Chomsky as Chávez's Clown

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Contrary to what many think, the ability to believe in fairy tales and to blindly accept a fiction, no matter how fantastic or grotesque, is not the sole attribute of the dumb and ignorant. The famous writer Noam Chomsky has just proved that intelligent and cultivated intellectuals are also capable of believing and adopting conduct and political action totally dogmatic, false and authoritarian. They believe so or at least pretend to.

It is nothing new to see a highly ranked intellectual falling into such contradiction. In the Soviet Union and Maoist China we saw the irrational phenomenon of the "fellow travelers" … Those intellectuals who believed — many of them in good faith — the establishment of "socialism" and the construction of "the new man" in those countries until the facts forced them to realize what those regimes really were. Nevertheless, although in many cases such mistakes are not motivated by the search of some sort of reward and may seem sincere, just some anthropological weakness, it behooves to ask the why and how of such conduct. Although the easiest thing would be to think that it is simply due to beliefs that no human being — even the most rational ones — could forever avoid, in Chomsky's case it is not possible to forget that he himself fought against this tendency in the past.

That is why it is imperative to ask: how can a man, apparently capable of reasoning, of critical analysis of what happens in the world, travel to Venezuela today to sing the praises of "XXI Century socialism" without noticing the military mentality of its inventor, Commander Chávez, nor the crass populism of his so-called Bolivarian Revolution? How can Chomsky commit the same error as some famous intellectuals of the past century, some praising Stalin and some, years later, revering Mao and his "Little Red Book"? They did so because they believed that in Russia and in China they were building the "true communism" and he does so now because he believes that in Venezuela "a new world, a different world" is being created. How can he forget that later all those intellectuals were forced to confess a "mea culpa" for their ideological blindness that prevented them from seeing what was behind the Stalinist and Maoist revolutionary discourse? That totalitarianism, responsible for the death of millions of people, inspired Castro to impose for fifty years a dictatorship in Cuba that Chávez devoutly imitates.

But what is surprising in the Chomsky of the last few years is not only the apparent historical amnesia but that he is sensitive to the praises the histrionic commander bestows: "I give you the warmest welcome (…) it was time for you to visit us and for the Venezuelan people to see you and hear you directly" while he shows his gratitude for his "loving and generous words". There is also the buffoonery of Chomsky saying how "it moved him to meet the men who have inspired this situation".

What is most surprising about this conversion to messianic faith, similar to other famous conversions to Catholicism (Baudelaire, Peguy, Claudel, etc) is that the miracle happens after the collapse of "real socialism" of Soviet inspiration and the establishment of capitalism in China by the same communist party Mao left in power. In contrast to the young intellectual "idealists" who worshipped Stalin or Mao before these important historical events happened, Chomsky has been able to observe them in his lifetime and that makes more incomprehensible the fact that he now seems to have forgotten them. Above all, the failures of messianic revolutions confirm without a doubt all his prophecies.

It is true that for a while now we have been witnesses to the instrumentalization of Chomsky in many directions. This happens despite the fact that his ethical position, his ideological references and his political activity are contrary to what many of his followers defend and value. This is easy to see simply by reading his books. Unless today's Chomsky is not the same who wrote:

"We are in a time of corporatizing power, consolidating and centralizing power. It is assumed this is good, if you are a progressive, as a Marxist-Leninist. Three important things come from the same background: fascism, bolshevism and corporate tyranny. They all come from the same more or less Hegelian roots." (Chomsky, Class Warfare, p.23) And let us not talk about what he wrote a while later regarding the country born out of the Bolshevik coup d'etat in October 1917 that, for Chomsky, was responsible for the dismantling of the emerging socialist structures in Russia: "They are the same brutal communists, the same brutal Stalinists of two years ago, now directed by the whites" and who are "the enthusiastic managers of the market economy". Hence his pessimism: "Those who try to associate themselves with popular organizations and help the population to organize themselves, those who support popular movements in this way, simply will not be able to survive in such circumstances of concentrated power". (Chomsky, Comprende le pouvoir, pp.7 — 11).

How is it possible that he can commit the same error as the pro-Chinese "fellow travelers" who had known the same old blindness in the preceding generation — that of the old Stalinists who tardily came to self-criticism — although he was a critical witness to such blindness? What is even more serious in Chomsky's case is that those experiences have taught him nothing even after seeing and denouncing them.

Regarding Chomsky we must ask ourselves about the mystery of the strange cohabitation of the sharpest intelligence and the most obtuse credulity in the same human spirit. Particularly so because at that time he was one of the harshest critics of the blindness suffered by many of his intellectual colleagues who along with him constituted the cream of western intellectuals: the Sartres and other great philosophers, historians, sociologists, journalists or first rate university people.

It is indeed a mystery since there were few intellectuals who later didn't have to confess being wrong and admit that Chomsky was right, showing how this blindness had driven them to commit that very grave error in the past. How could Chomsky have forgotten this? It is also true that the old Stalinists' blindness — a thousand times confessed and analyzed in articles, interviews and books — didn't serve as lesson for young western Maoists, who 20 years later repeated the same error, with the same arrogance as their predecessors. The first thing for them was blind adhesion to what was presented as an emancipating revolution. In Chomsky we see the opposite: first came the denunciation, the objective, rational analysis, rigorously critical, and then the blindness…

Shortsighted Anti-Imperialism

It is true that Chomsky's anti American imperialism was rather discreet with regards to the growing authoritarianism of the Sandinistas during their turn in power in the 80's in Nicaragua and the Castro dictatorship during several decades. And this is so in spite of the fact that among the victims of the latter are many who shared a lot with the militant pro-Cuban anti-imperialists of Latin America.

Could it be that this obstinate anti-imperialism, the fact that in his view the most important thing is to denounce the injustices prevalent in the USA as well as the injustices generated by this country on a global scale, drives him to stake his position on what happens in the American continent in such a confusing manner? Although Chomsky still considers himself "anarchist-

libertarian" it's clear that for him ideological considerations must be relegated to the background and a kind of gradation must be made between injustices according to the degree of global danger posed by the targets of his criticism. The problem is that such political relativism allows many Marxist-Leninists, demagogues and politicians, whose only concern is the conquest of power, its execution and conservation, to get shelter in Chomsky's anti-imperialist arguments instead of caring about helping the people to organize themselves. It's a serious problem because Chomsky does and says nothing to dissuade them. On the contrary, maintaining such immoral discretion with such perseverance and allowing himself to be photographed besides the Castros and the Chavezes he becomes an accomplice of the clownishness and the authoritarian, dictatorial deviations of these modern day oligarchs, no matter how convenient or discreet his praises might be.

Unfortunately, this obstinacy in keeping such Manichean discretion (considering that these demagogues' access to power is less of a danger than the destruction caused by Yankee imperialism in the world) is not only inefficient in preventing such destruction (these demagogues continue to do business with the empire's multinational corporations) but also contributes to demobilize people and make even harder the task of those who do struggle against worldwide domination by Capital and the State.

It is possible that, given his age, Chomsky can't recognize it: but it is impossible to think that he isn't aware of the distance that separates him from all those who believe his arguments against the Yankee empire and who, in turn, are very reticent, because of self-interest or comfort, to denounce the dominating ways of these supposedly revolutionary demagogues.

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About the author: O.A. combines theory and activism. In 1955 he organized in Mexico in solidarity with the Cuban struggle against the Batista dictatorship, later directly supporting the preparations for Castro's landing in the Isle. In 1962 in France he coordinated Interior Defense, a secret group formed by agreement between the CNT, the FAI and the Iberian Federation of Libertarian Youth in order to re-activate the struggle against Franco's dictatorship, being responsible for sabotage, attempts, printing clandestine propaganda and helping people fleeing Spanish fascism. Today he works on the revision of the Delgado and Granado trial, in the Support Group for Independent Libertarians and Syndicalists in Cuba (GALSIC), among other activities. He is the author of "El anarquismo español y la acción revolucionaria (1961–1974)" and "Miedo a la memoria".

Note from the publishers of *El Libertario*: In our issue #51, accessible in www.nodo50.org/ellibertario, we have published another article on this subject: "Chavez y Chomsky. El caudillo y el libertario" by N. Triffon, translated to Spanish from the French original published in *Le Monde Libertaire*, weekly paper by the French Anarchist Federation in its issue of December 21 2006.

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