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Book Review

Understanding Power: The Indispensable Chomsky

Edited by Peter R Mitchell and John Schoeffel
Vintage Books London
(2003, 416 pages)

Reviewed by John Arthur Barnes ^{1*}

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The book under review summarizes discussion between Noam Chomsky a renowned US based social critic and members of the public including academics through a large number of public fora held in many parts of the nation. Numerous social issues such as waging wars in foreign lands, gender issues, income disparities, racial and gender issues, spanning many decades of the twentieth century. The purpose of the book is to repeatedly highlight the need for citizens to remain socially and politically engaged and to maintain a healthy skeptical approach in receiving publicly available information. Citizens are encouraged to search for alternative and disparate sources of information. In adopting this approach Chomsky encourages citizens at his public fora that to form a balanced perspective of any issue requires diligent searching widely and deeply across a variety of media and to remain in active discussion with many other citizens. Chomsky confirms that the process will likely be time-consuming and arduous and consume time we would otherwise prefer to spend on personal and family issues. Such is the price we must personally pay to remain vigilant against propaganda.

1. Review¹

Noam Chomsky is accepted as an eminent social critic who over the past fifty years has brought to public attention the many falsehoods perpetrated by governments and vested interests on its peoples. Chomsky has achieved this through publishing books and journal articles and engaging in lectures at MIT where he serves as full time faculty and by

conducting extensive national and international tours.

The editors of the volume Peter R Mitchell and John Schoeffel are public defenders in New York City.

The book under review will prove to be a useful adjunct to both lecturers and students seeking to more clearly understand how the public discourse is manipulated by vested interests in governments and the public sphere.

Chomsky admits that to meticulously check and cross

¹ * Dr. John Arthur Barnes, Faculty member, Graduate School of Business and Advanced Technology Management, Assumption University of Thailand. Email: barnesjohn2010@gmail.com

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check what are purported to be facts requires considerable time and effort in tracking down original sources often obscured by authorities and only released to the public after many years of remaining sealed. That work by Chomsky and like-minded researchers' means that many other days to day activities which we enjoy such as family time, must be sacrificed.

The book under review is very different in format to other books written by Chomsky. The current volume is a collection of interactions between Chomsky and audiences spread over many locations in which individuals ask Chomsky questions largely about political and social issues both national and international.

The questions and answers are clearly identified in each case, but the questioner/s are identified only by gender.

What becomes very clear early in reading this volume, is the meticulous checking and cross checking of details engaged in by Chomsky in forming his opinions on key social issues.

Chomsky also reads very widely in several languages and records his finding diligently. He also has an extensive memory and power of recall over his long life.

Chomsky is not a typical knowledgeable person, he is humble and communicates as all great teachers do by encouraging his audience to "think things through," for themselves. He directs his audience to original sources. His responses are sometimes very brief involving just a few words, whilst at other times they involve lengthy and detailed explanations taken in small manageable steps.

The volume covers ten chapters the first three of which are "teach ins."

Chapter 4 is entitled *Colloquy* and covers numerous topics from *Escaping Indoctrination to Qualifications to Speak on World Affairs*.

Chapter 5 is entitled *Ruling the World* and covers topics ranging from *Soviet versus Western Economic Development to the (Human) Organ Trade*.

Chapter 6 covers *Community Activists* and discusses issues such as *Want Creation the Kibbutz Experiment*.

Chapter 7 *Intellectuals and Social Change* and covers topics such as *The Function of The Schools; The Fate of an Honest Intellectual; The Real Market to The Fraud of Modern Economics*.

Chapter 8 *Popular Struggle* which covers topics such as *Discovering New forms of Oppression: Negative and Positive Freedoms and the Nation State System*.

Chapter 9 *Movement Organizing* which covers a wide range of topics from media activism to Moral Values.

Chapter 10 *Point* covers numerous topics from *Crime Control and "Superfluous" People to the verge of Fascism*.

2. Conclusion

This is a carefully crafted edition of many of Chomsky's public discussions on issues important to us all. It is a wake-up call not to accept what is presented to us, but instead to thoroughly check original and alternative sources including those long kept sealed but now publicly available. The editors of the book demonstrate their dedication to focusing on issues identified by Chomsky as crucial which although originating in decades past, remain relevant and important today. The volume is moderately priced and available at Kinokuniya Bookstore in Bangkok

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