

# The New Criterion

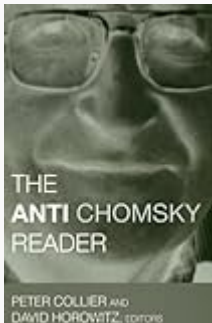
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## A disgraceful career

by Keith Windschuttle

A review of *Anti Chomsky Reader* by Peter Collier

### BOOKS IN THIS ARTICLE



*Peter Collier*

*Anti Chomsky Reader*

Encounter Books, 240 pages, \$17.95

One of the main reasons Noam Chomsky's political views are taken seriously in universities and the media is because he has an awesome reputation for scientific accomplishment in the field of linguistics. He is among the ten most cited authors in the humanities—trailing only Marx, Lenin, Shakespeare, the Bible, Aristotle, Plato, and Freud—and the only living member of the top ten. Last year *The New Yorker* called him “one of the greatest minds of the twentieth century.”

Were it not for this status, many of his obsessive and outlandish political ideas would by now have disqualified him from reasoned debate. He thinks every president of the United States since Franklin Roosevelt should have been impeached because “they’ve all been either outright war criminals or involved in serious war crimes.” He claims the United States actively collaborated with the Nazis against the Soviet Union in the latter stages of World War II. He once supported the Pol Pot regime in Cambodia, claiming the genocidal evacuation of Phnom Penh in 1976 was due to a failed rice crop and “may actually have saved many lives.” He describes Israel as a terror state

with “points of similarity” to the Third Reich. And he has defended an anti-Semitic French academic who claims the Holocaust was a “historical lie.” Chomsky describes him as nothing more than an “apolitical liberal” whose work is based on “extensive historical research.”

The most devastating articles in the *Anti-Chomsky Reader* are not those that expose the ideological prejudices, factual misrepresentations, and distorted logic of his political writings but the two at the end of the book that tear up his reputation as one of the towering intellects of our time. Two essays about linguistics reveal Chomsky’s output in that field to be not the work of a rare, great mind but the product of a very familiar kind of academic hack. His reputation turns out not to have been earned by any significant contribution to human understanding but to be the product of a combination of self-promotion, abuse of detractors, and the fudging of his findings.

John Williamson points out that fifty years after the announcement of the “Chomskyan revolution” in linguistics, immense progress has been made in almost every field of science. “We have been to the moon several times,” he writes. “Our way of life depends upon the computer chip.” The work of Einstein, to whom some of Chomsky’s fans compare him, has been confirmed many times and can explain many physical phenomena. But in linguistics, Williamson shows, the results are comparatively trivial. All that Chomskyan grammar can explain is language which is transparent and easily labelled: “first-order” sentences such as *The keeper fed the bananas to the monkey*. Grammatical formulations of the “second order of difficulty,” such as *For there to be a snowstorm would be nice*, still remain a mystery.

Moreover, Chomsky has not established a grand new paradigm for his field, and then spent the rest of his life building upon its foundations and encouraging other researchers to do the same, as would have happened had his project been genuinely important. Instead, his work has resembled a pattern all too familiar in the humanities and social sciences of one overblown speculation following another. Williamson writes:

The history of Chomskyan theory is a study in cycles. He announces a new and exciting idea, which adherents to the faith then use and begin to make all kinds of headway. But this progress is invariably followed by complications, then by contradictions, then by a flurry of patchwork fixes, then by a slow unravelling, and finally by stagnation. Eventually the master announces a new approach and the cycle starts anew.

Over Chomsky’s career, these cycles have gone from “transformational grammar and deep structure,” to “universal grammar,” then to “principles and parameters.” The most recent approach, launched in 1995, is called “minimalism.” And what has all this accomplished? Chomskyan theory has not even developed a rational means of explaining why the sentence *John was decided to leave early* is ungrammatical. If this had been real science, the project would have lost its funding years ago for lack of results.

Robert E. Levine and Paul M. Postal, in an essay appropriately entitled “A Corrupted Linguistics,” are equally critical of Chomsky’s puffed-up promises. They write:

Much of the lavish praise heaped on his work is, we believe, driven by uncritical acceptance (often by nonlinguists) of claims and promises made during the early years of his academic activity; the claims have by now largely proved to be wrong or without real content, and the promises have gone unfulfilled.

Commentators who are not linguists often discern a fundamental contrast between Chomsky's academic work on linguistics and his non-academic writings about politics. They take the former to be brilliant, revolutionary, and widely accepted, but recognize the latter as radical and controversial.

Levine and Postal, however, both academic linguists, don't see it this way. Rather than a great divide between his scholarly and popular writings, they find both share the same key properties: "a deep disregard and contempt for the truth, a monumental disdain for standards of enquiry, a relentless strain of self-promotion, remarkable descents into incoherence, and a penchant for verbally abusing those who disagree with him." They provide four revealing examples:

- In his earliest and most celebrated book, *Syntactic Structures* (1957) Chomsky covered up an inconsistency in his theory by publishing a statement about the grammatical rule for passive voice, even though he knew from other work of his own that the statement was untrue.

- After a dissertation by one of his own doctoral students, John Ross, had shown that one of Chomsky's purported "universal principles" of grammar was not actually universal, Chomsky refused to give up the principle and simply avoided mentioning Ross's critique. "The worst aspect of this subterfuge," Levine and Postal write, "is his touting of a failed principle as a genuine discovery to nonlinguist audiences unprepared to recognize the dishonesty involved." He cited it in an interview with one credulous reporter and repeated the claim in a much more prominent interview in *The New Yorker* last year.

- Levine and Postal record that Chomsky has sometimes rejected proposals made by other linguists, often in the strongest terms, but then later adopted those very proposals himself, without attribution or credit. This occurred with the concept of "deep structure," which is one of the ideas by which Chomsky is best known to lay audiences. In the 1970s, other linguists showed that "deep structure" was untenable. Chomsky at first defended his idea and ferociously opposed his detractors. He eventually gave away the concept himself in the early 1990s. But in abandoning it, he made no open announcement that he had done so, nor acknowledged the critique whose alternative thesis he adopted.

- In an effort to disguise his own failures, Chomsky has denigrated the results of scientific research in general. In his 2002 book *Nature and Language*, he was questioned by two interviewers who, despite being long-time enthusiasts, asked the big and by then embarrassing question about what he considered the "established results" of his work. Instead of producing some actual results, Chomsky chose to scorn the very idea of scientific results. "My own view is that everything is subject to question," he answered. "Even in the advanced sciences, everything is questionable." Levine and Postal point out that anyone with the slightest acquaintance with modern physical sciences would recognize this as a grotesque misrepresentation of science's true nature and its findings. Chomsky was deliberately distorting the status of the numerous genuine discoveries science has made in order to cover up his own inability to produce any.

Chomsky's stance here is particularly hypocritical, given a further point Williamson makes about his recent work. He has lately been attributing physical properties to the elements of language, applying terms used by hard sciences such as physics and chemistry. Chomsky and his followers now employ descriptions such as "light" and "heavy" phrases or "weak" and "strong" attraction between words in an attempt to explain the behavior of verbs and adjectives in the same terms as subatomic particles. Williamson also notes that Chomsky has presented transformational grammar as similar to the chemical sequencing of biochemistry, and appropriated the phrase "principles and parameters" from computer science.

Williamson's essay is a very amusing read. He recounts exchanges of emails he has had with Chomsky over a range of issues from the American role in World War II to technical aspects of linguistic theory. One exchange was about the role of transitive and intransitive verbs. Chomsky's thesis is that the rarity of one type of usage of intransitive verbs is such that it provides evidence the human brain has a preference for certain grammatical structures. This, in turn, is evidence for Chomsky's well-known claim (popularized by his loyal follower Steven Pinker) that grammar is innate and that humans are biologically "hard-wired" for grammar. In one of his emails, Williamson challenged this thesis with a list of ten examples of transitive and intransitive verbs that clearly failed to obey these hard-wired rules. In a footnote, Williamson reveals how intellectually taxing he found this task: "I would like to thank the girls of Hooters at the Jefferson Davis Turnpike location south of Richmond for helping me to compile this list."

Collier, Horowitz, and their six other authors have produced a book that has long been needed. It provides a penetrating coverage of the disgraceful career of a disgraceful but very influential man, who has so far avoided a criticism as thoroughgoing as this. Steven Morris, Thomas Nichols, and Eli Lehrer provide powerful critical analyses of Chomsky's writings about Vietnam, Cambodia, the Cold War, and the news media. Two essays by Paul Bogdanor and Werner Cohn examine Chomsky's compulsive hatred for the state of Israel and his support for neo-Nazi Holocaust deniers.

These days, Chomsky's denunciations of Israel dispense with the once-familiar distinction between Zionists and Jews. He has become a proponent of outright anti-Semitism. The prospect of Chomsky's legion of adolescent and academic followers adopting the same stance makes Bogdanor's and Cohn's articles particularly depressing. David Horowitz and Ronald Radosh analyze his long career of denouncing the United States, the country that has sustained him for his seventy-four years and given him all that he has.

Anyone who likes seeing such a celebrated leftist being skewered by his own words and arguments will enjoy much of this book hugely, but its overall effect is actually very sobering. What is it about Western intellectual culture, and American academic culture in particular, that has led so many potentially talented people to turn into such blind and hate-filled critics? There is no answer in this book, but it sure makes you wonder.

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**Keith Windschuttle**'s latest book is *The White Australia Policy* (Macleay Press).

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