomsky is scarcely distinguishable from a common liberal, declaring in a 2004 interview (p. 240) that "the main domestic problem we face is the collapse of the health care system." Not so. The larger problem for libertarians is the persistence of authoritarian American structures that support drug-company monopolies, the licensing of doctors (who thus have a state-enforced monopoly on work that could be done by nurses), the prohibition of known palliatives (marijuana, heroin), the invasion of privacy, etc.

Barry Pateman (the book's editor, whose sole bio note is buried on p. 233) reports George Woodcock's response to Chomsky's 1970 introduction to Daniel Guérin's Anarchism, reprinted here as "For Reasons for State" (1973). "It was one-dimensional. Chomsky, said Woodcock, was a left-wing Marxist (as was Guérin) who wished to use anarchism to soften and clarify his own Marxism. His work was mired in the nineteenth century language of anarchism. At best it was anarcho-syndicalism; at worst simple economic determinism. There was no reference to Kropotkin, Malatesta, Herbert Read." Acknowledging Woodcocks critique, Pateman continues: "To be sure, there is in Chomsky's work a certain blurring of terms, as well as the suggestion that left-wing communism, council communism and anarchism have much in common as tools with which to critique state socialism and capitalism." To criticize, yes; to propose, no.

Burying a bio note for Pateman reflects vulgar, if not celebrity-centered, publishing that I think contrary to a critical attitude that should be skeptical of starmaking cultural machinery of the publishing-industrial complex. I had to go to the Internet to find that additionally Pateman "has been working with the Emma Goldman Papers since June 1999, and had been the Projects research associate in the U.K. since 1989."

For someone who publishes so much, Chomsky is a surprisingly graceless and, worse, witless writer. No wonder his prose rarely appears in anthologies of aphorisms, even radicals' aphorisms. He has a taste for long paragraphs whose sentences don't always elaborate upon the topic sentence. I get the sense of someone who dislikes writing so much that he rarely rewrites and,
indeed, prefers giving interviews that, in fact, fill much of On Anarchism as well as another book also to come from AK Press, the expanded third edition of his Radical Priorities (2003). Reading both books, the best writing I could find is this: "The main one [program of university & society] is indicated by the fact that since World War II we've spent over a trillion dollars on what is laughably called defense, and unknown amounts for subversion in other countries. We've intervened repeatedly with military force to overthrown governments which we admit to be popular constitutional governments, to maintain in power oppressive dictators which are willing to subordinate themselves to our interests. At least once, and perhaps twice, we've forced modern civilization to the brink of destruction." Alas, this probably won't appear in any Bartlett's. Though some are impressed by his many footnotes, I am scarcely alone in noticing that too many refer to his own books; some of them reportedly lead nowhere.

II

Writing now about Chomsky, I recall an appreciation I wrote only two years ago and never published, about his appearance on the threehour live C-Span interview "In Depth" customarily presented on its second channel initially at noon on the first Sunday of every month. As an unedited conversation interrupted only scarcely, In Depth is one of the most challenging media forums for an author precisely because it is formally the antipode of the highly selective "sound bite" more common nowadays in television. The individual featured In Depth has customarily written not several but many books about which not only the C-Span staffer but the audience can pose questions. While die British historian Sir Martin Gilbert was impressive, I've seen this extended format defeat writers such as Susan Sontag, otherwise a promiscuous interviewee, who, realizing her insufficiencies, complained on camera that she'd never done the three-hour length before. Not long ago, Harold Bloom filled the time characteristically displaying his stupendous memory for literature, reciting passages, recalling plots, while saying little significant and less influential.

The Noam Chomsky interview was impressive initially for the intimacy of his address, his command of purportedly relevant facts and examples, and his skepticism before more "radical hypotheses from the C-Span telephone callers. Favoring full paragraphs over snappy remarks, he talked about Israel, the American founding fathers, the invasion of Iraq, the similarities between nineteenth-century British imperialism and current American adventures. Even in his mid-seventies, Chomsky didn't tire, and he didn't often repeat himself.

Perhaps because he has spent his entire life in schools (for instance never serving in the military, running a business, or even working in a store), he is ingenuously open, never dismissing the stupidest callers, acknowledging that MIT was indeed a favorite contractee for the US military, that his own academic research during the 1960s was "100 per cent supported by the Pentagon," that his colleagues in political science imite him to participate in doctorial orals only for "diird-world women," or that he let an unsympathetic New Yorker reporter into his office on the generous principle that no one should be forbidden access. (Celebrities with something to hide, or insecure about their prominence, such as Susan Sontag, say, customarily have agents previewing all interviewers.) Rather than attack the reporter or the magazine for what he regarded as The New Yorker "hatchet job," he simply advised Brian Lamb (and C-Span viewers)
to check out the facts. Who else would note without emphasis that he met his life when he was four and she was two and that they've been married "since 1949"?

And he is attractively generous. Brian Lamb, the C-Span chief who was also his interviewer, noted more than once that Chomsky had published 98 books with more than sixty publishers, without discerning the significance of these high numbers. In contrast to writers and agents who regard their produce as valuable, Chomsky refuses to discriminate between those outlets that are large and those small and probably between those who pay him and those who do not. Nothing is envied more by writers whose prominence depend upon powerful publishers' publicists than fame that is self-earned, so to speak. If other political commentators ignore him, as too many do, one reason is their refusal to accept that such prominence could be realized without publicists or powerful publishers. Chomsky also remembered individual books of his to a degree awesome to me, a dozen years younger, having published nearly as many with almost as many publishers.

III

Even those critical of Chomsky customarily defer to his astronomical reputation in the academic field called linguistics. Even so, I wonder if they've read those books, which are clearly eccentric, even if they overwhelmed a sleepy academic discipline that had remarkably few practitioners before him. As someone who has studied those books, as well as spending an afternoon with Chomsky some thirty-five years ago, may I say that I find them to represent a logician's construct (i.e., if this, then thus). (In The Anti-Chomsky Reader [Encounter, 2004], John Williamson calls this "a rationalistic approach to the study of linguistics.") While accounting for why children possess a language-learning ability that must reflect innate intelligence, I then must say that some of Chomsky's logically derived conclusions have less empirical validity. My favorite faux pas concerns his claim that a translation machine would be impossible. Well, those of us who have sampled "Translate this page" option on Google know from experience that translation programs are pretty useful, even if imperfect and sometimes funny.

Though Chomsky is undoubtedly a great political critic, particularly on marshalling crucial evidence and remembering obscure examples mostly reflecting a gut anti-Americanism (that is less sympathetic to some than others, such as tenured academics), the implicit theme of Chomsky on Anarchism, at least for me, is that he's essentially a Spanish Anarchist in another country now several decades later. While glad that he chooses to call himself an anarchist (much as I am glad when celebrities identify themselves as fans of the NY Yankees) and then to authorize the publication of a book put together by another, I don't find his anarchism to be particularly original or useful to the degree, say, that Paul Goodman and Norman O. Brown, Henry Miller and John Cage, were important to me. Though a Google search of Chomsky's unique name set between quotation marks yields an awesome total of over 4 million hits, add "anarchism" to his name and remove quotation marks and Google gives me only 159,000, which is less than four per cent of the total, which is to say that comparatively little in the corpus of Chomsky literature deals with his anarchism.

When biographies of Chomsky appear, I doubt if anarchism will figure importantly in their pages. Nor will his name be central in histories of modern or American anarchism.
Sidebar

For someone who publishes so much, Chomsky is a surprisingly graceless and, worse, witless writer. No wonder his prose rarely appears in anthologies of aphorisms.

AuthorAffiliation

Individual entries on Richard Kostelanetz appear in A Reader's Guide to Twentieth-Century Writers, the Merriam-Webster Encyclopedia of Literature, Webster's Dictionary of American Authors, and the Encyclopedia Britannica, among other distinguished directories. Living in New York, where he was born, he still needs two bucks (US) to take a subway.

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