

Introduction to Noam Chomsky for his Leventis Lecture at UCY (May 17, 2006)
by Dr. Kleanthes K. Grohmann, Assistant Professor of Theoretical Linguistics

I believe I can speak for the entire academic and administrative community of the University of Cyprus stating that it is a great honour for us to welcome Prof. Noam Chomsky, Institute Professor at MIT in Cambridge, Massachusetts, to present this year's Leventis Lecture, the third lecture in memory of Dino Leventis.

As the Courtauld Institute of Arts put it in its spring 2003 newsletter, Dino Leventis — who unfortunately passed away a year before my wife Joy and I moved to Cyprus — “oversaw a wide-ranging programme of support for education, research, conservation, and publication.” And “although the principal areas of support focus on Hellenic history and culture, the Foundation can look back on achievements in other areas as well,” which we might bundle here as ‘humanistic’. And humanistic, Noam Chomsky certainly is — in more than one sense of the meaning of the word.

To some, Noam Chomsky is known as a linguist, the founder of generative grammar and the ‘cognitive revolution’ in the mid 1950s, the subsequent development of the biolinguistic approach to human language, which gave rise to the interdisciplinary study of cognitive science and its creation as an academic discipline. We will hear more about this tomorrow, when the University of Cyprus is going to award Prof. Chomsky with an honorary doctorate.

To many people, however, Noam Chomsky is known for quite different achievements. Ever since the 10-year-old Noam Chomsky wrote an editorial in his school newspaper of the fall of Barcelona in the Spanish Civil War some 67 years ago, he has been a keen observer of current political events and social injustices, and has put them to paper or made himself heard in many other ways. It is this part of Noam's life that appeals to many, his outspokenness, his continuous fight for the disadvantaged, his honest and rigorous research and dismantling of fact and fiction in the media, in political discourse and action, and in intellectual thought.

As human beings, we can count ourselves fortunate to have had people like Noam Chomsky as fighters on the humanistic forefront in the difficult second half of the 20th century, and even more so in the beginnings of a rather strange 21st century. There is simply too much to say about Noam's activist life to squeeze into the five or ten minutes I have to introduce him, so I will simply present three of my favourite Chomskyan catch phrases.

- “Manufacture of Consent” — Originally coined by the early 20th-century US liberal Walter Lippmann, the title of the 1988 book by Noam Chomsky and Edward Herman, and employed in the documentary *Manufacturing Consent* by two Canadian filmmakers from the early 1990s, the notion of “manufacturing consent” is closely tied to Noam Chomsky's active role as media commentator and analyst as well as sniffer-outer of non-violent state and media propaganda, within the United States but also outside.

- “Culture of Terrorism” — Personally, I construe this phrase, also the title of one of Noam's books from 1988, with many aspects of US foreign policy and world hegemony, be it in Central America as in the mid 1980s or in other parts of the world, including the US itself. Noam's unyielding efforts in uncovering these facts and acts is in itself an admirable achievement. Shockingly, this kind of activity is necessary even today, 15 years after the end of the Cold War, over thirty years after Vietnam, and past other landmarks in Noam Chomsky's most famous writings and devastating critiques.

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• “Responsibility of Intellectuals” — Apart from an essentially Cartesian philosophy, Noam also follows the humanistic footsteps of the Enlightenment thinker Wilhelm von Humboldt who defined the institution university, and here I’m quoting from Milan Rai’s *Chomsky’s Politics*, as “nothing other than the spiritual life of those human beings who are moved by external leisure or internal pressures toward learning and research.” Noam Chomsky’s addition is that “[t]he extent to which existing institutional forms permit these human needs to be satisfied provides one measure on the level of civilization that a society has achieved.” To continue with Rai, “Responsibility of Intellectuals” is not only the title of Chomsky’s first adult political essay, it is also “at the heart of his political writings” — as Chomsky put it, “[i]t is the responsibility of intellectuals to speak the truth and expose lies.”

In the linguistics community it is sometimes rumoured — jokingly, of course — that there must be many Chomskys. One Noam Chomsky couldn’t possibly be the brilliant linguist churning out article after article and book after book, one might say. And then there is the political activist jetting across the globe to be heard but also to listen, giving an enormous amount of speeches and interviews, relentlessly fighting for the underdogs and the oppressed, of whom there are too many in this world to make it a truly happy place.

Or think of the Noam Chomsky who replies to virtually every letter and email sent to him. In fact, when I was a first-semester undergraduate student at the University of Wales, I sat down one winter night, after reading Raphael Salkie’s biographical introduction, *The Chomsky Update*, where the last sentence seems to be embedded in my mind as encouraging the reader to write to Chomsky (though after double-checking this a few days ago, I could not find any evidence for this encouragement). So I penned a brief letter — in my terrible handwriting, two or three pages long, quizzing him on his thoughts on how efforts of nationalistic identity in minority states could possibly be brought in line with an essentially anarchist belief system. Well, less than two weeks later I received a type-written two-page letter from one of those Noam Chomskys whose job it must be to reply to all the fan mail.

Amazingly, it read just like anything else Chomsky writes. All these Noam Chomskys must thus be well synchronized, so that each one can copy his style to perfection. If one considers lastly that Noam Chomsky, from what one hears, is also a dedicated family man and has been so successfully for a long time, in spite of his fulfilled academic and activist life, the ‘many-Chomskys’ hypothesis seems hardly plausible.

I thus take these observations that we have here with us tonight a man dedicated to academic excellence, political activism, relentless fighting, and, of course, life itself, within the family and beyond. Noam Chomsky is then a wonderful testimony to the human power that we all have, but that some of us could try access a little harder: each one of us can make the world a better place. Noam has been on this path for a long time and will, I’m sure, continue treading it. If anything, let the next 40 minutes or so sink in and decide for yourselves which line you want to adopt.

I now give you: Noam Chomsky!