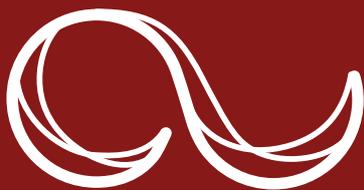


# **The role of intellectuals in times of a global pandemic:**

## **Understanding Noam Chomsky's political activism**

Júlio Antonio Bonatti Santos



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# The role of intellectuals in times of a global pandemic:

## Understanding Noam Chomsky's political activism

Júlio Antonio Bonatti Santos

This work aims to analyze the role of intellectuals in times of pandemic, when their discourse was assumed as a counterbalance to the hegemony of experts. It takes as a case study several exemplar speeches by Noam Chomsky, American linguist and political activist, which were produced since the beginning of March 2020 regarding the COVID-19. We will try to discuss that what marks Chomsky's discourse is related to the *ethos* (Maingueneau, 2020) of an "intellectual engagement" (Bourdieu, 2003). In other words, Chomsky assumes himself as a spokesman of the Humanity, concerned with "bigger problems": the pandemic cannot be undermined, but the global warming and the economic crisis created by the debacle of neoliberalism, as well as nuclear war menaces, are much greater threats to human species survival and the maintenance of the planet.

*Keywords:* Noam Chomsky, intellectual engagement, pandemic, ethos, COVID-19

### Introduction

Within the universe of possibilities for choosing the intellectuals' speeches, who are not necessarily convergent about topics affecting the world, and who, in general, don't talk about the same things, we chose to circumscribe our research on a specific intellectual, Noam Chomsky. In our view, he is an actual example of the "intellectual action", representing properly "the relations between intellectuals and power" (Bobbio, 1997, p. 11). Therefore, it is necessary to understand the statements of intellectuals like Chomsky, in moments of global uncertainty, as a discourse of a different nature that stands against the experts' power in major media corporations or in government technocracy.

Thus, far from wanting to exhaust the possibilities of interpreting the role of the wide category of intellectuals during the pandemic, our proposal is to outline the main points of how an intellectual like Chomsky has been developing and taking the same political positions since the beginning of his activism, in the 1960s, which refers to a type of intellectual engagement similar to that taken since the *Affair Dreyfus*.<sup>1</sup> In the *Affaire Dreyfus* we have an "inaugural archetype" of the concept of an "engaged intellectual" (Bourdieu, 2003, p. 73–74), from which the one who has a social capital as an erudite, a scientist or a writer, comes publicly criticizing the established powers and denounces crimes committed by "the reasons of State" (Chomsky, 1973).

Therefore, we understand that Chomsky comes from a lineage whose representatives are inserted into a form of intellectual activism; a lineage that became known as "the century of intellectuals" (Winock, 2000), the intellectual conceived as the one who "tells the truth", as Chomsky (1996, p. 55) himself define the "intellectual's responsibility": "At one level, the answer is too easy: the intellectual responsibility of the writer, or any decent person, is to tell the truth." On the one hand, there is a patent argument of authority behind the experts,

based on a “scientific discourse”, but, on the other hand, there is a kind of “moral commitment to the truth” behind the intellectuals’ discourse that becomes a “deeper criticism”: a “holistic view” to ponder, in the case of COVID-19, the humanitarian problems created due to the pandemic, but also to think about relating this crisis to previous and further geopolitical reasons, from a freer position, not committed to companies and States.

This position of the intellectual engagement is idealized in opposition to the “normal science discourse”: the genre of the scientific discourse is produced under the official means; it is plastered, blunted, does not allow the spokespersons of science to speak beyond what their researches allow. In other words, the experts of the science are inscribed in discursive structures of “scenes of enunciation” (Maingueneau, 2006) that don’t permit them to surpass the barriers of “objectiveness” and enter the field of “moral judgment”.

Then, what gives Chomsky’s speech authority to talk about the pandemic, to be demanded multiple times to do that, is not his expertise in the subject: it is not his background in epidemiology studies, which he lacks, neither his linguistics theories, that do not relate to the topic, but his image as a great surviving intellectual. It’s to say, what authorizes Chomsky to speak and, therefore, to make his contribution to the studies of this pandemic situation, is not what interests the State, or what would lead the actions of government officials, as they are in general centered on the discourse of experts. Instead, it is his trajectory as a critic without corporate scruples, engaged in telling another kind of “truth”, as one that can discuss and propose a different future for humanity. In short, differently from a biologist, a disease proliferation specialist or a market administrator, Chomsky conceives the pandemic beyond the COVID-19, as a long-term crisis, which will cover economic, social and environmental aspects of much greater proportions. And that’s what we try to analyze bellow.

## A look into the Chomsky’s speeches

Having this brief introduction in mind, we will try to show how Chomsky presents himself as someone capable and free to problematize and “predict” future crisis. Unlike the experts in pandemics, who talk about curves and contamination data, who give sanitary and personal hygiene recommendations and teach government officials how to control citizens’ bodies, prohibiting free movement, Chomsky’s discourse comes to foresee another projection: of war conflicts, pre-programmed economic crisis and climatic catastrophe. He constructs his metaphors in a different way: the biological lexicon, composed by terms like “survival”, “death”, “health”, “pathology” etc. is not used for human patients, for bodies, but for “concepts”, like “the capitalism” – it is typically the field where intellectuals like Chomsky operate.

Seeking to understand how Chomsky acts as an engaged intellectual during the pandemic, we searched the political network and the media in which he is involved. From that, we chose our corpus of analysis, selected among Noam Chomsky’s innumerable speeches to left-wing or clearly progressive press during the last four months in form of interviews, from March to June, defining the following sources: an interview to the Jacobin Magazine<sup>2</sup>; an interview with his longtime interviewers, David Barsamian<sup>3</sup>, an Armenian-American journalist and political activist; an interview with the British socialist newspaper Morning Star<sup>4</sup>; two interviews with Democracy Now<sup>5</sup>; an American channel of critical journalism; an interview with the Croatian philosopher Srećko Horvat, from which we will use only the parts of the transcript that we found published by Al Jazeera and not the video<sup>6</sup>; an interview to the journal Global Policy<sup>7</sup>; an interview to the Labor Notes<sup>8</sup>, channel for the proletarian movement, as well as in the interview to the Euroactiv<sup>9</sup>, a non-profit organization for democracy in European Union. We believe that, through this *corpus*, it’s possible to cover the vast majority of Chomsky’s speeches about the pandemic, centered on media vehicles with a more progressive bias, where Chomsky usually acts.

Based on this, we will test the following question: if Chomsky pursues a connection between the pandemic to bigger problems that threaten the human species, such as the greater dangers of an environmental crisis, nuclear war and the deeper menaces of the economic system. We will further explore how Chomsky uses some discursive marks that reveal a way to deal with the pandemic with the coronavirus itself not being the main problem but, instead, a minor part of a whole vision from a humanistic proposal, where the critique of the capitalist system and its extreme form, neoliberalism, is central.

The first major theme of intellectual work that is presented to Chomsky, therefore, is about “what we can learn from” COVID-19. His function is to “take a lesson”, “what to learn” from the pandemic: “The lessons arise at many levels, from the roots of the catastrophe to issues specific to particular countries.”<sup>10</sup> It fixes, in a first moment, the role of the intellectual as “educator”, characterized by a “wise” *ethos* (Maingueneau, 2020): those who are able to teach in times of war, crisis, pandemic, etc. He is not asked about “what we should do to overcome the pandemic itself”, but to give us “a lesson”. In other words, the actions to “defeat” the virus is left to the specialists; intellectuals must think in another sphere, that of understanding the consequences of the pandemic more broadly, and suggesting what humanity can learn from it.

Thus, the first “lesson” that Chomsky refers to is the relationship between science and the dominant economic system. For him, the pandemic could have been prevented: “This coronavirus pandemic could have been prevented, the information was there to prevent it. In fact, it was well-known”.<sup>11</sup> As responsible for this preventive path that had not been taken, Chomsky appoints the scientists. He speaks in a generic category of “scientists” who knew pre-

cisely, “perfectly”, that a pandemic was underway: “It’s very obvious what happened. After the SARS epidemic in 2003, the scientists knew perfectly well that there were other pandemics coming, probably of the coronavirus variety.”<sup>12</sup> So, the pandemic was predictable; and at the time the scientists knew it and were sure it could allow studies and vaccines to be produced to prevent it, but that was not done.

The explanation that Chomsky offers for “scientists” not taking the path of prevention is based on the economic interests and he blames the pharmaceutical industry: “Drug companies are following capitalist logic.”<sup>13</sup> He reiterates that the creation of a catastrophe as a result of an extended pandemic would be a market benefit for pharmaceutical companies: “Drug companies: they have the resources, they’re super-rich because of the gifts we lavish on them. They won’t do it. They observe market signals. Market signals tell you there’s no profit to be made in preparing for catastrophe down the road.”<sup>14</sup> Consequently, profits for pharmaceutical companies are huge with a pandemic, so the latter would be more than welcome.

This sort of criticism, of reasoning, is a typical characteristic of the intellectuals, and not of the experts: because it is situated in the field of moral criticism, of “pointing the finger”, like the text “*J’accuse*” of Émile Zola (1992) at the beginning of the intellectual engagement in the *Affaire Dreyfus*. So, Chomsky is denouncing the deep reasons of what is in the course of things, an understanding of the world which involves breaking corporate fears and reporting, spreading, saying who is the real guilty: the pandemic was predicted by scientists (who are at the forefront of research in major pharmaceutical companies) and nothing was done.

For Chomsky, the fact that the pandemic was not prevented, along with the omission of health companies, reveals the commitment to neoliberalism: “Why is there a coronavirus crisis? It’s a colossal market failure. It goes right back to the essence of markets exacerbated by the savage neoliberal intensification of deep social-economic problems.”<sup>15</sup> In other words, the main reason here is that the pandemic does not lie in the virus itself, but in a *modus operandi* of neoliberalism, in producing social and economic problems, where diseases are also means of disputing the market. And Chomsky reiterates: “One lesson is that it’s another colossal failure of the neoliberal version of capitalism.”<sup>16</sup> Again, through the idea of “lesson”, the coronavirus shows the fragility of the system, the failure of the neoliberal economy. The culprit for the deaths, then, would not be the disease itself but, ultimately, the neoliberalism.

However, there is an apparent contradiction in pointing out a “failure” within neoliberalism, as it represents enormous power, a real domination of politics – and Chomsky will use the metaphor of “hammer” several times to illustrate this strength of neoliberalism: “And then comes the neoliberal hammer: that governments are not allowed to do anything, that governments are the problem, not the solution.”<sup>17</sup> The

“hammer” metaphor to characterize neoliberalism is recurrent, also appearing other times, as in the Chomsky’s interview to the website Labor Notes: “Then comes the extra hammer blow of savage capitalism, neoliberalism, which we’ve been suffering from over the world for 40 years, goes beyond ventilators.”<sup>18</sup> We can see how this metaphor had already been repeated also in one of his interviews to Democracy Now, on last April 17: “The neoliberal hammer says the government can’t do anything the way it did in the past. You’re caught in a vise.”<sup>19</sup> In other words, Chomsky places in the symbol of the “hammer” Chomsky all the coercive power of neoliberalism over the State: it is something that subdues, that “crushes”, something violent, an economic violence that is at the root of the pandemic problem.

As an example of this type of violence in a symbol like the “neoliberal hammer”, this term reappears but with Chomsky using also medical terms: “So far, normal capitalist logic. But at that point the neoliberal pathology delivered another hammer blow.”<sup>20</sup> We see here the term “pathology”: neoliberalism is presented as a “disease”, occupying a place in the vocabulary of pathologies – therefore, something that surpasses COVID-19, since it is a structural, a “systemic disease”. A so-called “pathological state” that would define the moment we are living in would be an excessive consequence of the capitalism: “It’s true that this is a pathological extreme of the normal capitalist systems”<sup>21</sup>. That is, we have reached an extreme point of distancing within the capitalism, where its roots in power generate pathologies without control.

Based on a society dominated by the “pathology of capital”, Chomsky focuses his criticism on the United States, to show that the action mechanisms of neoliberalism are typical of criminals: “The United States is a total catastrophe because of the gang that’s running Washington.”<sup>22</sup> From the critical point of neoliberalism and the economic system, he criticizes Trump, as a representative of this programmed failure of the system. And the concept presented, that “there is a *gang* in Washington”, reveals a discursive freedom in using words by intellectuals – it is another point that highlights the idea of self-management of intellectual speeches, of his authority: his commitment to denounce and unveil the truth.

This becomes clearer when Chomsky, besides the use of the term “gang”, qualifies the US government as led by “gangsters”: “[...] an effort to construct an international of the most reactionary states and oppressive states, led by the gangster in the White House”.<sup>23</sup> It is another type of discursive qualification that is possible for an intellectual, it takes the forms of political activism, which must be clear, direct, and denunciative – with his freedom to present his ideas without keeping the jargon or the technical language that shapes de experts’ genres of discourse.

Another way for Chomsky to criticize the exemplary form of leading the pandemic along the neoliberal lines is by targeting Trump, using terms that disqualify him: “That tells

you something about the nature of the sociopathic buffoons who are running the government and the country's suffering from it."<sup>24</sup> The definition of US government leaders as "sociopathic buffoons" again illustrates Chomsky's intellectual authority to freely use no scrupulous academic terms, but colloquial language to define the Trump administration and its ways of fighting the pandemic.

According to Chomsky, the American government hunts for a culprit, in order to detach from itself the idea of guilt for the pandemic crisis: "Now they're seeking desperately to blame somebody else, to blame China, blame the World Health Organization. And what they're doing is really criminal."<sup>25</sup> And for Chomsky, cutting WHO resources, as Trump did, is a way of hitting the poorest countries, killing people from far away: "The World Health Organization works all over the world, mostly in poorer countries, on mothers' health, diarrhea deaths and so on. So what you're saying is 'OK let's kill lots of people in the South because maybe that'll improve my election prospects.'"<sup>26</sup> Nevertheless, Chomsky's position goes against Trump interests: the critics of Trump's administration permeates decisions and practices for the effective conduct of an imperialist policy, as we have seen undertaken by the government of the United States. It is Chomsky's way of keeping his criticism of imperialism alive.

At this point, we move on to the analysis of how Chomsky sees the problem of COVID-19 from a historical panorama. We mainly focus on his critical view of the future possibilities/dangers resulting from the use of natural resources by humanity in order to identify the pandemic as one of them, due to the anthropocentric action in dominating the planet in an inconsequential way. According to him:

"Let's not forget that the Anthropocene, as we're now calling it, the period since the Second World War, the geological epoch when humans are having a massive and destructive impact on the global environment, is a period not just of global warming, which is bad enough and escalating, but also destruction of the environment – of habitats, plastics destroying ocean life, uncontrolled trash and sewage, and unsustainable agriculture, industrial meat production, savage and cruel and also opening the door to pandemics."<sup>27</sup>

That is, the environmental crisis will lead to the destruction of the species. From Chomsky's point of view, the COVID-19, therefore, is a small danger to us as it could be thought under the long-term vision of an installed crisis of greater proportions. As he says: "These standard business principles have plenty of effects throughout the economy. The most severe of these concern the climate crisis, which overshadows the current virus crisis in its import."<sup>28</sup> The intellectual discursive mark is clear: Chomsky denounces the interests of the money, the actions of the capital behind this huge crisis of global warming.

And, following Chomsky's reasoning, the human beings will recover from the pandemic, and also from the subsequent economic crisis, but they will not overcome the melting of the polar caps: "We're not going to recover from the ongo-

ing melting of the polar ice sheets."<sup>29</sup> "Global warming", "polar caps", "melting" and consequent "rising of sea levels": they will kill more than a pandemic. And the same concepts are repeated by Chomsky: "The ice sheets are melting; they're not going to recover. That leads to exponential increase in global warming. Arctic glaciers, for example, could flood the world."<sup>30</sup> The main point for him is what concerns us as a species, what illustrates that we are marching towards a much bigger crisis due to the human destruction of the planet.

Continuing with his catastrophic scenario, Chomsky presents, in a gradation of threats, how the world will pass through the COVID-19 pandemic crisis, to face the more serious destruction of the environment and, what seems unthinkable, a threat of "nuclear war": "That's on top of the pandemic, on top of the global warming crisis, the crisis of nuclear weapons, which is equally severe."<sup>31</sup> Then, there are threats that remain in low priority under the view of the great prominence given to the pandemic by the mainstream media now, but we should be aware that the species' survival is threatened: "It will get worse. What this means for the environment or the threat of nuclear war, which no one is talking about but is extremely serious, is indescribable."<sup>32</sup> These are concerns of an intellectual who lived through the entire Cold War period and has as orientation the imminent danger of a nuclear war.

This affiliation to a historical point, through war menaces, is clear when he is asked about the threat of imminent nuclear war, based on the great apocalyptic symbol of the Cold War, the Doomsday Clock<sup>33</sup>: "It moved closer to midnight than it's been since its first setting in 1947. The threat of nuclear war is one reason."<sup>34</sup> Chomsky's reference to the Doomsday Clock shows the concern for a possible "total destruction". In other words, for Chomsky these questions must be put on the table at this time of pandemic, or we will be talking about a disease and forgetting consequences of greater destructive potential.

## Final considerations

Thus, along Chomsky's interviews analyzed here we can see a discourse typically introduced in a field of intellectual criticism, by assuming a genre of speech that allows him to use freely denouncing terms and criticize other geopolitical problems besides the pandemic. Running through his speeches it is possible to identify a "prophetic" *ethos*: "The Fifth Extinction was 65 million years ago, when a huge asteroid hit Earth and killed most of life on Earth. We're doing the same. We're the Sixth Extinction. Not just humans. Insect populations are rapidly disappearing"<sup>35</sup> So, the main point for Chomsky is to produce a discussion on the consequences and reasons regarding the pandemic – which are serious, he doesn't deny the real danger of the coronavirus –, but in a sense that turns into a crisis that will be worse, that affects not only the human species but also "insects",

as he says, and each other living beings.

This point remarks a type of ethos that Chomsky also assumes, for example, in the very definition of the name of one lecture he did on last April, as an “oracle”, where he suggests himself, although indirectly, as a reader of the new Delphic pythoness predictions: “The Delphic Oracle: Her Message for Today”.<sup>36</sup> The problems presented by the ancient Delphic oracle to the Greek philosophers, such as “know yourself”, are now the challenges for man, as a species, to recognize himself as part of a planet, of a common home. That is the kind of intellectual Chomsky represents, concerned with bigger problems of humanity.

Briefly, we tried to discuss that Chomsky’s view of COVID-19 pandemic is part of a “historical judgment”, developed over many years in articles, interviews, lectures and books during the journey of his life as a renowned intellectual and political activist: a criticism that is not circumstantial or restricted to a pandemic, to the proliferation of a virus. Therefore, Chomsky’s topics in his speeches here analyzed come from the same “Ariadne’s thread” that links his positions during decades: against the US imperialism in controlling the decolonization process of some countries in Asia and Oceania in post-World War II; against the US re-

pression of the struggle for economic and political freedom in Third World countries; against the danger emerging due to proliferation of nuclear weapons, that is part of what he experienced in the Cold War period; against the escalation of neoliberal economic policies and the consequent concentration of income and impoverishment of societies.

With this work we intended to produce a discussion about the following problem: the type of discourse raised by Chomsky is not up to government experts, men of science who must anchor themselves in statistical studies on disease proliferation curves, researchers who need to give prevention guidelines or economists who provide “get out of the crisis” scenarios.

In short, the line of reasoning presented by Chomsky is proper to a discourse based on a “historical authority” of the speaker, from the role of a sort of intellectuals in society assumed as a political engagement. And this role of engaged intellectuals can be seen as a counterpoint to the hegemony that experts have in speaking during a situation like a pandemic – nevertheless, not as an opposition to what scientists say, but as a different and complementary way of thinking about global crisis.

## Notes

- 1 This case was a political controversy derived from the trial of the French soldier of Jewish origin Alfred Dreyfus, who divided France in 1894 and spread a wave of well-founded xenophobia and patriotism across Europe on an anti-Semitic principle. Among those intellectuals engaged with this case, we can remark the writer Émile Zola (cf. ARENDT, 1989).
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- 8 See: <https://labornotes.org/04/interview-noam-chomsky-how-bosses-are-making-coronavirus-worse-their-benefit>. Accessed 24 Jun 2020.
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- 16 See: <https://www.euractiv.com/section/economy-jobs/interview/chomsky-on-covid-19-the-latest-massive-failure-of-neoliberalism/>. Accessed 24 Jun 2020.
- 17 See: <https://www.euractiv.com/section/economy-jobs/interview/chomsky-on-covid-19-the-latest-massive-failure-of-neoliberalism/>. Accessed 24 Jun 2020.
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