

Dark Times: What to Do. The Role and Responsibility of Intellectuals

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Professor Noam Chomsky has written an essay entitled, "The End of History: The short, strange era of human civilization would appear to be drawing to a close." Chomsky invokes the Roman goddess Minerva as she contemplates the end drawing nigh. His essay is thoughtful. It is eloquent. But something is missing.

Professor Chomsky references the devastation visited upon the Middle East by the American war machine. He mentions the brutal onslaught of ISIS, the self-proclaimed Islamic caliphate, as well as the military dictatorship in Egypt. And then he turns to the principal issue, climate change and a report issued by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). The report concludes that the increasing level of greenhouse gas risks "severe, pervasive and irreversible impacts for people and ecosystems." Ice sheets are melting. Sea levels will rise. Major cities and coastal plains will be inundated.

Species are disappearing from the planet at an alarming rate. The melting of permafrost regions will result in even more greenhouse gases being released, with even graver consequences for the planet's ecosystem. The Siachen Glacier, high up in the Himalayas, has been home to armed conflict between India and Pakistan. As the glacier melts "empty artillery shells, empty fuel drums [and] ice axes" appear, "a most appropriate metaphor," says Arundhati Roy, "for the insanity of our times."

Chomsky's brief essay concludes on an elegiac note—"Sad species. Poor Owl," referring to the goddess Minerva—and makes us wonder if this piece isn't primarily a lament. Implicitly there is a shrug of the shoulders, "Don't blame me. I'm just reporting the facts." Perhaps this is the problem. Missing is the framework that would help the reader direct his thoughts productively. There is a fatalistic disengagement. Some larger force is at work over which we humans have no control. God?

This fatalism pervades several of Professor Chomsky's pieces. One essay is entitled, "Humanity Imperiled: The Path to Disaster," another, "Can Civilization Survive Capitalism?" In "Is the World Too Big to Fail? The Contours of Global Order" Chomsky observes that maybe the financial system can be fixed, "but no one will come to the rescue if the environment is destroyed. That it must be destroyed is close to an institutional imperative."

Jeremiah was one of the major prophets of the Hebrew Bible. It was his role to reveal the sins of his people, thus explaining the reason for impending disaster, hence the word jeremiad, a moralistic essay in which its author denounces society for its wickedness, and prophesies its downfall.

Our Puritan forefathers were Calvinists. They also believed that mankind had sinned and that there was nothing he could do to save himself. There was an elect. They were the saints. They would be saved. God alone would determine who they were. The rest would perish. Whether it was crop failure, blizzard, drought or pestilence, a jeremiad would be sure to follow.

Chomsky's brief essay is jeremiad like. From some higher place, where reside the saints, he has issued civilization's death certificate. We have made war and killed many innocents. We have sinned against nature by fouling the air. And we must pay the price. There is no redemption through good works.

The effect of "The End of History" is to close the door to original thought and to eliminate the possibility of public initiative. The essay disempowers those who would undertake to redirect the forces that are destroying our planet. In this context it is useful to consider what Alexis de Tocqueville has to say on the subject of history and historians.

Tocqueville (*Democracy in America*, vol. 2) speaks of historians who "not only deny that the few have any power of acting upon the destiny of a people, but deprive the people themselves of the power of modifying their own condition, and they subject them either to an inflexible Providence or to some blind necessity." He adds, "In perusing the historical volumes [of our age] . . . it would seem that man is utterly powerless over himself and all around him. The historians of antiquity taught how to command; those of our time teach how to obey." I believe these remarks apply to Professor Chomsky's writing as well. In his version of history there is no room for human agency. "An inflexible Providence" marches us inexorably to our demise. There is nothing humans can do to stop it.

In 1967, Professor Chomsky wrote an essay entitled "The Responsibility of Intellectuals." His piece was inspired by the writing of Dwight McDonald who, a decade earlier, had explored the issue of responsibility concerning the suffering wrought by the Nazis. Were the German people, just ordinary folk leading modest lives, responsible for the actions of their government? Shouldn't they have done something to stop the devastation? Chomsky raises the same question and applies it to the war in Vietnam. Did we Americans have responsibility for the atrocities and wasn't it our job to stop them? And don't intellectuals have a special responsibility?

Intellectuals are in a position to expose the lies of governments, to analyze actions according to their causes and motives and often hidden intentions. In the Western world, at least, they have the power that comes from political liberty, from access to information and freedom of expression. For a privileged minority, Western democracy provides the leisure, the facilities, and the training to seek the truth lying hidden behind the veil of distortion and misrepresentation, ideology and class interest, through which the events of current history are presented to us. The responsibilities of intellectuals, then, are much deeper than what Macdonald calls the "responsibility of people," given the unique privileges that intellectuals enjoy.

Specifically, what is the intellectual's responsibility, as Chomsky sees it? "It is the responsibility of intellectuals to speak the truth and to expose lies." Based on this definition one can say that Professor Chomsky has acquitted himself admirably over the past decades.

But one can reasonably ask if there is any difference between the journalist and the

intellectual based on Professor Chomsky's definition. It most certainly is the job of responsible journalism to speak the truth and expose the lie. Then what is it that we expect from an intellectual that we don't expect from a journalist? New ideas. And here I am afraid Professor Chomsky has had little if anything to offer.

To quote Sean O'Casey, "Th' whole worl's in a terrible state o' chassis." Why is it that way? Does it have to be that way? What can be done to set it straight? These are the questions the intellectual should be asking.

There are many factors creating the "state o' chassis." Most of them can be traced to a combination of action and inaction on the part of government. Government promotes the exploitation of fossil fuels. It favors the private car over public transportation. It diverts to war critical resources that could be used to develop alternative sources of energy. All of these policies are humankind's contribution to global warming. These policies can be reversed, but not without transforming government. And I am afraid yet another election will not do the job.

Currently, there is considerable discussion and some experimentation exploring the possibilities of using sortition as a means of restructuring government. In ancient Athens, sortition was used as a means of selecting magistrates. We could substitute sortition for elections as a means of selecting our representatives and senators.

Sortition is another word for lottery. Essentially, a number is picked out of a hat. A pool of candidates is established. Often it is simply those who volunteer, those who want to hold the office. Then there is some kind of vetting process. Perhaps there are requirements of age and citizenship. Other parameters can be introduced as well.

Once the pool of candidates is established a number is drawn and the name attached to that number is now the magistrate. In ancient Athens he served for a year and but once in a lifetime. The Athenians used juries to keep track of a magistrate's performance. If they didn't like what he was up to another lottery was held and the magistrate was replaced.

Such a means of selecting those who govern has some obvious advantages over holding elections. There is no electioneering, i.e., lying and pandering, at election time. There are no political parties and no leaders to be bought off. Thus there is considerably less corruption. Corporate control of government is dramatically reduced.

Sortition is more democratic than elections because it establishes true political equality. Anyone can serve. Setting brief term limits insures rotation in office—this could be applied to the presidency as well—further limiting the opportunity for abusing power. If one wanted to democratize the process even further one could introduce referenda on key issues. Decisions concerning war and peace would certainly be one opportunity. This was the protocol in ancient Athens.

Or one could completely democratize the governing process by having the citizens govern themselves. This was the meaning of democracy in ancient Athens. The citizens, not their representatives, met in the Assembly, debated and voted on legislation and policy. The same principle could be applied in the United States. Instead of one assembly there would be thousands spread throughout the country. In *Paradise Lost, Paradise Regained: The True Meaning of Democracy*, I explore these and other possibilities at length.

Such thoughts will undoubtedly be dismissed as foolhardy, naïve, utopian by those who are stuck in the here and now, mired in the fixity of things as given, those who have a fear of change and want to cling to the present setup at all costs. Yes, changing government has its risks. There are outcomes that cannot be predicted. But if Professor Chomsky is right—and I believe he is—then the biggest risk of all is letting things stay as they are and believing we will survive. Change does occur and will continue to do so. The only questions are: What direction will it take? Whose hands will guide it?

What is the responsibility of the intellectual? Is it simply to gather the facts and uncover the lie, or is it the intellectual's responsibility to lead the way? It is easy enough to predict the end of civilization. It is quite another thing to do something about saving it. With courage and imagination mankind can live to see another day, but not without transforming government into an instrument that serves the common good.

Arthur D. Robbins is the author of "Paradise Lost, Paradise Regained: The True Meaning of Democracy," referred to by Ralph Nader as "An eye-opening, earth-shaking book . . . a fresh, torrential shower of revealing insights and vibrant lessons . . ." and the soon to be released e-book based on Part II of "Paradise Lost" entitled, "Democracy Denied: The Untold Story." Visit acropolis-newyork.com to learn more.

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