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The language of derision: targeting Noam Chomsky

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Current political debate and radio talkback exchanges - about asylum seekers, about the carbon tax or the influence of the Greens - is characterised by abuse.

Similar habits have been adopted by critics of this year's recipient of the Sydney Peace Prize, Professor Noam Chomsky.

Recent articles illustrate this taste for derision. Nick Dyrenfurth's Noam Chomsky and the Sydney Peace Prize in the July edition of The Monthly and his subsequent Truth about Chomsky... in ABC's The Drum; Keith Windschuttle's Chronicle in the July-August edition of Quadrant; and Robert Magid's Championing Chomsky for the Sydney Peace Prize in the mid-July edition of The Australian Jewish News.

The style of attack in these papers has three overlapping trends: the use of adjectives and analogies to ridicule an individual's character or an organisation's reputation; a tendency to make sweeping claims devoid of much evidence; promoting views as though they should be accepted without question. This latter habit often implies moral judgments about others.

I'll respond to some familiar charges about Professor Chomsky but mostly I want to ask if language which contributes to understanding can be used even in oppositional pieces? Can critics write less aggressively about someone with whom they disagree? Let's begin with the adjectives and analogies.

Adjectives and analogies

Adjectives can colour descriptions but they seldom strengthen an argument and it is dismaying when they are used like weapons to impress some and harm others. Dyrenfurth might ponder this observation. He refers to Professor Chomsky's myopic conspiratorial views on American foreign policy, and to a knee-jerk anti-Americanism by a "performative brand" (man) - namely Chomsky - whose political views are "cryogenically frozen". This latter description is apparently intended to show the writer's familiarity with science fiction.

Readers may anticipate the technique of dismissal-by-odious-comparison when they come across the phrase "the likes of", which foreshadows the labelling of several people in one go. Dyrenfurth enjoys this technique, as when he refers to a critic of his - Michael Brull - as having "a binary Zionist/Anti Zionist world view propounded by the likes of Brull, his anarchist idol Noam Chomsky and blogger-journalist Antony Loewenstein". Having used the technique once, and with no calm editor around to say, "may not be a good idea to use it again", the writer's confidence rises and we get a repetition. On the same page on which the epithet "anarchist idol" was introduced,

Dyrenfurth repeats "the likes of Brull" and a sentence later adds, "and the political backsliding and intellectual dissembling common to Chomsky and his acolytes".

Magid's piece is meant to be a funny way of denigrating previous recipients of the Sydney Peace Prize whom he compares to president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad of Iran, Lebanese Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah and Colonel Moamar Gadaffi of Libya. There's a "ha ha", self-congratulatory air in the use of such comparisons to dismiss previous Peace Prize recipients, including former president of Ireland and UN high commissioner for human rights, Mary Robinson, Archbishop Emeritus Desmond Tutu, Swedish diplomat and advocate of nuclear disarmament Dr Hans Blix and Palestinian educator and human rights campaigner Dr Hanan Ashrawi.

Sweeping claims

Noam Chomsky understands the value of dialogue across national boundaries and across cultures, but that hardly means that he identifies with or always agrees with the people he meets. Nevertheless Dyrenfurth refers to Chomsky's "solidarity with religious and nationalist fanatics" as though meeting leaders who would no doubt be regarded as enemies of the West, including Israel, automatically means an expression of solidarity. Chomsky, for example has met with Hugo Chavez of Venezuela but has also recently repudiated Chavez's oppressive treatment of a Venezuelan judge.

Magid diverts his attention from attacks on Noam Chomsky to claim that "Israel bashers have figured prominently in the list of previous winners of the Sydney Peace Prize", even though, and Magid could be forgiven for not knowing this, senior members of their respective synagogues were members of the juries who chose the recipients denigrated by Magid. So, does his charge ring true? All those recipients, from Professor Mohammad Yunus to Dr Vandana Shiva, from Archbishop Tutu to Patrick Dodson and former secretary-general of Amnesty International Irene Khan distinguish between criticism of the militaristic and illegal policies of the government of Israel and the human rights of Israeli citizens. But in an argument designed to push long held convictions, the subtleties of making distinctions let alone identifying exceptions to the rule, are not entertained. Certainty is the rule. Even slight doubt must not be considered.

Sweeping claims flow from the pen of those who seem not to reflect that they might be in error, they might not always be right. There are several grounds for disagreeing with Professor Chomsky, but it's hardly fair comment to evaluate a massive humanist body of work on the basis of one or two issues. And the practice side of his life's work should be taken into account. Such work has included courageous stands on behalf of vulnerable individuals all over the world, such as dissidents in Eastern Europe and South America and more recently his support for ex-Guantanamo Bay detainee David Hicks.

Brushing aside any evidence to the contrary almost inevitably produces "everything, all of the time" claims. For example, Windschuttle writes that "Chomsky has throughout his life supported revolutionary violence, including some of the greatest mass homicides in history". Throughout his life? Really? As if that does not convince his readers, he goes on to make the time worn charge that Chomsky's exploration of reasons for the September 11 attacks could somehow be construed as rationalisation - support for such attacks. Chomsky's commentary, he says, is "every bit as deceitful as his apology for Pol Pot and the Cambodian genocide". Noam Chomsky and his colleague Edward Herman attempted to make accurate estimates of the deaths in Cambodia between 1975 and 1979 and they did observe that Western correspondents were not paying

attention to the mass murder of comparable proportions that was occurring in East Timor. Raising inconvenient questions and making unexpected comparisons do not amount to apologies either for the perpetrators of the 9/11 attacks or of the Cambodian genocide?

Christopher Hitchens, who parted company with Chomsky in their respective commentaries on the 9/11 murders, nevertheless comments that Chomsky is often erroneously attacked for things he is thought to believe, or believed to have said. Hitchens also comments that Chomsky's analyses of power have "done the state a service", and in this respect he is a useful citizen in ways that his detractors emphatically refuse to recognise.

Absolute certainty

Even if abusive commentary discredits those who make it, why do such critics persist? A possible answer to that question concerns the moral certainty of those who want to impress the people they like in order to deride those they do not like. In some respects we might all drift into that tendency. I associate with people whose company I enjoy, whose views usually match mine. But those friends and associates are and should be highly critical if I wrote as though denunciation amounted to analysis.

Moral certainty almost inevitably leads into a "them and us", "good and bad actors" view of how the world works. Dyrenfurth tells us that Chomsky is "the lineal successor to Leon Trotsky" and that I and my colleagues at the Sydney Peace Foundation are "resuscitating a discredited brand of far-left politics by juxtaposing extremists such as Chomsky ... with respectable previous recipients such as Patrick Dodson and Sir William Deane". Who decides on "extremists", who decides the meaning of "the far left", or who might be deemed "respectable"?

In a further effort to sound funny, Mr Magid refers to Chomsky's "brave condemnation of the murder of Osama bin Laden" and in the same document refers to John Pilger being renowned for his "lifelong vilification of Israel". Lifelong? In that judgment there's no caveat about policies which Pilger has criticised in common with numerous prominent Israeli citizens who write not only in newspapers such as Haaretz but also in The Jerusalem Post, whose usual perspectives would seldom be considered radical.

Chomsky has challenged others' views on diverse topics from the science of linguistics to socio-political controversies about justice. Nevertheless, Windschuttle decides that "Chomsky's moral perspective is completely one-sided". Completely? In a long career, Chomsky has a record of striving for accuracy and has been willing to revise earlier interpretations when new data warranted it. I expected Windschuttle to have valued such action by a colleague academic. Instead he labels Chomsky's work as representing "a deplorable pattern of behaviour". Deplorable? Who sits on high to make such a judgment? Even if he might not be impressed by Windschuttle's version of history, I doubt that Noam Chomsky would label him in this way.

Let me question another example of a writer's absolute certainty. In its 14-year history, the Sydney Peace Prize has never been awarded by the University of Sydney, yet Windschuttle writes that this institution "rewards Chomsky for his 'moral courage' and his 'critical analysis'". The Sydney Peace Foundation, not the university, awards Australia's only international prize for peace. That foundation is an alliance of representatives from media, business, community sector and academic walks of life whose major partner is the City of Sydney.

Windschuttle finishes his derision by deciding that the Governor of New South Wales' probable "flattering words" at the ceremony to award Professor Chomsky, "will do little to foster peace and a great deal more to trash her university's former good name". Flattering? Former? What is the substance of these before and after comparisons?

Noam Chomsky was chosen for the Sydney Peace Prize precisely because, over 50 years, he has identified the human rights inherent in the goals of peace with justice and has done so by asking people to examine their assumptions about the politics and policies of states and about the values of powerful institutions. Of course this makes people feel uncomfortable. Chomsky, says journalist David Barsamian, is "like an avant-garde musician, exploring and expanding the boundaries of ... the way people think".

Even if it's difficult for any of us to drop our beliefs and the language to sustain them, it is disappointing that certain critics express their views with mockery, sometimes amounting to hatred. A touch of tolerance and a small capacity for reflection could enable them to write in other ways. The critics whom I have referred to could exchange their "for or against" views with an effort to be modestly constructive and scholarly, perhaps by acknowledging some value in such a cosmopolitan, influential and generous world citizen as Noam Chomsky.

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