

Noam Chomsky:  
A Life of Dissent  
by Robert F. Barsky  
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Noam Chomsky lies.

My admiration for the man was until recently boundless, so I've been obliged over the years to generate theories galore about his well-known fact mangling. Maybe it's selective memory, I've said. Maybe he's so single-minded that he just doesn't see those countervailing details. Maybe it's just a useful pair of blinders, which shut out context as he gallops through the work of others on a hunt for opportunities to absorb or destroy.

But the most recent biography of Chomsky—Robert F. Barsky's *Noam Chomsky: A Life of Dissent*—makes it very hard to believe that none of Chomsky's distortions are willful. It's not that Barsky suggests this; heaven forbid! He has blinders of his own. He is too star-struck and too ill-informed to see anything in his subject but Saint Noam, champion of all that is virtuous, enemy of all that is evil. But he quotes Chomsky at great length, with utterly no sense of consistency or accuracy or accountability, dumbly piling up inadvertent heaps of evidence that Noam Chomsky lies.

## I

Chomsky, of course, is one of the towering figures in our half of the twentieth century, and one who will likely tower for centuries to come. He is a Kant, a Locke, a Descartes. He is, in a *New York Times* blurb that has become obligatory whenever he is profiled, "arguably the most important intellectual alive" Certainly, he is the most cited. In the top-ten list of most-cited people *ever*, on which he sits cheek-by-jowl with authors whose works have been in circulation somewhat longer, like Aristotle and Shakespeare, he is the only one still drawing breath, let alone a pay cheque. And there's a lot to cite. He has published millions of words—over seventy books and over a thousand articles—on a staggering range of technical and popular subjects.

He is the most powerful force in contemporary linguistics, and has been for almost forty years. If a Nobel Prize was offered for linguistics, he'd get the first one. Then they'd have to stop giving it out. No one else comes close.

His is one of the defining voices in contemporary philosophy of mind; which is almost to say, in philosophy. He is a Founding Father of the cognitive science revolution that has driven major research programmes in fields as diverse as robotics and molecular biology. His impact on psychology has been perhaps the most remarkable. With a single book review in the fifties, he turned its leading figure into a pariah and its defining paradigm into a by-word for empty scientism (to wit, B.F. Skinner and Behaviorism), wiping the slate clean for the incredible advances of the last several decades.

One of a tiny handful of our cousins to the south for whom the term *dissident* makes sense, he is unquestionably the most relentless domestic critic the American government has faced over the last thirty years. He has furiously attacked its unpopular war on Indochina, and its popular war on Iraq, its well-known ties with Israel, and its submerged ties with Indonesia, its active role in the suppression of the Palestinians, and its cheerful complicity in the elimination of the East Timorese. There are many who think his best chance for a Nobel is not in science but in peace, for his anti-war, anti-imperialism, anti-oppression activism.

More recently, Chomsky has turned his withering gaze on the Western media as well, ridiculing their claim to a watchdog role on government, depicting them in great detail rather more as lap dogs.

But there's this problem. Chomsky lies.

## II

Chomsky's pettifogging is painfully inescapable in Robert Barsky's book, for anyone who knows even a little of the record it violates so freely. Since the publisher's cataloguing data lists *Noam Chomsky: A Life of Dissent* as a biography, I'll let a real biographer provide the initial diagnosis. Phyllis Grosskurth, our most important author of substantive

biographies (of Freud, of Margaret Mead, of Melanie Kline, of Lord Byron), says "You can't write a good biography and be in love with your subject".

Grosskurth's remark can leave the publishers (ECW Press here, MIT Press in the US) only one response, "oops!" Robert Barsky *loves* Chomsky. In his defense, it's hard not to. Chomsky's charismatic intellect and burning passion are hard to resist.

Also, Barsky is Canadian, and we're softies for Chomsky. His receptions here are usually doting, and he has graced us first with some his more significant work. His major linguistic and philosophical book, *Reflections on Language*, began as the Whidden lectures for McMaster University, and one of his most important political books, *Necessary Illusions*, began as the Massey lectures for CBC Radio One's *Ideas*. One of Chomsky's main political publishers is Montreal's Black Rose Press. His chief linguistic popularizer is Canadian (Stephen Pinker). And we regularly create rhetorical homages to Chomsky, including Daniel Brooks and Guillermo Verdecchia's play, *The Noam Chomsky Lectures*, and the National Film Board documentary, *Manufacturing Consent*. Joining them, we now have Barsky's book.

Barsky should know better. Not about the devotion, perhaps, nor even about the homage—there is much to celebrate about Chomsky—but Barsky should certainly know better about the form his celebration takes: a facile, unreflective conduit for Chomsky's every pronouncement. Barsky is an Assistant Professor of English at the University of Western Ontario with an affection for post-modern discourse analysis and a previous book, *Constructing a Productive Other*, which examines the power language wields over fact. If anyone should have been alert to the irresponsibility of Chomsky's discourse, its complete lack of accountability to other sources, Barsky should have.

He wasn't. Chomsky gets to say whatever he wants in the book, even when it is flatly (and unwittingly) contradicted on another page. Indeed, Chomsky's influence over the book is so complete that MIT Press promotes it in terminology that makes Barsky little more than a ventriloquist's dummy:

Because Chomsky is given ample space to articulate his views on many of the major issues relating to his work, both linguistic and political, this book reads like the autobiography that Chomsky says he will never write.

So: the book is not really a biography. If it were, by Grosskurth's criterion alone we would have to conclude it is a bad one. For my money, I'd suggest *hagiography*, for its devotional approach, or maybe *stenography*, for the amount of careful dictation it contains. But I can live with MIT Press's *autobiography*. As such, it is worth asking what picture Chomsky paints of himself in the space Barsky provides. It is an attractive one, of course, but whenever it conflicts with the facts, the facts suffer.

### III

Let's start with his academic ascendancy.

According to Chomsky-Barsky, brilliant young Noam was ignored by the very scholars whom the record suggests cultivated him. Zellig Harris—his undergraduate, masters, and doctoral supervisor, and an enormous influence on both Chomsky's linguistics and his politics—couldn't have cared less about his student's intellectual development. He "never looked at [Chomsky's B.A. thesis]" and generally "never paid the slightest attention to [Chomsky's research]" ... "he didn't know what I was doing". Roman Jakobson, whose linguistic influence was also powerful on Chomsky, whose courses Chomsky attended at Harvard, who helped get Chomsky his first job, who was one of the people who landed Chomsky a keynote role at the 1962 International Congress of Linguists, "hadn't the faintest interest or understanding of anything I was doing". Bernard Bloch, who sponsored Chomsky's talks at Yale (the paramount university for linguistics at the time)—who put Chomsky's unpublished magnum opus, *Logical Structure of Linguistic Theory*, in the Yale library; who, as editor of the only journal that mattered in linguistics, *Language*, supported Chomsky's career and promoted Chomsky's work very heavily indeed; who did virtually everything in his considerable power to bring Chomsky to prominence—"didn't believe a word" of Chomsky's theories.

Miraculously, the neglected Chomsky stumbled into an academic job. Chomsky-Barsky tells us that young Noam "had no identifiable field or credentials in anything" . He just happened to get a job because the school (MIT) was "a scientific university which didn't care much about credentials". In fact, Chomsky was only a *pro forma* year away from his Ph.D., he was fresh off a very prestigious three-year fellowship at Harvard, he had several conference appearances and journal publications to his name, and a massive manuscript under his arm, and his application had the support of the hugely influential Roman Jakobson.

Obscurity, neglect, and incomprehension somehow fell away immediately, to be replaced by hostility. His work became the target of all the "hatchet men' in the profession" . His approach was showcased at important Texas Conferences, two years running (1958 and 1959), which most people would consider an honour, if not an endorsement. Not Chomsky. As he tells it, those conferences were "organized with the specific purpose of nipping this heresy in the bud ... [they were out] to destroy me". Unable to destroy him, Chomsky says, the tactics now became suppression, and the chief organizer of the conferences refused to publish the 1958 proceedings until "a lot of pressure" was brought to bear on him (never mind by whom in his tiny and powerless circle); worse, the 1959 proceedings have "never seen the light of day, including my first extensive paper on generative phonology".

Er, not exactly. The 1958 proceedings were published comparatively sooner than those of the preceding years' conferences (1956 and 1957), and while the 1959 proceedings weren't published as such, the manuscript circulated widely and Chomsky published many of its arguments in other works.

Chomsky's success, in fact, was remarkably easy. That's not to say he didn't work tremendously hard, think great thoughts, and develop a compelling new programme for linguistics. He did all of that and more. But he was far from ignored, and there is little evidence of hostility to his work until the sixties, when—with him, his colleagues, and his

students becoming increasingly abrasive—it largely took the form of counter-attack.

So what? So Chomsky is a little romantic about his early roots. Who isn't? So he is predisposed to see indifference and hostility all around him. A certain amount of controlled paranoia is actually quite productive for scholars. Where's the crime?

There isn't one, not of Chomsky's anyway. This is standard fare for autobiographies. But Barsky might certainly be indicted for failing to calibrate these claims against some documentation, and for championing Chomsky's version in complete disregard of the contrary evidence.

Take just the matter of Zellig Harris. Chomsky is now astonishingly dismissive of Harris's influence. In the preface to his first book, though, his story was very different. That book (*Syntactic Structures*) promotes a theory heavily dependent on many of Harris's grammatical notions (including the now-famous transformation). And Chomsky said so very clearly:

During the entire period of this research I have had the benefit of very frequent and lengthy conversations with Zellig S. Harris. So many of his ideas and suggestions are incorporated into the text below and in the research on which it is based that I will make no attempt to indicate them by special reference.

Barsky, however, mentions this well known passage solely to give Chomsky the chance to now repudiate it. The fulsome acknowledgment, Chomsky now says, was only included because it is self-evidently empty, because it would be "obvious to professional linguists right away" that the book seeks only to tear down Harris's whole framework.

The claim is absurd, as Barsky might easily have discovered. He might, for instance, have asked professional linguists active at the time, or he might have looked at their published commentaries during the period, which rarely distinguished between Chomsky and Harris, and which eagerly endorsed transformational analysis. Or Barsky might have looked at the comments of one of Chomsky's most

biggest bulldogs (Robert Lees), who—in an influential and very partisan review of *Syntactic Structures* published by Bernard Bloch—saw a different sort of obviousness: "the basic idea ... was obviously derived from those manipulations characteristic of Harris's discourse analysis". Barsky might even have looked at other early writings of Chomsky's. The first line of his 1958 Texas conference paper, for instance, begins "The approach to syntax that I want to discuss here developed directly out of the [work] of Z. S. Harris". Elsewhere he says such things as "The process I use for investigating language is the one that I was taught. It is described in Harris' *Methods*."

#### IV

Maybe this isn't so bad. Maybe it's not so bad that Barsky scrupulously avoids the record and just lets Chomsky speak. Chomsky is an interesting guy. And, frankly, I'd much rather read what Chomsky has to say than what Barsky has to write. But there is an ugly side to Chomsky. He doesn't just have his way with the facts. After he has cast them into a convenient shape, he frequently uses them to bludgeon opponents. And Barsky's negligence here becomes more culpable, giving Chomsky ample elbow room for these bludgeonings.

As a rather minor (thus, for our purposes, tidy) example, take *Cartesian Linguistics*, Chomsky's quite fascinating 1966 investigation of the much earlier philosophical parallels to his linguistic programme. While it was lauded in many quarters, and sold widely, the book also came in for a fair amount of criticism. And criticism of even the most innocuous sort sticks in Chomsky's craw.

Here is how Chomsky-Barsky frames the reception of the book:

The year after *Cartesian Linguistics* appeared, Hans Aarslef[f], regarded as a leading scholar in the field, published a major book "in which," Chomsky writes, "he described traditional universal grammar as solely 'Cartesian' in origin, completely ignoring the quite obvious Renaissance and earlier origins that are emphasized in *Cartesian Linguistics*" (31 Mar. 1995).

He had not seen *Cartesian Linguistics* when he wrote his book, "though he knew I was working on it, and had lectured about the topics at Princeton [where Aarsleff taught]—he was away.

Aarsleff got it wrong, Chomsky got it right. But Aarsleff was not only inept and sneaky, arranging to be away when Chomsky was lecturing, he was stupid and vicious to boot:

"A few years later ... [Aarsleff] wrote savage denunciations of *Cartesian Linguistics* (in *Language* and elsewhere), claiming that I had made this idiotic error, which he did make [himself] a year after *Cartesian Linguistics*, and which is explicitly and unambiguously rejected in *Cartesian Linguistics*" (31 Mar. 1995). As Chomsky writes, Aarsleff identified the error as the failure of *Cartesian Linguistics* "to recognize the pre-Cartesian sources of Port Royal and later work, which was not only false (they were explicitly and carefully mentioned) but pretty audacious, since in his independent book a year after *Cartesian Linguistics* he had referred to all of this work as solely Cartesian, without any mention of the earlier sources" (14 Aug. 1995).

But Chomsky's response to critics is rarely complete without generalized vituperation; he's not through with Aarsleff. We also get:

Such "absurdity and falsification," in Chomsky's view, is only to be expected. "Furthermore, [Aarsleff's] version has become accepted Truth. I've never bothered to respond, because ... my contempt for the intellectual world reaches such heights that I have no interest in pursuing them in their gutters.

Barsky, of course, did not think to actually read Aarsleff (if he had, he might at least have got the spelling right; Chomsky always spells the name *Aarsleff*; ergo, so does Barsky). Nor did he read the many other critics of *Cartesian Linguistics* who had voiced complaints similar to Aarsleff's.

Stand back! Clear! It's time to bring out the truth defibrillator and resuscitate a few of the facts.

Starting at the top, did Aarsleff (in *The Study of Language in England, 1780-1860*) make the "idiotic error" of claiming that all traditional universal grammar was solely 'Cartesian' in origin? Not by a mile. He never even used the term 'Cartesian', Descartes is mentioned only twice—once in a list

of scholars neglected in the history of linguistics, once as an important source (with Locke) for eighteenth century philosophical linguistics—and universal grammar is identified as "at least as old as the High Middle Ages"

OK, now did *Chomsky* make this error? Not in letter, though certainly in spirit. The overwhelming effort of *Cartesian Linguistics* is just to argue that the title makes sense: that there was a particularly Cartesian approach to linguistics. Chomsky does note that this approach (that is, what others called 'traditional universal grammar') has "roots in earlier linguistic work". But he is casual in the extreme about these roots: under no ordinary use of the word could "emphasized" apply to Chomsky's mention of earlier work, let alone "carefully". More to the point, Aarsleff never accused Chomsky of this idiotic solely-Cartesian error anywhere that I am know of, certainly not in the *Language* review that Chomsky-Barsky cites.

Other critics, in fact, had made much of Chomsky's lack of interest in pre-Cartesian sources. Aarsleff cites their criticisms and he certainly adds his disapproval over Chomsky's indifference to major antecedents. But he does not accuse Chomsky of saying that no work of this sort preceded Descartes, that it was "solely 'Cartesian'". Aarsleff is more interested in a larger matter, which he demonstrates thoroughly: the blatant shoddiness of the history in *Cartesian Linguistics*. Aarsleff attacks the book because it is bad history—"because the scholarship is poor, because the texts have not been read, because the arguments have not been understood, because the secondary literature that might have been helpful has been left aside or unread, even when referred to"—because, in short, there is virtually no historical motivation for the label "Cartesian Linguistics".

Aarsleff is never allowed to make anything resembling this charge in *Noam Chomsky A Life of Dissent*. But—what the hell, maybe some reader might actually know something of the original controversy—Chomsky-Barsky defends against it anyway. The defense is a howler:

The term "Cartesian" is not used [by Chomsky] according to its generally accepted definition. Chomsky extends that definition to encompass, as he

puts it, "a certain collection of ideas which were not expressed by Descartes, [were] rejected by followers of Descartes, and many first expressed by anti-Cartesians"

"Ahem," one might imagine someone other than Barsky asking his subject, "then exactly how are these ideas *Cartesian*?"

I don't want to leave the impression (as Aarsleff does) that *Cartesian Linguistics* is dreck. Chomsky is incapable of generating anything worthless (false, sure; malicious, definitely; worthless, no).

The problem here is one of categories. Chomsky really wasn't writing a history. He calls it that in the subtitle and the preface, but he can be rather loose with labels. Rather, he was just providing a source book for transformational linguists to see how their work manifested important philosophical currents—and he is very clear both about these goals and about his own untrained, opportunistic reading of the source material. Judged as history, as Aarsleff judged it, *Cartesian Linguistics* is a dismal, polemical, ideologically driven failure. Judged as preliminary spade work in a neglected (indeed, *rejected*) area of language philosophy, in order to inform current (mid-sixties) practice, it's very fine indeed, even thrilling.

Cartesianism is important to Barsky because his interest is overwhelmingly in Chomsky's politics. Although he pretends at times, perhaps even believes at times, that he is offering an account of Chomsky's work in other areas, he is always way over his head in any of the material outside the political. And Cartesianism is the necessary link for Barsky between Chomsky's politics and Chomsky's intellectual credentials, his work in philosophy and language. "Once we accept the Cartesian perspective on language," Barsky argues, "the next step is to support natural rights and to oppose authoritarianism". If you like his linguistics, that is, you'll love his politics.

Chomsky himself is never this direct about the links between his politics and his linguistics, though it is probably not a coincidence that his first important political essay ("The Responsibility of Intellectuals") came out the same

year as *Cartesian Linguistics* or that this was the period when his opposition to American foreign policy went dramatically public.

In fact, Chomsky claims never to have cared much about the adjective *Cartesian*, at all, and one of the leitmotifs of his scorn centres on people who use proper names to label ideas (Marxism, Freudianism, ...), though his professed distaste doesn't match the evidence. Judging by his usage, Chomsky quite likes labels based on proper names, applying them with abandon.

He is, for one thing, still using *Cartesian* about traditional universal grammar, thirty years later, despite the careful, emphatic demonstration of many scholars that it is not terribly appropriate for the material he subsumes under it. He writes regularly about topics he has dubbed *Plato's Problem* and *Orwell's Problem*. *Foucauldian* is his curse word for all things post-modern. And he is incapable of talking about behaviorism without contemptuously spitting out the name Skinner, whom Chomsky seems to hold personally responsible for the very existence of totalitarianism ("As far as the Skinner thing is concerned ... I think it's a fraud, there's nothing there. I mean it is empty. It's an interesting fraud. ... First you ask, is this science? No, it's fraud. And then you say, OK, then why the interest in it? Answer: because it tells any concentration camp guard that he can do what his instincts tell him to do, but pretend to be a scientist at the same time.").

The *Cartesian Linguistics* material is a small part of *Noam Chomsky: A Life of Dissent*, but I've gone through it in some detail because it is extremely representative. It emphasizes, carefully, (1) how long Chomsky holds a grudge, (2) how completely careless he is in the distortion of the public record, and (3) how blithely unaware Barsky is of both the distortions and the public record.

## V

Should you read *Noam Chomsky: A Life of Dissent*? Well, if you want insight into Chomsky, there's lots to be had, but

you'll have work for it. You'll have to read against Barsky much of the time, rather than with him. Unless you do, unless you try to weigh up and balance the book's claims, unless you hold them accountable to evidence, and look for that evidence, unless you exercise the same skepticism about Chomsky-Barsky that Chomsky is always urging readers of his political and media analyses to exercise on others, you will come away with a very blurred picture of Noam Chomsky, and an even blurrier picture—a smeared picture—of the great many people who have raised his ire.

I am, by the way, a member of that large club. Chomsky loathes my book of a few years back, *Linguistics Wars*, and it gets a share of tarring in Barsky's opuscle.

You have every right now to say "Aha!" and place my comments in the Petty, Embittered Foe basket, but that tarring—honestly—is only indirectly related to the fact that I have now given up making excuses for Chomsky's misrepresentations, and have been delivered, unwilling, to the conclusion that many, if not all, of them are deliberate. I've known about Chomsky's attitude toward to my book, and argued with him about many of its particulars, since long before it was published. And Chomsky has said nasty things about it in print before Barsky gave him this recent opportunity. None of this was news to me before Barsky's book, and none of it was bothersome. Chomsky's Chomsky, I figured, and went on making excuses.

No, it's not the attack, or the character of the attack, or publication of the attack, that brought me to this place. It's the nakedness in which Chomsky's fact-manglings are revealed, and the blindness with which Barsky can say "x" on one page and "not-x" on another. He blankly quotes Chomsky on one page, for instance, that a particular group of opponents charted in *The Linguistics Wars* included "neither students nor colleagues of mine, for the most part". Then, a bit later, when Barsky gets around to enumerating these opponents—John Ross, George Lakoff, Paul Postal, and James McCawley—he identifies the first three as Chomsky's MIT colleagues (though—no surprise—he gets it a bit wrong here, too; Lakoff never taught at MIT). And should have known that the fourth was one of his earliest, most famous

students (as was Ross, who clocks in as both student and colleague).

Did Chomsky just *forget* that Ross and Postal worked with him at MIT, that Ross and McCawley wrote Ph.D. dissertations under him, that Lakoff was his student? Is it just a *really* bad memory at work here? Nope, not even that paltry excuse will work. The only explanation is crude convenience: when it serves another purpose (to illustrate how beneficent he is toward his enemies), Chomsky is off bragging that his department hired nobody but his opponents for awhile, listing Postal and Ross among them.

‘Do I contradict myself?’ he might be saying, if Barsky had done his job well enough to ask about it: ‘Very well. I contradict myself.’

It is tough not to feel churlish when saying unpleasant things about someone whose work you admire so greatly, in linguistics, in politics, and in manifold overlapping other areas. And I do. Chomsky’s work in linguistics is immensely important, his work in politics perhaps more so. His philosophy of mind is enervating. His critiques of the media are devastating.

But there’s this problem. Noam Chomsky lies.