

Power and Illusion:

Ron Perspectives from Laing

Roberts and Chomsky

Laing and Chomsky's work reveals commonalities in defence mechanisms, phantasy systems and use of violence to maintain authority at different levels of social reality.

The statesman of the world who boast and threaten that they have doomsday weapons are far more dangerous and far more estranged from reality than many of the people on whom the label psychotic is affixed. (Laing, 1965, p.12)

The standard view of how the system works is at serious odds with reality. (Herman and Chomsky, 1994, xi)

Today, in the rich western countries, we live in a world of illusions - a manufactured non-sanity of runaway consumption, furnished by international capital and predicated on the control of energy resources through military force by the world's great power – the United States, aided and willingly abetted by the United Kingdom and a cavalcade of client states. Together they constitute a coalition of the willing, the fearful and the forced acting as one to ensure a healthy climate for transnational corporations to conduct their business (Chomsky, 1999a). This view, familiar perhaps to intellectual dissidents and those at the sharp end of western practice, has not been widely disseminated in the western media and consequently is largely absent from popular discourse and understanding. The failure to represent this perspective in the mainstream is ensured by the operation of one simple factor - power.

What Laing's and Chomsky's work considered together provides, is a clinical dissection of how power operates in various domains so as to manufacture our social, economic, political and psychological realities. In Laing's case, the analysis of power was directed to understanding the interpersonal and intrapersonal (intrapyschic) operations on our experience – particularly as it occurred in the microsocial context of the family, though understood as applicable to other social institutions and carrying historic repercussions (see Laing, 1967, 1968, 1971). In contrast, Chomsky examines the macro social context of international relations, politics and the media to unravel the

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workings of power, chiefly US power, on the global stage. Here in its most naked form (summoned at the behest of the elites who control international capital), military force or the threat of it, is used to terrorise, punish and enslave those who perceive as subservience, economic dependency and imperialism, the benefits of what our politicians and media commentators call democracy. In a calculus of misery, death and suffering, Chomsky's writings have catalogued the many 'benefits' which this exported democracy has brought to the citizens of Latin America (e.g. Chomsky, 1992, Herman and Chomsky, 1994), the Middle East (e.g. Chomsky, 1999b), the Balkans (Chomsky, 1999a) and South East Asia (e.g. Herman and Chomsky, 1994, Chomsky, 1967). Closer to home, in its host environment, a more subtle manifestation of power prevails, working through a loyal media to channel thought within acceptable boundaries and thereby manufacture political obedience and consent (Chomsky, 1989, Herman and Chomsky, 1994, Chomsky, 2003).

This paper is about the relationship between these two bodies of work – how together they reveal to us the origins of the irrationality behind the 'total world system' (Laing, 1968), how threats, violence and deceit underlie the fabric of our consensual reality, and how the operations of power in the construction of our 'internal' mental life mirror those operations used to fashion the external world. The major illusions underpinning the reality and experience of westerners, the operations by which they are maintained, the functional role which these serve in society and the nature of the institutional purveyors of these illusions will be examined in what follows.

Illusions

In a recent work, Chomsky (2004) describes the guiding principle behind imperial action in the world (and permissible discourse dealing with this), as one so obviously true that it is often considered unnecessary to formulate (p.42). This principle holds that the imperial power (the US and/or UK) is the vanguard of history, motivated solely by noble intent, righteously intervening in the world to bring justice, stability, liberty and democracy to the darker uncivilised corners of the earth. Whilst post modern challenges to the idea of an inherent direction to history may have sufficed to curtail vulgar Marxist assertions of the inevitability of revolution, it has fuelled western reactionary opinion with an overwhelming sense of urgency. The imperial quest must now assume greater importance less any reduction in western power, leaves the floodgates open to the tides of chaos which threaten to overwhelm our civilisation. Simply put - *we* are *good* and need to be protected from *them* who are unceasingly *bad*. And what is so bad about them? Well, if a thorough examination of the record is anything to go by, it would seem to be *their* desire for independence and national self-determination which arouses our displeasure. Laing wrote extensively on the means by which we arrive at notions of us and them - whether as family member, political ideologue or national citizen. These are complex abstractions whereby group identity emerges as the product of a set of reciprocal

internalisations of each by each other. Of particular interest in the present context, Laing argues that the precondition for the stability of this *nexus* of relationships is the generation of terror and violence within the group. Only then, as a consequence of such destructive action on our experience, are we ripe for the destruction of others. Thus;

If our experience is destroyed, our behaviour will be destructive...Normal men have killed perhaps 100,000,000 of their fellow normal men in the last fifty years. (Laing, 1967, p.24)

A search through Chomsky's writings enables us to tally the number of such killings by 'normal men' which have arisen directly or indirectly from the complicity of US 'peacemakers' in Washington. The figures make for disturbingly reading. Consider just a few of the locations where US action has been felt. In Guatemala around 200,000 people were killed by the US backed counterinsurgency campaign and death squads (Chomsky, 2003 p.6), in Nicaragua 40,000 were killed by the US backed contras. Death squads in El Salvador and in Honduras saw another 75,000 and 10,000 respectively shuffled from their mortal coils (Chomsky, 2003, footnote 13). In Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia (the so called Indochina wars) upwards of 4 million people were killed (Chomsky, 2003, p.90), a figure which includes approximately 750,000 deaths attributed to the Khmer Rouge (Chomsky, 1994, pp383-384) whose emergence and campaign of slaughter subsequent to the illegal bombing initiated by Kissinger and Nixon did not preclude it from later enjoying the backing of the US and UK Governments at the United Nations. Following the US backed military coup in 1965 and installation of Suharto as President, the Indonesian army killed 700,000 people followed in the late 1990's by another 200,000 people in East Timor, all with the diplomatic and military support of the US and UK (Chomsky, 2004, p.53). To these figures we can now add the recent estimates of 1.8 million deaths as a result of the sanctions and ongoing war in Iraq (Roberts et al, 2004), not to mention the enormous numbers of tortured and displaced people resulting from US attempts to ensure democracy - for example in South Vietnam 8 million people were forcibly displaced (Chomsky, 2003, footnote 52), in Columbia 2.7 million (Chomsky, 2004, p.52), and in Kosovo 350,000 (Chomsky, 1999a, p.16). And in passing, lest one should think that the UK has a more honourable record in the international arena, analysis of declassified UK government records by Mark Curtis (2003, 2004) should suffice to set the record straight. Curtis estimates that the UK has direct responsibility for between 4 and 6 million deaths in conflicts since the end of the Second World War. As we remember the Holocaust 60 years on, it seems that the principal lesson which the current imperial powers have taken on board is to make sure they hold on to power.

The maintenance of illusion

It is evident that for this catalogue of horror to have somehow eluded one's attention and for our belief in western 'goodness' to have survived relatively intact, significant forces must be operating to maintain the denial of reality. Chomsky (2004) moves into psychological territory in identifying several core mental mechanisms responsible for sending information 'down the memory hole' as he puts it. To Orwell's 'double think' he adds 'loyalty to power', 'denial syndrome' and 'intentional ignorance'. While Sartre and Laing may have used the concept of 'bad faith' to explain all of these phenomenon bar loyalty to power, Chomsky's terms are additionally useful inasmuch as they make explicit reference to the operation of these processes in subservience to violent political power. They are the building blocks of what Marx described as 'mystification', a concept invaluable to Laing in his elucidation of family systems. Intentional ignorance is of specific interest, a term which ably captures both the intentions of the relevant authorities to instill ignorance in the population, and the resulting intentions of people to maintain their own psychological comfort in ignorance. Furthermore, by never actually talking about these matters, the processes of intentional ignorance in effect hide all traces of the intent to forget, thus wiping their existence from conscious thought in a meta level of forgotten thoughts. So we come not to know, what it is that we have forgotten we ever knew. In this state of enlightenment we are permitted to pronounce on our free will. Such are the means by which our own thoughts directly mirror the will and intentions of outside agents. Laing (1971) considered these matters in *The Politics of the Family*. For example;

It is mandatory to project bad onto the Enemy, whoever they may be; and it is mandatory to deny that this is a projection. (Laing, 1971, p.92)

And again;

We at this moment may not know we have rules against knowing about certain rules. (Laing, 1971, p.100)

No wonder that Laing questioned whether much of what we customarily feel is a result of having been hypnotised to feel it. Experience he argued is normalised through the operation of a whole host of what are usually described psychoanalytically as defence mechanisms – these comprise such actions as denial, splitting, projection, introjection, repression, rationalisation etc. plus rules against acknowledging that we are in fact doing these things. In discussions with Richard Evans (Evans, 1976) Laing argued that these systems and structures of communication, underpinning as he put it a multitiered system of lies (Evans, 1976, p.66), fitted perfectly well the day to day functioning of political elites - as exemplified in the Watergate affair for example. Thus like Chomsky he was clear that such defences are not merely defences for us but defences for powerful elites to continue

with business as usual. Behind the mirror of illusion is concealment of power. Chomsky reminds us that it is not simply a matter of psychological processes, operating independently of the social and economic realities in our midst, that are responsible for this onslaught on truth;

Throughout the modern period, measures to control 'the public mind' have been employed to enhance the natural pressures of the 'free market', the domestic counterpart to intervention in the global system. (Chomsky, 1989, p.31)

Repression always has functional significance - whether on the personal or political stage and the mainstream press are one of the principal means by which the public mind is controlled. In both *Manufacturing Consent* (Herman and Chomsky, 1994) and *Necessary Illusions* (Chomsky, 1989) the workings of a 'propaganda model' are explored, explaining how 'totalitarian thought control' is maintained by the self confessed 'free agents' of the press and an elite intellectual culture following an agenda loyal to corporate business interests. Like intentional ignorance, 'loyalty to power' may operate on different levels. It describes the functional workings of the press as a corporate institution selling readers of different social groupings to the markets controlled by other corporations. Equally, it applies to the motivations of individuals who are selected or self selected to perform their 'duties' as reporters of events deemed permissible to discuss within the system. At the level of the individual these motivations may or may not be conscious. The rewards for such loyalty can be great, one reason why Chomsky believes that if you find yourself getting accepted in elite company, it probably means you're doing something wrong. Chomsky usually reserves discussion of double think to the willed intentions of the elite, though he is not unaware that the consequences of these intentions are played out in our own obedient psychology. Compare the following;

Throughout history, aggressive and provocative measures have been justified in terms of defence against merciless foes; in Kennedy's case, defence against what he termed 'the monolithic and ruthless' conspiracy' dedicated to world conquest. (Chomsky, 2004, p.225)

In such forms, have US ruling elites always portrayed the 'enemy', whether communist or not. Compare this with a presidential address at West Point military academy.

The plan is for the United States to rule the world....it calls for the US to maintain its overwhelming superiority and prevent new rivals from rising up and challenging it on the world stage.. It says not that the US must be more powerful, but that it must be absolutely powerful (quoted in Ahmed, 2003, p.17).

Evidently the idea of world conquest lies close to the heart of some people. Rather than come

clean on this to the public – not considered a good idea – better then to impugn these motives to others (projection) and use these projected motives to justify one’s own aggression against the enemy in order to protect and defend our interests. In this way the invasion of South Vietnam by US forces for example, becomes an act of defence, the invasion of Iraq an act of liberation – in fact all such acts of naked aggression by US and UK forces are rendered invisible – as being conducted by the benign and merciful Anglo-American alliance. *Ipsa facto* they cannot be malign, because *we* would never do such a thing. Only *they* would. *We* are trustworthy, *they* are not. *Our* sources are reliable *theirs* are not. In fact the more outlandish the US/UK alliance’s actions the more impunity they have to carry them out while the population is psychologically paralysed. Anyone who seriously questions this may well be told they are crazy. The splitting between the good *us* and the bad *them* can be seen then to set in motion an elaborate public phantasy system to justify continued aggression. In *Sanity Madness and the Family* (Laing and Esterson, 1964) and in Schatzman’s *Soul Murder* (1973) (principally Laing’s work: see Mullan 1995) such public phantasy systems operated to curtail and restrict the independence of particular family members who were threatening to blow the lid off the whole affair. As we embark once more on the ‘War against Terror’ (recall the prior instalment, courtesy of President Reagan in Latin America), the war without end of the Bush/Blair *folie à deux*, it is important to realise that like the tangled wars within the family, this one too is fought against those who seek (national) independence and self determination.

Chomsky describes the efforts to maintain the current fictions shielding us from reality as ‘thought control’. Making assertions of thought control in the real world can be dangerous, since if one is not too careful, it can attract psychiatric attributions of delusional ideation, particularly if one talks about thoughts being broadcast into one’s head, by radio waves for instance. But of course it is not a question of whether others really are trying to control and direct our thoughts - they are - it is rather a question of how distressed we are when we make public our realisation of this. A person, who appears in a state of great distress over the lack of control they have over their own thoughts, may in one sense be considerably more in touch with reality than another, not so distressed person who appears oblivious to the fact that this kind of thing is going on all the time. Accordingly the notion of thought control can either be viewed as a symptom of mental illness or as a strategy of power. Which of these we choose to endorse perhaps says something about the level to which we have internalised society’s rules on permissible thinking, and how we have managed to deal with the prevailing realities so far.

That such a matter of choice is possible at all is surely no coincidence. To unravel this further, an authentic behavioural science would need to unearth the history of ideas of thought control and its incorporation into a system of policing thinking - a history of the origins of the thought police no less.

Throughout the world the mental health system has always been used to patrol internal dissidence. We do not stand apart from the Soviet Union in this respect - it is not that *they* are repressive whilst *we* are humane and benign. The mental health system is subservient to the 'great game' - the power play of politics – Soviet dissidents knew this well – but we too have our own dissidents. Just as citizens of the USSR and Maoist China were subject to suitable 'education' about the need to 'reform' the malcontents in their societies, we have our own 'public relations' system embodied in institutional psychiatry. And *Public Relations* is after all just another term for propaganda (Curtis, 2002). The threat of mental illness is the sword of Damocles hanging over all our heads.

Reclaiming reality

Each of us is living in a society that has a vested interest in our alienation from reality and the indoctrination of new recruits into the collective phantasy of western benevolence. The struggle to regain our own thoughts is a political struggle in the full sense of the word. We need to wake up from this dream world urgently, and win the struggle within ourselves. In Orwell's 1984, Winston Smith finally loved Big Brother. We must avoid that fate. Discerning what is actually going on from what we are told is going on, will not be easy, such is our present state of alienation. The possibility of an authentic mode of being was a central issue for Laing - similarly for Chomsky, the concern is how to remain free from the imposition of a mentality imposed by propaganda;

Citizens of the democratic societies should undertake a course of intellectual self-defense to protect themselves from manipulation and control. (Chomsky, 1989, viii)

The struggle for people in the west today to reclaim some credible version of the truth behind the operation of our modern societies is vital. It is time for the behavioural sciences to play their part in this and aid what Chomsky calls the second great superpower - public opinion. To do this, exposing the lies and hidden intentions of Government (Chomsky, 1967) must assume a higher priority. In the modern age the survival of the human species is under threat from induced climate change and human folly in the pursuit of greed. We should not underestimate the risk, nor presuppose that our political leaders will come to their senses. In the US and UK our peaceful and benevolent governments are the world leaders in disregarding international law, promoting mass murder and accruing and developing armouries of devastating biological, chemical and nuclear weapons. They have made it clear that the risks these pose, are to them inconsequential. Their fundamental operating principle as Chomsky tells us, is that 'hegemony is more important than survival' (Chomsky, 2004, p.231).

The other human inhabitants of the planet - those on the receiving end of western 'hospitality and justice' have long known this. For them it is *not wise to live with illusions* (Chomsky, 2004, p168). We must realise before it is too late that neither is it wise for us. The twin aims of the power that threatens life on this planet - as Orwell knew,

are to conquer the whole surface of the earth and to extinguish once and for all the possibility of independent thought. (Orwell, 1977, p.156)

I leave the last word with Bruce Lee

Never take your eyes off your opponent. (from Enter the Dragon, 1974)

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