**Meeting the Enemy: An Essay Review of
Noam Chomsky : A Life of Dissent
by Robert F. Barsky**

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Ever since the late 1950s, when his review of B. F. Skinner's *Verbal Behavior* appeared in the journal *Language*, he has been a source of troubled thoughts for radical behaviorists: Noam Chomsky, inventor of transformational grammar, co-founder of psycholinguistics, professor at MIT, leading critic of American foreign policy and well known analyst of American mass media, author of over seventy books, his name a near synonym for the analysis of grammar and language in contemporary circles. Robert F. Barsky, an assistant professor of English at the University of Western Ontario, in *Noam Chomsky: A Life of Dissent* (MIT Press, 1997), gives us the most detailed account to date of Chomsky's early life and formative years; one which takes the political life of the MIT professor as its primary topic, though a considerable number of pages are devoted to the origin of Chomsky's views on language and the nature of his objections to radical behaviorism.

This is a sympathetic biography intended to foster the view that Chomsky is the leading American intellectual of the 20th century's last half. In an introduction, five chapters and a conclusion, Barsky surveys Chomsky's youth, his university days and relationship with linguist Zellig Harris, the influence of rationalism on his approach to language and politics, his analysis of individuals and their relation to institutions, the place of dissent in his life, and the relationship of Chomsky to contemporary movements (he, for example, opposes the postmodernists). Barsky relies

upon available sources, but heavily supplements them with a personal correspondence between himself and Chomsky spanning from 1991 until shortly before the book's publication. Most of what is original in the book stems from this correspondence. The best terms to describe Barsky's treatment are personal, authentic, enthusiastic, less than comprehensive, with a decidedly and intentional focus on the political rather than the intellectual aspects of Chomsky's work – over half of the 200 plus pages are about politics. The political discussion will be of most interest to those who write the history of the American Left since World War II (I found my copy of the book in the political science section of the store, aside a healthy number of Chomsky's own political books. Disappointingly, this large national trade store carried only one of his linguistic treatises). The political views of Chomsky will be discussed here only as they related to Skinner¹.

The book is filled with more than two dozen photographs whose advantage is their personal and candid nature: Chomsky in an Scottish pub, speaking to a political audience, listening to a talk, standing outside his MIT office in a work shirt, and with a picture of Bertrand Russell looking over his shoulder. The latter picture is not without point. For Barsky suggests that the prime model of

¹The other biographies of Chomsky are Lyons (1991); Haley and Lunsford, (1994); For a comprehensive bibliography of Chomsky's writings see Koerner and Tajima (1986).

Chomsky's academic and political life is that of twentieth-century philosopher Bertrand Russell (pp. 32-34). Another photograph (contrived by Mark Achbar and Jeremy Allaire) shows a white rat looking down on an issue of the *New York Review of Books* prominently headlined "The Case Against B. F. Skinner," the title of Chomsky's review (1972) of *Beyond Freedom and Dignity*. The caption reads, "Chomsky's condemnation of B. F. Skinner's brand of behaviorism helped popularize his own unconventional approach to language." What the pictures do not reveal is the enormity of Chomsky's accomplishments.

Who is this man that Barsky informs the reader was the *most cited* living individual in the world (among the arts and humanities)? To meet the enemy: He was born on December 7th, 1928, (the year Skinner entered graduate school at Harvard), the son of Russian immigrants who provided an "intensely Jewish-Hebraic household"; his father authored a "definitive" study of the history of the Hebrew language, and was for more than forty years faculty president of Gratz College. His mother taught as well, and appears the source of Chomsky's earliest political views. Chomsky, like Skinner, had one brother. Barsky makes the case that the two key words for Chomsky's youth are language and politics. Well before college he is intimate with both as they are the foundation of the family environment in which he grew up. His lifelong views nearly formed by late adolescence: "Left-libertarian values" in politics, and "rationalist ideas" in linguistics (and psychology).

Chomsky quickly rose to academic recognition, though not through the usual steps. He had entered the University of Pennsylvania at age 16 and by 19 he was dating his future wife and considering immigrating to Palestine. What changed his plans was meeting Zellig Harris, the Benjamin Franklin Professor of Linguistics. Founder of the first department of linguistics in the United States, Harris was widely known for his structural analysis of linguistics and later the development of dis-

course analysis. He led Chomsky not only to a deeper interest in language analysis but to philosophy, mathematics, and cultural psychoanalysis. Though Chomsky attended few structured classes, he completed his degree in 1949 (with an honors thesis titled "Morphophonemics of Modern Hebrew."), and married as well. He was twenty years old. A Master's degree from Penn soon followed, as well as an appointment to the Harvard Society of Fellows (Skinner had one from 1933 to 1936).

From 1951 until 1955, Chomsky worked on his own analysis of language, receiving his Ph. D. in 1955 "on the strength of having submitted just one chapter of this thesis" (p. 83). Can it really have been that simple? Apparently. "Chomsky's ties to that university [Pennsylvania] had been severed in 1951, and other than presenting this chapter he fulfilled no formal obligations for the degree" (p. 83). (A story best not told to current graduate students.) The 1000 page manuscript from which the chapter was drawn did not receive publication until twenty years later as *The Logical Structure of Linguistic Theory* (Chomsky, 1975). An appointment as assistant professor at MIT came in the fall of 1955, promotion to associate professor followed two years later, a year at the Institute for Advanced Study in 1958 at Princeton University, and of course, the infamous review of *Verbal Behavior* appeared in 1959, the year which also saw Chomsky promoted to Full Professor at the age of 32. In the fields of the social sciences and humanities there may be no more impressive rise to academic stardom in recent times².

Chomsky has always been forthright in his views on what is wrong with the discipline of psychology. In 1979, he said, "in order to do good psychology one must start by identifying a cognitive domain – vision, for example – that is to say, a domain that can be considered as a system, or mental organ, that is more or less integrated" (Chomsky, 1979, p. 49). His posi-

²An excellent history of linguistics in America cited by Barsky is Matthews (1993).

tion was renewed in 1988 in the proclamation that "behavioristic science has to become mentalistic in order to become scientific" (Chomsky, 1988, p. 150). From such a perspective it easily follows that "psychologists have a curious definition of their discipline...A dead end. They want to confine themselves solely to the study of performance – behavior..." (1979, p. 49). Mainstream psychology has, as Barsky records, recognized Chomsky's contributions. The American Psychological Association gave him the Distinguished Scientific Contribution Award in 1984, and followed it with the status of William James fellow in 1990.

Chomsky's innovations in linguistics must, according to Barsky, be seen against the psychological background of the "Bloomfeldians who preceded him...[their] model ...based on behaviorism and its associated learning theory" (p. 96). Thus, when Chomsky engaged *Verbal Behavior*, it was as a "stand in" for an entire tradition in linguistics which is only loosely but, nonetheless, devastatingly related to Skinner's specific thesis. In writing the infamous review, "The thirty-year-old Chomsky was taking on an established and well-entrenched figure, and, in doing so, was putting into question an entire school of psychological enquiry" (p. 97). Chomsky changed linguistics forever, and, for those in the cognitive revolution, psychology as well.

During the two decades of the 1970s and 1980s the review of *Verbal Behavior* by Chomsky was cited once for each two citations of *Verbal Behavior* itself. This may be the most unique relationship between a book and a review in the history of the social sciences (Knapp, 1992). The various attempts to lessen its influence have produced mixed results.³ Chomsky's thesis may be concisely summarized: If the terms of behaviorism are taken literally, its claims are obviously false, if taken metaphorically the claims show no advantages over other views, in fact, valuable distinctions are lost. Barsky lets Chomsky

explain. "It wasn't Skinner's crazy variety of behaviorism that interested me particularly, but the way it was being used in Quinean empiricism and 'naturalization of philosophy,' a gross error in my opinion. That was important, Skinner was not. The latter was bound to collapse shortly under the weight of repeated failures" (p. 98).

But later explanations uttered by Chomsky, particularly following the review of *Beyond Freedom and Dignity*, are more forceful, vitriolic, and clearly directed at Skinner. For example, Barsky's provides this 1974 statement from Chomsky. "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. See, I think that there are two levels of discussion here. One is purely intellectual: What does it amount to? And the answer is zero, zlick...I mean there are no principles there that are non trivial, that even exist...Now the other question is, why so much interest in it?... I mean, the methodology that they are suggesting is known to every good prison guard, or police interrogator. But, they make it look benign and scientific...it tells any concentration camp guard that he can do what his instincts tell him to do, but pretend to be a scientist..." (pp. 98-100).

Citizens of the twentieth century know of no greater evil than the Nazi produced Holocaust. Lkening radical behaviorism to the final solution was apparently too much even for B. F. Skinner, who had previously remained silent in the face of Chomsky's vitriolic remarks. He replied in a letter to the *Times Literary Supplement* (Skinner, 1990), a portion of which Barsky quotes. Barsky also cites a letter from Chomsky in which the latter comments on Skinner's failure to respond to the review of *Verbal Behavior*: "there's no particular reason why he should have responded. We knew each other, and got along quite well, but virtually never discussed these issues" (p. 100). Was this mere gentlemanly behavior?

One valuable contribution of Barsky's biography is to place in historical context the relationship of Chomsky's analysis to that of earlier contributors. This occurs primarily in Chapter 3, "Humboldt and the

³Responses to Chomsky included Catania, 1972; MacCorquodale, 1970; Segal, 1972, but also see Andreson, 1990; and Stemmer, 1990.

Cartesian Tradition," where the reader not only finds a discussion of the history of Chomsky's criticisms of radical behaviorism, but also an explication of the Enlightenment sources of much of Chomsky's own formulation of language and linguistics. Chomsky rejects the structural linguists of his day for an entirely new program of "universal grammar." For Chomsky the dualism in the Cartesian tradition is not one of different substances, but rather one of different modes of action, the mechanically determined versus the humanly decided. "Human action is coherent and appropriate, but uncaused" (p. 108).

A major influence on Chomsky was Wilhelm von Humboldt (1767-1835), the brother of explorer Alexander von Humboldt whose travel diaries had impressed Darwin. He wrote on history, politics, and language expressing a strong belief in the "inalienable value of the individual" (see Isham, 1967). Humboldt didn't so much "enlighten" Chomsky as confirm the view that the fundamental description of human language ability is creativity. For Humboldt language in the human animal was not a capacity that could be "invented" or "come upon." It instead reflects an "inner need," not merely a "vehicle for the maintenance of communication." Chomsky recasts this view by describing language as something which "grows" rather than something which is "learned" (p. 175).

And it grows quickly, for Chomsky has always characterized the acquisition of language by children as a process which is fairly rapid and without much direct instruction. Nearly the same view was expressed by Humboldt: "A further proof that children do not mechanically learn their native language but undergo a development of linguistic capacity is afforded by the fact that all children, in the most different imaginable circumstances of life, learn to speak within a fairly narrow and definite time span, just as they develop all their main capacities at certain definite growth stages" (p. 110).

The remainder of the biography is largely devoted to political issues and

actions, though it would be a mistake to think that these are not relevant in understanding the criticisms Chomsky forms against behaviorism. In fact, the key to understanding Chomsky and the apparent guiding thesis in Barsky's telling of Chomsky's intellectual life is political throughout: "There is a remarkable consistency to Chomsky's political work. His fundamental values have remained virtually unchanged since childhood. He has supported and looked for ways to nourish the libertarian and creative character of the human being" (p. 95). From this follows Chomsky's hatred for Skinner's psychological (and what he sees as Skinner's political) views. Nothing which diminishes the creative capacity, and thereby the freedom of human beings, can be tolerated, certainly not the suggestion that there may be limits – or foolishness – in the description of humans as free.

Barsky denies that the same formula applies to Chomsky's linguistic analysis. Here data, research, science has formed Chomsky's views. But one wonders if it is mere coincidence that Chomsky's science so closely resembles his humanitarian and political views. The attacks on B. F. Skinner's analysis of verbal behavior, and on the possibilities of improving life through behavior analysis, suggests more of a relationship than Barsky is willing to permit. To my reading of the story of Chomsky there is no action or thought which is without political consequence⁴.

For a number of years, and on several occasions, Chomsky and his wife seriously considered immigrating to Palestine. Both lived for periods of time in Kibbutz, one of the few actually living arrangements that has been compared to many of the features of *Walden Two* – a socialist community that is experimental about many cultural practices. It seems paradoxically that as much as Chomsky has thought, said, and done about the living situation of people, that he so easily dismisses the ideas of *Walden*

⁴Among the most interesting political anecdotes in Barsky's book is the description of the night Norman Mailer spend in the same jail cell as Chomsky following the October, 1967 march on the Pentagon; they had not met previously (p. 191).

Two. How would he organize a government to promote the good?

Chomsky's critics are dismissed with little space. Who are the linguists who argue that syntactical analysis cannot be done without semantic analysis: no understanding of structure without understanding meaning? They received voice in R. A. Harris's *Linguistic Wars*, an account which Chomsky said exaggerated his role and "omitted" the relevant facts (see Mabry, 1994 for a review). Studies of language in primates are dismissed as easily as critics. "This work," pronounces Chomsky, "has not the remotest relation to science, though people in white coats and with equipment sometimes do it" (p. 174).

There are disappointments in Barsky biography, but they need not count as deficiencies. For example, we learn nothing of how Chomsky works (other than the nature of a few collaborations, and that he writes letters twenty hours a week, and works on many projects at once). The closest we come to a description is this honorific passage: "His approach to work, and indeed his very manner of living, derives from a rationalist perspective that emphasizes ideas and their advancement rather than honors and their procurement, or power and its accumulation" (p. 115).

Barsky's makes the reader want to know more about his subject, a valuable quality in a brief biography. He stops short of a formula for understanding his subject: a generative mechanism for elucidating what Chomsky has written and spoken. A wider reading of Chomsky makes clear that for him human nature matters, and like Hobbes, dictates politics. Radical behaviorists, in his casting, do not believe in a human nature; therefore, there is nothing to stop them from slowing rising to fascism. It is a commitment to people's nature that prevents enslaving political systems. "Once we accept the Cartesian perspective on language," says Chomsky, "the next step is to support natural rights and to oppose authoritarianism" (p. 112): language and politics unite.

The century's end is near, and Barsky may be right. Chomsky could be the last intellectual figure of mid to late 20th century America. It is not hard to make him a hero, especially for those in the academy. He is terribly bright and extraordinarily fluid in his expression. His values would appear to lead to a better world; he is an activist in productive ways, he seems, even from the great distance of the TV screen and short biography, a humble and engaging person – on first meeting he would treat us nicely. But why so intense about Skinner and Skinnerians – if we are merely mistaken?

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