
UNDER WESTERN EYES

Chomsky Revisited

By Leopold Labedz



STUDENTS of casuistry should by now be familiar with Noam Chomsky's persistent efforts to prove that the earth is flat. He tries to make us believe that he is motivated in matters of Viet

Nam and Cambodia by a scholarly preoccupation with facts and an intellectual "concern for truth." Fiddlesticks. Such declarations are simply a camouflage for his political passions.

How much of it is cant and plain humbug? It is difficult to say. Chomsky lives in a fantasy world in which everything which does not square with his ideological beliefs, no matter how obvious, is instantly dismissed as a product of the "Western propaganda system" and explained away with dialectical logic-chopping.

What can one make of an academic linguist who tries to use every channel in the West's free press to propagate his view that the "Free Press" (as he ironically calls it) has deliberately invented and spread the story of "the alleged genocide in Cambodia"? In this nefarious conspiracy aiming to achieve "the reconstruction of imperial ideology" in the West, collusion obviously extends from *The New York Times* to *The Wall Street Journal*, from *Le Monde* to *Le Figaro*, from *Die Zeit* to *Die Welt*.

Does he see much difference between the "Free Press" and the press in the totalitarian countries? Very little (*Working Papers*, May-June 1978):

"In a totalitarian society the mechanics of indoctrination are simple and transparent. The state determines the official truth. The technocratic and policy-oriented intellectuals parrot official doctrine, which is easily identified. In a curious way this practice frees the mind. Internally, at least, one can identify the propaganda message and reject it... Under capitalist democracy, the situation is considerably more complex... The democratic system of thought control is seductive and compelling. The more vigorous the debate, the better the system of propaganda is served, since the

tacit unspoken assumptions are more forcefully implanted."

That's how "the myth of genocide in Cambodia" has been established, with only a few sturdy dissident intellectuals (like Noam Chomsky, Stephen Heder, Ben Kiernan, Torben Retbøll, Laura Summers, Serge Thion, Michael Vickery, Gareth Porter, Edward S. Herman, George Hildebrand, and our own Malcolm Caldwell) seeing through the fraud. But the rest, possessing no such blessedly critical minds, have been seduced by the democratic press (*The Political Economy of Human Rights*, 1979, Vol. II, pp. 299-300):

"The success of the Free Press in reconstructing the imperial ideology since the U.S. withdrawal from Indochina has been spectacular... The system of brainwashing under freedom with mass media voluntary self-censorship in accord with the larger interest of the state, has worked brilliantly. The new propaganda line has been established by endless repetition of the Big Distortions..."

It is against this background that one has to look at Chomsky's latest communication (in this issue of ENCOUNTER, p. 93). For him my article "Myths & Horrors" (ENCOUNTER, February) was, of course, part of "contemporary propaganda" aimed at "reconstructing the imperial ideology" through the brainwashing of the hapless readers of these pages. How do his arguments stand up to the scrutiny of, admittedly, the perverted pen of an imperial propagandist?

CHOMSKY CLAIMS that I suppressed his "conclusion" that refugees' "reports must be considered seriously" and that I turned it "into its opposite."

This is a good example of his polemical methods: the assertion is totally false. The trick is simple, but still needs to be carefully watched. Chomsky announced the need for "serious consideration" of the refugees' reports... but only to deny them any validity. It was a disingenuous way of providing himself with an academic alibi of "objectivity." His conclusion was exactly as I have stated it: that "the refugees from Cambodia were not to be given credence." Contrary to what he says I have correctly rendered his reasoning. I quoted one sentence (italicised below) from a paragraph which, quoted in full, should settle the matter of which of us is misleading readers about Chomsky's attitude to the evidence provided by the Cambodian refugees:

"They naturally tend to report what their interlocutors wish to hear. While their reports must be considered seriously, care and caution are necessary. Specifically, refugees questioned by Westerners and Thais have a vested interest

in reporting atrocities on the part of Cambodian revolutionaries. . . .”

Can any reader of Chomsky’s letter infer from it what his real point was in his *Nation* (25 June 1977) article?

For good measure he stressed in the same passage “the extreme unreliability of refugee reports” (after “serious consideration”?) and concluded that the Cambodian “executions have numbered at most in thousands.”

He presented his conclusion as based on “analysis by highly qualified specialists who have studied the full range of available evidence”, dismissing such first-hand studies as the book by Father François Ponchaud. As an Australian writer has pointed out (Robert Manne in *Quadrant*, October 1979), when closely examined, these “highly qualified specialists” and their “full range of evidence” are less than impressive. Chomsky’s broad body of scholarly opinion

“boils down to an unidentified article in a fortnightly news review which has for four years affirmed constantly the Ponchaud analysis; a

letter to the editor of a man who now believes that hundreds of thousands of deaths were directly caused by the actions of the Pol Pot régime; and a piece by an ideologically blinkered student [Ben Kiernan] in an undergraduate magazine.”

Noam Chomsky now says that he “cited estimates ranging from thousands to hundreds of thousands and even millions killed, concluding that ‘We do not pretend to know where the truth lies amidst these sharply conflicting estimates.’” He also says that “there has been no ‘obfuscation’” on his part.

But he now writes about “thousands or more killed” (*Political Economy*, Vol. II, p. 279), and yet, as noted above, he emphatically declared that the “executions numbered at most in thousands.” He referred ironically to the “alleged human rights violations in Viet Nam” and the “alleged Khmer Rouge atrocities.” He derided in general the “tales of communist atrocities.” He even scoffed at *The Wall Street Journal* for having “dismissed contemptuously the very idea that the Khmer Rouge could play the constructive role.” In his last book (*Political Economy*, Vol. II, p. 347) he sneers at

A Question of Sources

IN HIS *Political Economy* (Vol. II, p. 343) Noam Chomsky expressed warm thanks to Ben Kiernan, a left-wing activist from Monash University in Melbourne, “for important information and very helpful comments.” Approvingly he referred (pp. 226–8) to the studies on Cambodia in which Kiernan “took issue with the horror stories by refugees”, questioned the assumption “that there was a central direction for atrocities”, and rejected the idea “that the [Pol Pot] government planned and approved a systematic large-scale purge.”

A year later this “Australian scholar” (as Chomsky called him) has suddenly become poacher-turned-gamekeeper in the field of genocide. It happened to be the same Ben Kiernan who analysed for the *New Statesman* (2 May 1980) some of the blood-chilling records brought out from Pol Pot’s macabre interrogation centre at Tuol Sleng. Without mentioning his previous whitewashing of the Pol Pot régime, he wrote:

“That Pol Pot ran a violent, repressive régime is something scarcely open to question.”

Nimble confounding the issues, he dissociated himself not only from his own past, but also from Chomsky:

“There is a right-wing argument which suggests that Pol Pot and his friends, while ferocious, were not more so than any other rough, tough Third World government. And there is a left-wing argument—still held, apparently, by Noam Chomsky—which suggests that, although Pol Pot made numerous brutal errors, the conception of something especially outlandish about his régime is a chimera bred-up by the Western (and Vietnamese) mass-media.”

He concluded, with artless innocence, that “there was something entirely bizarre about the Pol Pot régime. Bizarre, yet disturbingly familiar in parts. . . .”

CHOMSKY IS THUS not the only one among the dwindling band of Pol Pot apologists who is trying to extricate himself from his past and to cover up its traces. But he does so without renouncing his “outlandish” initial assertions. He may well be surprised by such a sudden turn-about of a “scholar” whom he earlier thanked so profusely for his “evidence”! Ironically, this transformation appeared just after the *New Statesman* (25 April 1980) published an enthusiastic review of Chomsky’s *Political Economy*—“this may be the most important contribution to the study of American foreign policy to be published since the Vietnam War ended.” A week later, the same *New Statesman* printed a special feature by Ben Kiernan and Chantou Boua: “THE BUREAUCRACY OF DEATH: DOCUMENTS FROM INSIDE POL POT’S TORTURE MACHINE”, which occupied eight distinctive central pages of the magazine, with the cover and editorial pages devoted to the same subject. The decision to give it so much space was explained by reference to Santayana’s saying that “those who fail to understand history may be condemned to repeat it. . . .”

Might it not be helpful for this purpose to study the *New Statesman*’s own history, and its almost unprecedented record of repetitive misunderstandings and chronic failings, from Kingsley Martin to . . . Ben Kiernan?

L.L.

Leo Cherne for having written in 1965 that, after American withdrawal from Viet Nam, "there will be a bloody purge of the non-Communist leaders and intellectuals." Having dismissed such a prospect in his 1973 book, *Counterrevolutionary Violence: Bloodbaths in Fact and Propaganda* (I refer to *Bains de Sang*, the French edition published by Seghers/Laffont in 1975), he is still sarcastic about "the case of the missing bloodbath" in Viet Nam (*The Nation*, 25 June 1977, and *Political Economy*, Vol. II, p. 135).

What has happened in Indochina since the "liberation" makes Chomsky's erroneous perspective painful to recollect. His contemptuous dismissal of "the bloodbath myth" as simply invented by "Washington propaganda" sounds singularly hollow today, as does his prediction that "the movement which tries to gain the support of the peasant masses will certainly not resort to a bloodbath of the rural population" (pp. 31-2 and 102-3). To rescue his earlier assertions he produces some dazzling semantic footwork, but his efforts only indicate obduracy.

HIS SENSE OF REALITY is obviously in inverse proportion to his self-righteousness. The stickler for quantitative precision now plays fast and loose with numbers and magnitudes. In 1977 he contemptuously rejected the estimated figure of 1.2 million victims. If one now divides it by his uncertainty "factor of 1,000" one obtains a figure similar to that given, apologetically, by the Khmer Rouge leader, Khieu Samphan (10,000), in his recent *Time* (10 March 1980) interview, i.e. "at most in thousands" (if we take 2 million as the basis of division, the result will be similar). But Khieu Samphan acknowledged the missing Cambodians and conveniently attributed all 2 million victims to the Vietnamese (*they credit him with 3 millions*). Chomsky has no such escape clause, being stuck, as he is, with his past figures and present obfuscations, for he is not prepared to admit that he was wrong. His "factor of 1,000" simply cannot be tallied with the missing Cambodians. How indignantly Noam Chomsky rejected as a fraud the press report quoting Khieu Samphan's 1976 admission of a missing million in the "liberated" Cambodia! Now he is ready even to quote the "reported" CIA estimates in preference to the figure given by an ideologically less contaminated source (William Shawcross, *The New York Review of Books*, 24 January 1980), 4-5 million surviving Cambodians out of the estimated 7-8 million before the war. In his *Language and Responsibility* Chomsky stressed the need "to look at the facts with an open mind", but his assurances that he is open-minded about the number of victims are unconvincing. Has ever an open mind been so closed to truth?

IN HIS IDEOLOGICAL fanaticism he constantly shifts his arguments and bends references, quotations and facts, while declaring his "commitment to find the truth." He excoriates the "Free Press", but when it suits his argument, he quotes it extensively. Even his ideological allies sometimes find this hard to swallow. Thus, for instance, the former editor of the radical *Ramparts*, David Horowitz, wrote critically about Chomsky in the Left-wing *Nation* (8 December 1979):

"Consider... for a moment, Chomsky's misleading comparison of the Soviet and American presses as 'mirror images'. In fact the ignorance imposed on the Soviet public by Government-controlled media and official censorship is mind-boggling by Western standards...."

Why bring this up? Why dwell on the negative features of the Soviet system (or of other Communist states) which in any case are widely reported in the American media? What is the relevance?

These are questions the apologists of the Left raise when they are confronted by the Soviet case. Unfortunately, the consequences of ignoring the flaws of practical Communism are far-ranging and real. To begin with, the credibility of the Left's critique is gravely undermined. Chomsky's article is a good example. The American press does not look inordinately servile when compared with its real-world counterparts—and especially its socialist opposites."

Another Chomsky sympathiser, A. J. Langguth, was also critical of Chomsky in his review of *Political Economy* in *The Nation* (16 February 1980):

"Is there something tinny about the Chomsky-Herman chapters on Cambodia? Perhaps it is the unrelenting insistence that they were right about Indochina and that almost everyone else was wrong. Compared to the recent articles from Shawcross, which concerned the well-being, indeed the survival of the Cambodian people, the passages from Chomsky and Herman represent a high degree of special pleading, which because of our obsession with our sins, ends up slighting the major issue—the present fate of the Cambodians."

Or, in Robert Manne's melancholy reflection:

"Sad to say [it is not] possible to expect that the political self-confidence of the former supporters of Pol Pot will be in the slightest deflated by the fact that concerning their estimation of him and his odious régime they were wholly, shamefully and ludicrously wrong. Pol Pot has passed; Noam Chomsky, I fear, persisteth."

He persisteth to the point where he is now denying ever having had the slightest intention of pooh-poohing the Cambodian horrors. As he put it in a previous communication to ENCOUNTER (October 1979):

"Since authentic defenders of the Khmer Rouge were virtually impossible to find, apart from marginal Maoist groups, it has been necessary to invent them. . . . I have been elected to the post of 'official opponent', so difficult to fill."

Poor misunderstood fellow! He was only concerned with the whole truth about a situation which, as he somewhat belatedly discovered, "was grisly enough." Yet this scholarly solicitude has not met with the milk of human kindness "in the present historical context, when allegations of genocide are being used to whitewash Western imperialism, to distract attention from the 'institutionalized violence' of the expanding system of sub-fascism . . ." (*Political Economy*, Vol. II, p. 150). In such a context, he says, even the figures on the Left began "publishing outlandish falsehoods" about what he refers to as his "alleged views." Many are those among them who have fallen for the Great Imperial Hoax (Sidney H. Schanberg and William Shawcross, Eugene McCarthy and George McGovern, Jean Lacouture and Claude Roy). Unlike Noam Chomsky they have obviously not realised (p. 149) that

"To determine the credibility of those who transmit reports is a critical matter for anyone concerned to discover the truth, either about Cambodia or about the current phase of imperial ideology."

Who is the truth-seeker, where is the ideologist? Consider Father Ponchaud and his "alleged sympathy with the Khmer peasants" which, according to his implacable critic, he invoked "for the benefit of a gullible Western audience." Chomsky called his book "serious and worth reading", but it is difficult to see why, for at the same time he denounced his "deceit", "fakery", and "outright falsehoods", and said that he "plays fast and loose with numbers and is highly unreliable with quotations" (charges which, as we have seen, apply to Chomsky himself).

It is not exactly an unknown psychological phenomenon—attributing to opponents one's own polemical sins. In Chomsky's case it always goes with high moral indignation, and also coincides with a less stringent, not to say callous, attitude to the crimes of one's own side. This type of selective morality is, as Raymond Aron observed a long time ago, a characteristic trait of *gauchistes* in general and is not confined to the apologists of Stalin alone.

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IT WOULD TAKE half a lifetime to unravel all the ploys, twists, and other mental acrobatics displayed in Chomsky's writings. Behind the extraordinary technique is a mind-set which is capable of what *The Wall Street Journal* called "intellectual levitation."

Bear with me for a few more examples. Chomsky writes in his letter:

"Labeledz claims that I criticised Western intellectuals for giving 'too much "publicity" to the Cambodian genocide', another fabrication."

Here is the editorial introductory note to "An Open Letter to Noam Chomsky" by Claude Roy published in *Le Nouvel Observateur* (3 December 1979):

"In the last issue of the review *Change* (22 March 1979), Noam Chomsky is full of irony in his conversation with Regis Débray about Western intellectuals who gave so much publicity to human rights or to the Cambodian genocide. Our friend Claude Roy finds this irony disturbing and close, very close, to bad faith."

Or take Chomsky's reference to East Timor, his standard argument (but one which, in any event, cannot justify his belittling the horrors in Cambodia). Here also his irony is misplaced: for where did he learn about the East Timor massacres but in the same "Free Press" which he so castigates?

ENCOUNTER has not been dealing with the East Timor atrocities, but it was not a case of suppression: it did not cover the Taraki-Amin massacres in Afghanistan either. Or, for that matter, those by the Mengistu régime in Ethiopia. And it came to discuss the horrors of Cambodia themselves only recently.

But whatever the omissions, it really is not a question of conspiracy of the "Free Press", as Chomsky believes. Western newspapers reported the East Timor atrocities. They condemned them with less vehemence than Chomsky, but more explicitly than he leads us to believe. Papers such as *The Wall Street Journal* (which, according to Chomsky, has a "disgraceful record of subservience to state power and apologetics for barbarism") published articles which also denounced the East Timor atrocities (George Steiner's "Thinking the Irreparable About Cambodia", 30 November 1979):

"There are no accurate figures as to the number of men, women and children hounded, gunned, starved to death in Biafra not long ago, or being eliminated right now by Indonesian policies in East Timor. . . ."

The East Timor outrages may have deserved larger coverage and greater moral condemnation, but their extent is not comparable to those of Cambodia. They were assiduously exploited

propagandistically by "progressives" who wanted to "even it up" with Cambodia. As Robert Conquest wrote (*Daily Telegraph*, 8 March 1980):

"East Timor was until 1974 a Portuguese colony, though ethnically indistinguishable from the Indonesian part of the island. After some fighting, Freitlin, a Communist-front régime, came to power in 1975, and soon afterwards the Indonesians annexed the territory. The story of the supposed super-massacre they carried out was originally based on an administrator telling the Press that 60,000 people had lost their lives or homes (including 40,000 who had fled from the Communists). This was instantly inflated to 60,000 killed, which was gradually put up to '60,000 to 120,000'."

Chomsky now gives in his letter the figure of 100,000 to 200,000.

Professor H. W. Arndt analysed the story in detail in the Australian magazine *Quadrant* (December 1979), and summed up Noam Chomsky's evidence before the UN Decolonization Committee to the effect that

"up to half the population of East Timor may have died and that 'the deaths from war, starvation and torture equalled or relatively exceeded those in Kampuchea'. Some Australian newspapers indulged in similarly extravagant statements."

These specious symmetries and counterpoints are nothing new in the history of *gauchisme*. When it was a question of condemning Stalin's genocide, Simone de Beauvoir wrote (in *La Force des Choses*, p. 220) in a way quite similar to Chomsky's argumentation about Cambodia and East Timor:

"While perfectly indifferent to the 40,000 dead in Sétif, to the 80,000 assassinated in Madagascar, to the hunger and miseries of Algeria, to the burning of villages in Indochina, to the Greeks suffering in the camps, and to the Spaniards being executed by Franco, the bourgeois hearts are suddenly bleeding for the poor Soviet inmates."

The variations on this theme hark back to the time when Arthur Koestler ridiculed in *The Yogi and the Commissar* the standard "progressive" argument about Stalin's forced labour camps: "And what about the lynchings of Negroes in the South? . . ."

No doubt some horrific things happened in East Timor. But it is demagoguery on the part of Chomsky to put the "direct responsibility" for them "in Washington", as it is to say that it bears "basic responsibility" for "the current suffering in Cambodia." Pol Pot had power in Cambodia, whereas the US President did not control East Timor.

THERE IS NO POINT getting into a numbers game, yet the judgment whether there was genocide in Cambodia or East Timor depends on the magnitude of the respective horrors. In this context, just as Chomsky tends to understate the Cambodian atrocities, so he tends to overstate the massacres in East Timor. As usual, he is not too meticulous in his handling of figures. He refers in his *Political Economy* (Vol. II, p. 139), to the "apparent massacre of something like one-sixth of the population of East Timor." In his present letter the figure becomes "roughly one-fifth of the population." In either case, his assumption of possibly 200,000 victims would make the population of East Timor far higher than it was before the atrocities took place (it was the 1974 recorded figure of 688,769 which was used by the "progressives" for the charges about the missing East Timorese). This in no way affects the question of moral condemnation, but it is relevant to his argument about genocide; although he does not admit it, the percentage of victims in Cambodia is far higher. Nor are the absolute figures in the two cases comparable: in Cambodia they go tragically into millions.

It is not true as he asserts in his letter that for me "it is an incontrovertible fact" that the population there had been reduced "from seven to four million under the Khmer Rouge régime." I did not say this: I just referred to Sidney H. Schanberg's article reporting how his Cambodian journalist friend, Dith Pran, told him about such reduction "by massacre and starvation." But never mind Chomsky's careless use of quotations, references and attributions. Like Father Ponchaud, I do not believe that we can have an exact figure; but I do believe that we can have an idea of the order of magnitude of the Cambodian tragedy, and that it is within the range of millions, not—as Chomsky believes—of "thousands." Thus it falls fully into the terrible category of genocide. Chomsky's pettifogging becomes easier to understand when one recalls that he has never attributed the responsibility for the Cambodian murders to the policies of *Angka*, the ruling organisation of the Khmer Rouge régime. By now the evidence about its nature and the extent of the Cambodian holocaust is overwhelming. The ghastly story told by Dith Pran to Sidney H. Schanberg led him to the conclusion that

"the Khmer Rouge terror may have touched a level of cruelty not seen before in our lifetime. It was Cambodians endlessly killing other Cambodians in an orgy of destruction."

Sunday Telegraph Magazine, 13 April 1980

The evidence is coming not only from the refugees' reports, which Chomsky so cavalierly dismissed, but also from present-day visitors to Cambodia. Chris Mullin described what he saw on the spot in the Left-wing *Tribune* (11 April 1980):

"Visitors to Phnom Penh these days are taken on a gruesome little ritual tour of Khmer Rouge handiwork. The highlight is the Tuol Sleng prison (a converted high school) which has records listing over 16,000 inmates, of whom only five are said to have survived. . . . Of course there is no need for the visitor to believe any of this—though it is graphic enough. Instead he or she can take a car along any of the roads out of Phnom Penh. Choose any road, no one will prevent you. Drive until you want to stop at a village, any village, and ask what happened in the Pol Pot time.

"I drove one day to Kros, a village 18 kilometres along the road to Battambang. The village I chose at random had a population of around 2,000 before the coming of the Khmer Rouge. Today there are just 853, mostly women."

PERHAPS THE BEST IDEA of Chomsky's warped perceptions can be gauged from his other comparisons. For instance, he contemptuously rejected any parallel between the Pol Pot régime and the Nazi régime, and declared that

"a more appropriate comparison is with France after liberation, where 30-40,000 people were

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massacred with far less motive for revenge. . . .”

Political Economy, Vol. II, p. 149

And he also declared that, with regard to torture, Israel’s “record far exceeds in brutality anything that we know of from Viet Nam” (*Palestine Human Rights Bulletin*, 30 August 1977).

The eeriness of Chomsky’s “intellectual levitation” can be judged by his adroit shifts in argument whenever a factual mistake is detected in his writings.

“When we first read Ponchaud’s original, we assumed that the Thai journal *Prachachat* must be a right wing journal giving a criticism of the Khmer Rouge. That is what Ponchaud’s account suggests, in particular his final ironic comment, now deleted in the American edition. We wrote in *The Nation* (25 June 1977) that the chain of transmission was too long to be taken very seriously and we raised the following question: ‘How seriously would we regard a critical account of the United States in a book by a hostile European leftist based on a report in *Pravda* of a statement allegedly made by an unnamed American official?’ . . . Several people (Heder, Ponchaud, Vickery) have pointed out to us that we were mistaken in assuming that *Prachachat* was a right wing newspaper critical of the Khmer Rouge. The fact is that it was a left wing newspaper and the actual text is not a criticism of the Khmer Rouge, but a defense of the Khmer Rouge against foreign criticism, something that could hardly be guessed from Ponchaud’s account and is certainly worth knowing, in this context.

Political Economy, Vol. II, pp. 263-4

Well, how does Noam Chomsky get out of his blunder? Very simple. He continues:

“Here then, is an improved version of our original analogy: How seriously would we regard a critical account of the United States in a book by a hostile European leftist based on a report in ENCOUNTER* of comments by a ‘neutral person’ who reports statements of an unnamed American official?”

Having discovered the true tribal identity of *Prachachat*, Chomsky added a footnote reflecting his own tribal sympathies:

“* Our apologies to the editors of *Prachachat* for this comparison.”

Can one take seriously such political infantilism? Why does Noam Chomsky continue to write letters

¹ Every polemical line of his communications over more than a decade of argumentative exchanges has been published in these pages in full, without alteration: which (and he has privately conceded as much) is more than he has ever enjoyed in his own progressive-Left press.

to ENCOUNTER?¹ Why should he want them to appear in a magazine the comparison with which is a terrible insult to an obscure pro-Pol Pot Thai journal? Why should he expect his stabbing illuminations of dangerous truths to be published in an organ of the “Western propaganda system”, exercising “voluntary self-censorship in accordance with the larger interests of state”?

What is our indefatigable publicist up to? And what is his logic? After all, he believes that

“The democratic system of thought control is seductive and compelling. The more vigorous the debate, the better the system of propaganda is served, since the tacit unspoken assumptions are more forcefully implanted.

He also believes that in the case of Cambodia “critics of US violence” find that

“their comment is eagerly sought out in the hope that they will deny atrocity reports, so that this denial can be featured as ‘proof’ that inveterate apologists for Communism will never learn. . . .”

Result: there was no genocide in Cambodia! And the earth remains flat!

NOAM CHOMSKY thinks that he should not be compared with the Nazi and Stalinist apologists. Yet he deals in the same way with Pol Pot’s Kampuchea as do other cranky characters with Hitler’s Germany and Stalin’s Russia when, even now, they deny or minimise the extent of these historic cases of genocide (cf. John Bennett’s letter, p. 94). I can only repeat: I find it indecent in somebody whose own people has been a target of genocide to belittle the tragedy of others who have also suffered it. . . .

During the Stalin-Hitler Pact the US Communists maintained that the refugees from Poland (then occupied by the two partners-in-crime) were not to be given credence. They also attacked the International Rescue Committee (whose chairman, Leo Cherne, is called by Chomsky a “longtime apologist for US violence and oppression”) for bringing to the USA European intellectuals, refugees from Nazi-occupied and Vichy France, who were facing the danger of extermination. I wonder if Noam Chomsky is ever troubled by the thought of how unfeeling his attitude toward all these “highly unreliable” Cambodian refugees may appear to them?

HE ONCE GAVE US a short, but revealing, description of his political evolution (*New Left Review*, September–October 1969):

“In the ’forties, when I was a teenager, I would hang around left-wing bookshops and the offices

of off-beat groups and periodicals, talking to people—often very perceptive and interesting people who were thinking hard about the problems of social change—and seeing what I could pick up. Then I was much interested in a Jewish organization which was opposed to the Jewish state in Palestine and worked for Arab-Jewish co-operation on a socialist basis. Out of all this, from my relatives and friends, I learned a great deal informally and acquired a certain framework within which my own way of thinking developed. . . . I withdrew during the 'fifties from political involvements, though of course I retained my intellectual interest. I signed petitions, over the Rosenberg case, for instance, and went on occasional demonstrations, but it did not amount to much. Then, in the 'sixties, I began to be more active again."

The rest, as they say, is history. "Chomsky's great intellectual prestige, deservedly obtained in the field of syntax", secured an "undeservedly respectful attention to his political writings" (*New Statesman*, 17 August 1979).

Chomsky likes to quote, as in his last book, both George Orwell and Bertrand Russell. One can imagine what the author of *Homage to Catalonia* would have thought of this particular member of another "generation of unteachables hanging around our necks like a necklace of corpses." Bertrand Russell wrote (in the preface to a book by Gustav Herling, *A World Apart*, 1951) no less relevant words about the then letter-writers who denied the existence of Stalin's forced labour camps:

"Those who write these letters and those fellow-travellers who allow themselves to believe them share responsibility for the almost unbelievable horrors which are being inflicted upon millions of wretched men and women, slowly done to death by hard labour and starvation in the Arctic cold."

Our letter writers are still with us.

WHAT CHOMSKY CANNOT ACCEPT is that his opponents were right and he was wrong, that they perceived the nature of the beast; hence all his subsequent rationalisations. He indignantly denounced (*Political Economy*, Vol. II, p. 163) *The Wall Street Journal* which "has the gall to make the

following editorial comment" (23 August 1978):

"Now, having finished the task of destroying [the US presence in Indochina, the American liberals] are shocked and dismayed by the news of the grim and brutal world that resulted. One of the few good things to come out of this sordid end of our Indochina campaign was a period of relative silence from the people who took us through all its painful contortions. They should have had the grace to maintain their quiet at least a while longer."

Perhaps "they", but not "he." Chomsky would not withdraw—as he should have—from his "political involvements", having lost all credibility. Shouldn't his case be a warning to other progressives who try so hard not to learn from their mistakes?

Malcolm Muggeridge has often written about this problem of intellectual hygiene, and I have his permission to quote a passage from a recent personal letter to me:

"I agree utterly with the last sentence of your 'Myths & Horrors' piece. Ever since my 1932 time in Moscow I've been pondering over the servility and credulity of Western intellectuals *vis-à-vis* the Soviet régime, constantly supposing that such an event—say, Margarete Buber-Neumann's experiences—will put paid to it all, only to find that as the Durantys and the Werthys depart, the Chomskys and the Fondas come along. So, I have to conclude it's a death-wish—as my dear and now deceased colleague, Cholerton, used to put it, 'The vomit returns to the dog!' . . ."

SO IT IS THAT the radiant guru of the 1960s, Professor Noam Chomsky, is still with us; but the lustre has gone. How eloquent and refreshing he appeared to the militant students of the day, lecturing, writing, protesting, and drawing crowds everywhere! Now the spirit of '68 is gone. The sobering experiences of the 1970s revealed how blinkered he was and how threadbare his arguments were. But he is still trying to reassert his old ideological doctrines, with his usual aggressive self-righteousness, his familiar polemical tricks. It is all rather unpromising. There are few takers for old illusions. In the mournful words of Simone Signoret, "Nostalgia is no longer what it used to be. . . ."

Literature & Criticism

An Age of Parody

Style in the Modern Arts—By MALCOLM BRADBURY

ONE OF THE HAZARDS of modern intellectual life is that one is occasionally called away from the devotions of one's study in order to attend international conferences, held in distant, sultry, foreign places where the endless sun gives one a headache, the clatter of ice in long drinks causes annoyance, and the repeated slap of the surf on the shore obtrudes into the rigours of intense debate. Despite these discomforts, I have now and then been prevailed upon to attend such occasions; and a few years ago I went to a conference in Honolulu, Hawaii, to which a group of writers and some critics from various Asian, Pacific, American and European locations came in order to talk about the state of their various literary cultures, and about the global condition of culture as such.

The topic seemed somewhat improbable; in the event, it proved extremely interesting, so interesting that a book is shortly to appear from its proceedings. To the western imagination, the meaning of the term culture in its literary sense seems reasonably clear, and its evolution coherent and comprehensible. It is an outcome of nationality and language, but it is also something larger—a cosmopolitan, Arnoldian project, concerned with the best that is known and thought in the world, which in some sense guarantees art's broad communicability and hence its universality. Art is a project of artistic professionals; and their sphere is super-national. Thus it would be hard to localise, to root in any single national tradition, the major movements that have moved through the western arts—Neo-Classicism, Romanticism, Realism, Modernism. We are used to artists who, like Joyce's Stephen Dedalus, travel elsewhere to forge in the smithy of their souls the uncreated conscience of their race. As George Steiner reminds us in *Extra-Territorial*, much of the best of our modern writing comes from writers "unhoused", writers like Beckett, who might be classed as Irish or as French, or Nabokov, who could be seen as Russian, German or American. And we are used,

increasingly, to a literature that is therefore polysemic, polyvalent, polyglot—a literature that comes from the free movement of independent writers, a general availability of translation, and the powerful effect of writing in major world languages.

But these are not the universal conditions of writing. Writing and writers emerge variously in different cultures at different stages. For artistic perception is deeply conditioned perception: it is shaped by the prevailing orders of ideology, the assigned role of the artist, the nature of his social location, and the nature of the linguistic medium he uses.

In fact most of the world's writers do not live within our conception of literature at all—a conception shaped by a situation in which the arts are secularised and in general depoliticised, where universal literacy is assumed, publishing is independent, writing produces an income, and the avant-garde role of artists is acknowledged. But most writers write in minority languages, with little prospect of translation. They write in societies where universal literacy may be recent or not yet fully developed. They write, often, in cultures post-colonial or post-revolutionary, where the question of the definition of national culture is an urgent and often a deeply political one. They write, often, without western conceptions of individuality, or of literary commerce; and indeed they may find the spirit of western literature and western writing the sign not of high artistic development but of extreme disorientation—the sign of a tragic break between language and subject, or the evidence of the psychic disarray of liberalism.

YET THERE IS ONE SENSE—disturbing to many of the writers present—in which the diffusive power of western culture was inescapable. For what is clear is that there is a cosmopolitan cultural force that is transforming the arts of the world. It is not the potent influence of modernism or post-modernism,