

An Exchange on *Manufacturing Consent*

Source: Peter R. Mitchell and John Schoeffel, eds., *Understanding Power: The Indispensable Chomsky* (The New Press, 2002)

Noam Chomsky in conversation with activists at Woods Hole, MA.

[Editors' Note: The 1992 movie *Manufacturing Consent: Noam Chomsky and the Media* was the most successful Canadian feature documentary ever made and played in more than 32 countries. Although Chomsky cooperated with the directors and liked them very much, he has not seen the film and does not intend to, for reasons that follow. [1](#)]

MAN: Noam, watching your reactions to the documentary they made about your critique of the media, you've shown a lot of discomfort ...

CHOMSKY: You should see the letters I write him [indicating Mark Achbar, one of the directors].

MARK ACHBAR: He's a good letter-writer.

MAN: Again earlier today you said something critical about it. I'm sure you realize the politically potent effect that the film is having.

CHOMSKY: Oh, yes.

MAN: And I was just wondering, if this were a film about Bertrand Russell [British philosopher and socialist] and his powerful ideas, and how he helped to change society with his ideas, would you be as critical of it, or would you see it as a powerful political organizing tool?[2](#)

CHOMSKY: Both, both.

MAN: Then I guess I'd love to hear you say something positive about the film.

CHOMSKY: Well, what I would say is exactly what you said -- I mean, the positive impact of it has been astonishing to me. Mark can give you the details, but outside of the United States, the film is shown all over the place, and even inside the United States it was shown to some extent.

MAN: It was in a lot of cities.

CHOMSKY: Yeah, but in every other country it's been on national television.

MAN: It came to Seattle four times and sold out every screening.

CHOMSKY: Okay, but everywhere else it was on national television. I didn't realize this myself until I was traveling around Europe giving talks last year, and I'd be in Finland

and "Oh yeah, we all saw it on television" -- it was that sort of thing all over the place. As a matter of fact, it's gotten to the point where I'm invited to film festivals all over the world -- literally. Well, one result of that is there's been a ton of reviewing, and the reviewing is extremely interesting. The reviews are often written just by guys who write T.V. criticism for the newspapers, you know, completely apolitical people. And their reaction is extremely positive, I'd say about 98 percent of the time it's very positive. In fact, about the only thing that got a lot of people pissed off, including Phil Donahue, was some remarks I made about sports: people got kind of angry about that.³ But most of the time the reaction is very positive; they say, "Yeah, really interesting."

In fact, I get a ton of letters about it -- like I get a letter from some steelworker in Canada saying, "I took my friends three times, we all saw it and it's great," and so on and so forth. Well, that's all fine. But the standard letter, the *standard* letter, is something like this: it says, "I'm really glad they made this film; I thought I was the only person in the world who had these thoughts, I'm delighted to know that somebody else actually has them and is saying them." Then comes the punch-line: "How can I join your movement?" That's why I'm ambivalent.

Now, I don't think it's anything Mark and Peter [the directors] did wrong; I mean, I haven't seen the movie, but I know that they were very well aware of this problem, and tried very hard to overcome it. But somehow it's just inherent in the medium, I don't think the medium allows an escape from this -- or if it does, I don't think that anybody's yet found it. I mean, I don't think the medium can make people understand that if they film me giving a talk somewhere, that's because somebody else organized the talk, and the real work is being done by the people who organized the talk, and then followed it up and are out there working in their communities. If they can bring in some speaker to help get people together, terrific, but that person is in no sense "the leader." That somehow doesn't get across in a movie -- what gets across is, "How can I join your movement?" And then I've got to write a letter which is a big speech about this. So I am ambivalent about it.

Incidentally, one more comment about the reviews: the reviews in the United States were intriguingly different. First of all there weren't many because it wasn't shown a lot here. But they were very interesting. Do you remember the *New York Times* review? That was really fascinating, that was the most intriguing one.

MARK ACHBAR: They left your name out of the title of the film.

CHOMSKY: Well, yeah, right. But actually, the *New York Times* to my surprise wrote a very favorable review, or what I'm sure they took to be a favorable review. They assigned it to Vincent Canby, who's kind of an old-time New Dealer, he was the big cultural critic at the *Times* forever, and he wrote a review which I'm sure everybody at the *Times* took to be very favorable. It said something like, oh yeah, really interesting guy, wonderful film, so on and so forth. Then it said, obviously there's nothing to what he's saying, of course it's all nonsense -- but it was very sympathetic.

Then it got really interesting. It said, though what he's saying is all nonsense, nevertheless the leading idea is worth taking seriously, even though it sounds crazy. And the leading idea, Canby said, is that the government is only responsive to the fifty percent of the population who vote, not to the fifty percent who don't vote, so therefore we ought to try to register more people. He said, yeah, this sounds pretty far out in left field, but nevertheless we shouldn't discount it totally, something like that.⁴ It just flew by him completely -- he didn't see what the film was about. I mean, the most illiterate T.V. reviewer in Tasmania didn't miss the point like that, it's only in the United States that it has to be completely missed. And that's what it means to "think properly."

But I do think the film is double-edged. It's certainly energized a lot of activism. I think it did a tremendous amount of good just for East Timor alone [the film includes extensive coverage of the unreported East Timor genocide as a case study of Edward Herman's and Chomsky's "Propaganda Model"⁵]. And it's had a good impact in other respects. But it also has this negative aspect, which seems to me almost unavoidable. But you wanted to say something more ...

MARK ACHBAR: I'm sure you're aware that we have you saying in the film, almost verbatim, what you just said: that the reason you can give talks all over the place is because people are organizing.

CHOMSKY: Yeah, I know -- but it just doesn't get across. There's something about the medium which prevents it from getting across. I mean, I know that it was tried, I know that that was the idea, but ...

MARK ACHBAR: Was it really the majority of letters that said, "I want to join your movement"?

CHOMSKY: Well, they say something like that: the general picture is that it's about me - - and it isn't. The whole point is, it's not. And I don't know how you get that across to people in a film.

MAN: But it *is* about you, just the ideas aren't about you.

CHOMSKY: Nooo!

MAN: The ideas are for the world to think about.

CHOMSKY: But see, it really *isn't* -- because if I'm somewhere giving a talk, it's precisely because somebody organized a meeting. Like, I'm here, but I didn't do anything -- Mike and Lydia [Albert and Sargent, co-editors of *Z Magazine*] did something. I didn't do anything. And that's the way it is everywhere else too.

MAN: But you're also here because of the way you grew up, and that school that you went to.

CHOMSKY: But the same is true of everybody else who's here too. Yeah, sure. Everybody's got their own story.

WOMAN: But the critique of the media in the film is taken from speeches that *you* gave.

CHOMSKY: Yeah, but that's because other people are doing important things and I'm not doing important things -- that's what it literally comes down to. I mean, years ago I used to be involved in organizing too -- I'd go to meetings, get involved in resistance, go to jail, all of that stuff -- and I was just no good at it at all; some of these people here can tell you. So sort of a division of labor developed: I decided to do what I'm doing now, and other people kept doing the other things. Friends of mine who were basically the same as me -- went to the same colleges and graduate schools, won the same prizes, teach at M.I.T. and so on -- just went a different way. They spend their time organizing, which is much more important work -- so they're not in a film. That's what the difference is. I mean, I do something basically less important -- it *is*, in fact. It's adding something, and I can do it, so I do it -- I don't have any false modesty about it. And it's helpful. But it's helpful to people who are doing the real work. And every popular movement I know of in history has been like that.

In fact, it's extremely important for people with power not to let anybody understand this, to make them think there are big leaders around who somehow get things going, and then what everybody else has to do is follow them. That's one of the ways of demeaning people, and degrading them and making them passive. I don't know how to overcome this exactly, but it's really something people ought to work on.

WOMAN: As an activist for East Timor, though, I have to say that the film put our work on a completely different level. Even if you have some trouble with it personally, it has gotten people doing a lot of real work out there.

CHOMSKY: I think that's true; I know that's true.

ANOTHER WOMAN: Now I've got to admit it -- I felt odd having you sign a book for my friend earlier today.

CHOMSKY: Yeah, it's crazy -- it's just completely wrong. In a place like San Francisco, it gets embarrassing: I can't walk across the Berkeley campus -- literally -- without twenty people coming up and asking me to sign something. That doesn't make any sense.

WOMAN: It does feel unnatural.

CHOMSKY: It is, it's completely missing the point. It's simply not factually accurate, for one thing -- because like I say, the real work is being done by people who are not known, that's always been true in every popular movement in history. The people who are known are riding the crest of some wave. Now, you can ride the crest of the wave and try to use it to get power, which is the standard thing, or you can ride the crest of the wave because you're helping people that way, which is another thing. But the point is, it's the wave that

matters -- and that's what people ought to understand. I don't know how you get that across in a film.

Actually, come to think of it, there are some films that have done it. I mean, I don't see a lot of visual stuff, so I'm not the best commentator, but I thought *Salt of the Earth* really did it. It was a long time ago, but at the time I thought that it was one of the really great movies -- and of course it was killed, I think it was almost never shown.

WOMAN: Which one was that?

CHOMSKY: *Salt of the Earth*. It came out at the same time as *On the Waterfront*, which is a rotten movie. And *On the Waterfront* became a huge hit -- because it was anti-union. See, *On the Waterfront* was part of a big campaign to destroy unions while pretending to be for, you know, Joe Sixpack. So *On the Waterfront* is about this Marlon Brando or somebody who stands up for the poor working man against the corrupt union boss. Okay, things like that exist, but that's not unions -- I mean, sure, there are plenty of union bosses who are crooked, but nowhere near as many as C.E.O.s who are crooked, or what have you. But since *On the Waterfront* combined that anti-union message with "standing up for the poor working man," it became a huge hit. On the other hand, *Salt of the Earth*, which was an authentic and I thought very well-done story about a strike and the people involved in it, that was just flat killed, I don't even think it was shown anywhere. I mean, you could see it at an art theater, I guess, but that was about it. I don't know what those of you who know something about film would think of it, but I thought it was a really outstanding film.⁶

Notes

[For the complete notes of *Understanding Power: The Indispensable Chomsky*, visit the [Understanding Power](#) website.]

¹. For the companion book to the documentary, see Mark Achbar, ed., *Manufacturing Consent: Noam Chomsky and the Media*, Montreal: Black Rose, 1994 (includes videotape ordering information). Chomsky also explained why he has not seen the film in an interview with *Movie Guide* (p. 11):

I haven't seen it and I don't intend to. There are several reasons, some of them are merely personal. I mean I just don't like to hear or see myself because I think about how I should have done it differently. There's also a more general reason. I'm very uneasy about the whole project. For one thing, no matter how much they try, and I'm sure they did try, the impression it gives, and I can tell that from the reviews, is the personalization of the issues. That's the wrong question for a number of reasons.

I can begin with the very title of the film. The title of the film is *Manufacturing Consent*. The title is taken from a book, a book written by Edward Herman and me. And if you look at the book, you'll find his name comes first. Well, his name came first at my insistence . . . for the simple reason that he did most of the book. And in fact, most of the

things people write about in the reviews of the film are his work. Here we already begin to see what's wrong. These are all cooperative activities and they shouldn't be personalized and associated with one individual. . . . And if the impression is given that there's some leader or spokesman or something like that organizing, galvanizing things, that's absolutely the wrong lesson. The lesson there is follow your leader. The lesson ought to be: take your life into your own hands.

2. For some of Bertrand Russell's political writings, see among other titles, *Principles of Social Reconstruction* (1916); *Political Ideals* (1917); *Proposed Roads to Freedom: Socialism, Anarchism and Syndicalism* (1918); *The Practice and Theory of Bolshevism* (1920); and *The Prospects of Industrial Civilization* (1923). See also, Noam Chomsky, *Problems of Knowledge and Freedom: The Russell Lectures*, New York: Pantheon, 1971; Barry Feinberg and Ronald Kasrils, *Bertrand Russell's America: A Documented Account*, Boston: South End, 1983.

3. Chomsky appeared on the cable television talk show *Pozner & Donahue* on April 20 and 22, 1993, from 9 to 10 p.m. Phil Donahue was quite sympathetic, except regarding sports:

DONAHUE: There's a part of the documentary which has you on the podium, reliving the experience of going to a high school football game when you were in high school. And you sat there and you said, "Why do I care about this team? I don't even know anybody on the team." Here, Professor Chomsky, you go too far. You are cranky, you're anti-fun. We wonder if you ever knew the experience of a hot dog with mustard and a cold beer. And it is much easier, then, to dismiss you as the Ebenezer Scrooge of social commentary. Go away. You're not a happy man. You're scolding us for rooting for the high school football team.

CHOMSKY: I should say, I continued to go root for the high school football team -- the reason I bring it up is, it's a case of how we can somehow live with this strange dissonance. I mean, you conform to the society around you, and you're part of it, and you have the hot dog and you cheer for the football team. And in another corner of your mind you notice, "This is insane. What do I care whether this ..."

DONAHUE: *What* is insane?

CHOMSKY: What do I care whether this group of professional athletes wins or that group of professional athletes wins? None of them have anything to do with me.

DONAHUE: I don't know. I grew up with the Indians [baseball team], I was a kid in Cleveland ... it was a social experience, it was the smell, this huge Cleveland stadium. ... Those are memories. What's wrong with this? Why wouldn't you want to celebrate this?

CHOMSKY: I did the same thing. I can remember the first baseball game I saw when I was 10 years old, I can tell you what happened at it -- fine. But that's not my point. See, if you want to enjoy a football game, that's great. You want to enjoy a baseball game, that's

great. Why do you care who wins? Why do you care who wins? Why do you have to associate yourself with a particular group of professionals, who you are told are your representatives, and they better win or else you're going to commit suicide, when they're perfectly interchangeable with the other group of professionals. ...

DONAHUE: You had a relative in New York City who had a kiosk which wasn't quite on the main street, it was behind the train station. And God knows what kind of radical literature he was selling. And you're there, this little kid listening in -- no wonder you grew up to be such a radical who doesn't like high school football.

CHOMSKY: Unfortunately, I did like it. I'm sorry for that.

On Chomsky's views about the role of spectator sports in society, see chapter 3 of *Understanding Power*.

[4.](#) For the *New York Times*'s review, see Vincent Canby, "Superimposing Frills On a Provocative Career," *New York Times*, March 17, 1993, p. C17 (a subheading listed the film's title as "Manufacturing Consent and the Media"). The exact words of the paragraph in question:

Whether or not you agree with Mr. Chomsky's conclusions, his reading of the American scene is persuasive: that the government is most responsive to the wishes expressed by the minority of citizens who vote, which is also one of the principal points made by John Kenneth Galbraith in his recent book *The Culture of Contentment*. As Mr. Chomsky sees it, his mission is to wake up and activate the electorate.

[5.](#) On the "Propaganda Model," see chapter 1 of *U.P.* and especially its footnotes 35, 44 and 67. On the case of East Timor, see chapter 8 of *U.P.*

[6.](#) On *Salt of the Earth*, see Herbert J. Biberman, *Salt of the Earth; The Story of a Film* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1965) [includes the screenplay by Michael Wilson]; James J. Lorence, *The Suppression of Salt of the Earth: How Hollywood, Big Labor, and Politicians Blacklisted a Movie in Cold War America* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1999).