

ISSN 1751-8229

Volume Seven, Number Two

## SOME BEWILDERED CLARIFICATIONS

Slavoj Žižek

Since Noam Chomsky's "Fantasies" (Sunday, July 21, 2013, <http://www.zcommunications.org/fantasies-by-noam-chomsky>) present themselves as a reaction to my reply to his interview with a critical dismissal of my work, a brief clarification is needed. What Chomsky refers to as my "reply" is a non-authorized and not accurate transcription of my answer to a question from the public during a recent debate at Birkbeck college in London. As it would be clear from a full transcription, at that moment I didn't even know about Chomsky's attack on me – I was just asked what do I think about his total dismissal of my work (together with that of Lacan and Derrida) as a case of fanciful posturing without any foundation in empirical facts and scientific reasoning, and I improvised a reaction on the spot. Chomsky's remark that I "cite nothing" to justify my claim about his inaccuracies is thus ridiculous – how could I have done it in an improvised reply to an unexpected question? Probably to illustrate my disrespect for facts, Chomsky also dwells on the characterization of Obama that I wrongly attributed to him; there is no mystery about it, upon learning about my mistake, I unambiguously apologized – here is the text of my apology (from *Harper's* magazine):

"In attributing to Noam Chomsky the statement that Obama is a white guy who took some sun-tanning sessions, I repeated an untrue claim which appeared in Slovene media, so I can only offer my unreserved and unconditional apology.

I would like to add that, even if the statement I falsely attributed to Chomsky were to be truly made by him, I would not consider it a patronizingly racist slur, but a fully admissible characterization in our political and ideological struggle. There are African-American intellectuals who allow themselves to be fully co-opted into the white-liberal academic establishment, and they are loved by the establishment

precisely because they seem “one of us,” white with a darkened skin. This is why, I think, the statement I falsely attributed to Chomsky does NOT amount to the same as Silvio Berlusconi’s misleadingly similar characterization of Obama as beautiful and well tanned: Berlusconi’s remark dismissed Obama’s blackness as an endearing eccentricity, thus obliterating the historical meaning of the fact that an African-American was elected President, while the remark I falsely attributed to Chomsky, if accurate, would point towards the ambiguous way Obama’s blackness can be instrumentalized to obfuscate our crucial political and economic struggles.”

I added the long second paragraph not to qualify my apology, but to make it clear that I never accused Chomsky of making a racist comment (as was Berlusconi’s quip). I find it a little bit mysterious why Chomsky dwells on this event which, if anything, proves my respect for empirical facts, i.e., my readiness to admit a mistake when I am empirically wrong! So is Chomsky ready to apologize when he reaches the lowest point of his attack in his claim that, in my reproaches to him concerning the way he deals with Khmer Rouge atrocities, I endorse the

“distinction between worthy and unworthy victims. The worthy victims are those whose fate can be attributed to some official enemy, the unworthy ones are the victims of our own state and its crimes. The two prime examples on which we focused were Cambodia under the Khmer Rouge and the Indonesian invasion of East Timor in the same years. /.../ to this day, those who are completely in the grip of western propaganda adhere religiously to the prescribed doctrine: a show of great indignation about the KR years and our accurate review of the information available, along with streams of falsification; and silence about the vastly more significant cases of ET and Cambodia under US attack, before and after the KR years. Žižek’s comments are a perfect illustration.”

All I can say is that I simply agree with these lines (with the exception of the last sentence, of course). Not only do I agree, but I was making the same point repeatedly, even mentioning East Timor, as in the following passage from my *Welcome to the Desert of the Real*:

»Why should the World Trade Center catastrophe be in any way privileged over, say, the mass slaughter of Hutus by Tutsis in Ruanda in 1999? Or the mass bombing and gas-poisoning of Kurds in the north of Iraq in the early 1990s? Or the Indonesian forces' mass killings in East Timor? Or...«

The claim that I in any way endorse the »distinction between worthy and unworthy victims” is thus patently wrong. I only have to add that I see an important difference between Cambodia and East Timor. In the latter case, we were dealing with a foreign military intervention and occupation (Indonesia with the US support) whose aim was simply to colonize and exploit the occupied country, while in the case of Cambodia, violence was perpetrated by a politico-military organization of Cambodian people themselves mobilized by a well-articulated radical Millenarian vision (to erase the ideological past and build a New Man, inclusive of closing all schools, liquidating intellectuals, prohibiting all religions, and undermining family ties). Furthermore, one should also bear in mind that the US attitude towards Khmer Rouge cannot be reduced to a demonizing condemnation: to counter the increased Soviet influence

after the overthrow of the Khmer Rouge regime by the Vietnamese intervention in 1979, the US and China together supported the Khmer Rouge regime as the sole legitimate representative of Cambodia in the UN – all of a sudden, Khmer Rouge were not so totally bad... But this seems to me also a relatively minor point. What brings us to the heart of the matter is Chomsky's accusation that I rudely misrepresent his position: according to me, he (Chomsky) claims

“that ‘we don't need any critique of ideology’ – that is, we don't need what I've devoted enormous efforts to for many years. His evidence? He heard that from some people who talked to me. Sheer fantasy again, but another indication of his concept of empirical fact and rational discussion.”

For me, on the contrary, the problem is here a very rational one: everything hinges on how we define “ideology.” If one defines and uses this term the way I do (and I am not alone here: my understanding echoes a long tradition of so-called Western Marxism), then one has to conclude that what Chomsky is doing in his political writings is very important, I have great admiration and respect for it, *but it is emphatically not critique of ideology*. Let me indicate what I mean by this. What I had in mind when I spoke about his stance towards Khmer Rouge was, among other passages, the following lines from Chomsky's and Herman's “Distortions at Fourth Hand» from *The Nation* (June 6, 1977):

»Space limitations preclude a comprehensive review, but such journals as *the Far Eastern Economic Review*, the London *Economist*, the *Melbourne Journal of Politics*, and others elsewhere, have provided analyses by highly qualified specialists who have studied the full range of evidence available, and who concluded that executions have numbered at most in the thousands; that these were localized in areas of limited Khmer Rouge influence and unusual peasant discontent, where brutal revenge killings were aggravated by the threat of starvation resulting from the American destruction and killing. These reports also emphasize both the extraordinary brutality on both sides during the civil war (provoked by the American attack) and repeated discoveries that massacre reports were false. /.../ To give an illustration of just one neglected source, the London *Economist* (March 26, 1977) carried a letter by W.J. Sampson, who worked as an economist and statistician for the Cambodian Government until March 1975, in close contact with the central statistics office. After leaving Cambodia, he writes, he 'visited refugee camps in Thailand and kept in touch with Khmers,' and he also relied on 'A European friend who cycled around Phnom Penh for many days after its fall [and] saw and heard of no ... executions' apart from 'the shooting of some prominent politicians and the lynching of hated bomber pilots in Phnom Penh.' He concludes 'that executions could be numbered in hundreds or thousands rather than in hundreds of thousands,' though there was 'a big death toll from sickness' - surely a direct consequence, in large measure, of the devastation caused by the American attack. /.../ If, indeed, postwar Cambodia is, as /Lacouture/ believes, similar to Nazi Germany, then his comment is perhaps just, though we may add that he has produced no evidence to support this judgement. But if postwar Cambodia is more similar to France after liberation, where many thousands of people were massacred within a few months under far less rigorous conditions than those left by the American war, then perhaps a rather

different judgement is in order. That the latter conclusion may be more nearly correct is suggested by the analyses mentioned earlier.

/.../ We do not pretend to know where the truth lies amidst these sharply conflicting assessments; rather, we again want to emphasize some crucial points. What filters through to the American public is a seriously distorted version of the evidence available, emphasizing alleged Khmer Rouge atrocities and downplaying or ignoring the crucial U.S. role, direct and indirect, in the torment that Cambodia has suffered. Evidence that focuses on the American role /.../ is ignored, not on the basis of truthfulness or scholarship but because the message is unpalatable. «

I think the quoted passage confirms that my improvised resume of Chomsky's position about Khmer Rouge atrocities («*No, this is Western propaganda. Khmer Rouge are not as horrible as that.*») is a correct one. I do not agree in any way with those who accuse Chomsky of sympathizing with Khmer Rouge, although I find the parallel between Cambodia after the KR takeover and France liberated in 1944 very problematic. Did de Gaulle after the liberation of Paris order its complete evacuation? Did his government reorganize entire social life into collective communes run by military commanders? Did it close down schools? If anything, de Gaulle's first government was way too tolerant, (among other problematic measures) admitting legal continuity between the Vichy years and the new republic, so that all laws enforced by the Vichy regime (and they were numerous!) remained valid if they were not explicitly revoked. But apart from this particular point, I have some further problems with Chomsky's and Herman's old text.

I agree that one should approach reports on humanitarian crises or genocidal violence in Western media with a great measure of skepticism: they are as a rule heavily biased due to political and economic interests. However, although Chomsky claims he doesn't pretend to know what actually went on in Cambodia, the bias of his own description is obvious: his sympathies lies with those who try to minimize and relativize Khmer Rouge atrocities. This bias is ideology - a set of explicit and implicit, even unspoken, ethico-political and other positions, decision, choices, etc., which predetermine our perception of facts, what we tend to emphasize or to ignore, how we organize facts into a consistent whole of a narrative or a theory. And it is this bias which displays Chomsky's ideology in selecting and ordering data, what he downplays and what he emphasizes, not only in the case of Cambodia but also in the case of post-Yugoslav war (his downplaying of the Srebrenica massacre), etc. To avoid a misunderstanding, I am not advocating here the "postmodern" idea that our theories are just stories we are telling each other, stories which cannot be grounded in facts; I am also not advocating a purely neutral unbiased view. My point is that the plurality of stories and biases is itself grounded in our real struggles. With regard to Chomsky, I claim that his bias sometimes leads him to selections of facts and conclusions which obfuscate the complex reality he is trying to analyze.

Today we know that the accusations against the KR regime were mainly true. Chomsky's answer would probably have been that such heavy accusations have to be grounded in precise empirical facts, and that in the case of Cambodia back in the late 1970s such facts were sorely missing. While there is some truth in this claim (especially with regard to the devastation caused earlier in Cambodia by the US

Army), I have again some problems with it. There is a thin line that separates justified doubt about media reports from comfortable skepticism which allows us to ignore or downplay atrocities. One can easily imagine a similar line of argumentation in the late 1930s about the Nazi atrocities or the Stalinist purges: we don't have enough reliable data, we should not pretend to know what really goes on in these countries, so it is advisable to doubt Western press reports... (and in both these cases, as well as in the case of Khmer Rouge, later knowledge confirmed the worst fears). One may add that a similar tactic is used by companies and organizations which want to downplay the environmental or health risks (we don't really know for certain about global warming, about the health risks of smoking...). So how can to decide in such cases? It is here that the analysis of ideology can be of some help – the point I made in my improvised reply to Chomsky:

*»For example, concerning Stalinism. The point is not that you have to know, you have photo evidence of gulag or whatever. My God you just have to listen to the public discourse of Stalinism, of Khmer Rouge, to get it that something terrifyingly pathological is going on there. For example, Khmer Rouge: Even if we have no data about their prisons and so on, isn't it in a perverse way almost fascinating to have a regime which in the first two years ('75 to '77) behaved towards itself, treated itself, as illegal? You know the regime was nameless. It was called "Angka," organization — not Communist Party of Cambodia — an organization. Leaders were nameless.»*

My underlying thesis is here that no effective ideology simply lies: an ideology is never a simple mystification obfuscating the hidden reality of domination and exploitation; the atrocious reality obfuscated and mystified by an ideology has to register, to leave traces, in the explicit ideological text itself, in the guise of its inconsistencies, gaps, etc. The Stalinist show trials were, of course, a brutal travesty of justice concealing breath-taking brutality, but to see this, it is not necessary to know the reality behind them – the public face of the trials, the puppet-like monstrosity of public confessions, etc., made this abundantly clear. In a homologous way, one doesn't have to know how Jews really were to guess that the Nazi accusations against them were a fake - a close look at these accusations makes it clear that we are dealing with paranoid fantasies.

The same goes for liberal-capitalist violence, of course – I have written many pages on the falsity of humanitarian interventionism. One does not need to know the brutal reality that sustains such interventions, the cynical pursuit of economic and political interests obfuscated by humanitarian concerns, to discern the falsity of such interventionism – the inconsistencies, gaps and silences of its explicit text are tell-tale enough. This, of course, in no way implies that the disclosure and analysis of facts are not important: one should bring out to light all the details of their atrocious brutality, of ruthless economic exploitation, etc. - a job done quite well by Chomsky himself. However, in order to explain how people often remain within their ideology even when they are forced to admit facts, one has to supplement investigation and disclosure of facts by the analysis of ideology which not only makes people blind for the full horror of facts but also enables them to participate in activities which generates these atrocious facts while maintaining the appearance of human dignity.

There is another refined point to be made here. Often, one cannot but be shocked by the excessive indifference towards suffering, even and especially when this suffering is widely reported in the media and condemned, as if it is the very outrage at suffering which turns us into its immobilized fascinated spectators. Recall, in the early 1990s, the three-years-long siege of Sarajevo, with the population starving, exposed to permanent shelling and snipers' fire. The big enigma here is: although all the media were full of pictures and reports, why did not the UN forces, NATO, or the US accomplish just a small act of *breaking the siege of Sarajevo*, of imposing a corridor through which people and provisions could circulate freely? It would have cost nothing: with a little bit of serious pressure on the Serb forces, the prolonged spectacle of encircled Sarajevo exposed to daily dose of terror would have been over. There is only one answer to this enigma, the one proposed by Rony Brauman who, on behalf of the Red Cross, coordinated the help to Sarajevo: the very presentation of the crisis of Sarajevo as "humanitarian," the very recasting of the political-military conflict into humanitarian terms, was sustained by an eminently *political* choice (basically, taking the Serb side in the conflict). Especially ominous and manipulative was here the role of Francois Mitterand:

"The celebration of 'humanitarian intervention' in Yugoslavia took the place of a political discourse, disqualifying in advance all conflicting debate. /.../ It was apparently not possible, for Francois Mitterand, to express his analysis of the war in Yugoslavia. With the strictly humanitarian response, he discovered an unexpected source of communication or, more precisely, of cosmetics, which is a little bit the same thing. /.../ Mitterand remained in favor of the maintenance of Yugoslavia within its borders and was persuaded that only a strong Serbian power was in the position to guarantee a certain stability in this explosive region. This position rapidly became unacceptable in the eyes of the French people. All the bustling activity and the humanitarian discourse permitted him to reaffirm the unfailing commitment of France to the Rights of Man in the end, and to mimic an opposition to Greater Serbian fascism, all in giving it free rein."

One can see how my perception of the Yugoslav conflict differs from Chomsky's. However, I agree with the general thrust of his argument which is that one should analyze the depoliticized humanitarian politics of "Human Rights" as the ideology of military interventionism serving specific economico-political purposes. As Wendy Brown develops apropos Michael Ignatieff, such humanitarianism

"presents itself as something of an antipolitics – a pure defense of the innocent and the powerless against power, a pure defense of the individual against immense and potentially cruel or despotic machineries of culture, state, war, ethnic conflict, tribalism, patriarchy, and other mobilizations or instantiations of collective power against individuals."

However, the question is: "what kind of politicization /those who intervene on behalf of human rights/ set in motion against the powers they oppose. Do they stand for a different formulation of justice or do they stand in opposition to collective justice projects?" Say, it is clear that the US overthrowing of Saddam Hussein, legitimized in the terms of ending the suffering of the Iraqi people, not only was motivated by precise politico-economic interests, but also relied on a precise idea of the political

and economic conditions of the post-Saddam Iraq (Western liberal democracy, guarantee of private property, the inclusion into the global market, etc.). The purely humanitarian anti-political politics of merely preventing suffering thus effectively amounts to the implicit prohibition of elaborating a positive collective project of socio-political transformation. Jacques Ranciere proposes here a salient comparison of human rights with charity donations:

“/.../ when they are of no use, you do the same as charitable persons do with their old clothes. You give them to the poor. Those rights that appear to be useless in their place are sent abroad, along with medicine and clothes, to people deprived of medicine, clothes, and rights. /.../ if those who suffer inhuman repression are unable to enact Human Rights that are their last recourse, then somebody else has to inherit their rights in order to enact them in their place. This is what is called the ‘right to humanitarian interference’ – a right that some nations assume to the supposed benefit of victimized populations, and very often against the advice of the humanitarian organizations themselves.”

Consequently, what today, in the predominant Western public speech, the “Human Rights of the Third World suffering victims” *effectively mean* is the right of the Western powers themselves to intervene – politically, economically, culturally, militarily - in the Third World countries of their choice on behalf of the defense of Human Rights. My disagreement with Chomsky’s political analyses lies elsewhere: his neglect of how ideology works, as well as the problematic nature of his biased dealing with facts which often leads him to do what he accuses his opponents of doing.

But I think that that the differences in our political positions are so minimal that they cannot really account for the thoroughly dismissive tone of Chomsky’s attack on me. Our conflict is really about something else – it is simply a new chapter in the endless gigantomachy between so-called continental philosophy and the Anglo-Saxon empiricist tradition. There is nothing specific in Chomsky’s critique – the same accusations of irrationality, of empty posturing, of playing with fancy words, were heard hundreds of times against Hegel, against Heidegger, against Derrida, etc. What stands out is only the blind brutality of his dismissal – here is how he replies when, back in his December 2012 interview with *Veterans Unplugged*, he was asked about the ideas of Lacan, Derrida, and me:

“What you’re referring to is what’s called ‘theory.’ And when I said I’m not interested in theory, what I meant is, I’m not interested in posturing – using fancy terms like polysyllables and pretending you have a theory when you have no theory whatsoever. So there’s no theory in any of this stuff, not in the sense of theory that anyone is familiar with in the sciences or any other serious field. Try to find in all of the work you mentioned some principles from which you can deduce conclusions, empirically testable propositions where it all goes beyond the level of something you can explain in five minutes to a twelve-year-old. See if you can find that when the fancy words are decoded. I

can't. So I'm not interested in that kind of posturing. Žižek is an extreme example of it. I don't see anything to what he's saying."

And he goes on and on in the same vein, repeating how he doesn't see anything to what I'm saying, how he cannot discern in my texts any traces of rational examination of facts, how my work displays empty posturing not to be taken seriously, etc. A weird statement, measured by his professed standards of respect for empirical facts and rational argumentation: there are no citations (which, in this case, can be excused, since we are dealing with a radio interview), but also not even the vaguest mentions of any of my ideas. Did he decode any of my "fancy words" and indicate how what one gets is "something you can explain in five minutes to a twelve-year-old"? There are no political references in his first attack (and in this domain, as far as I can see, I much more often than not agree with him). I did a couple of short political books on 9/11 (*Welcome to the Desert of the Real*), on the war in Iraq (*Iraq: the Borrowed Kettle*), on the 2008 financial meltdown (*First as Tragedy, then as Farce*), which appear to me written in a quite accessible way and dealing with quite a lot of facts – do they also contain nothing but empty posturing? In short, is Chomsky in his thorough dismissal of my work not doing exactly what he is accusing me of: clinging to the empty posture of total rejection with no further ad?

I think one can convincingly show that the continental tradition in philosophy, although often difficult to decode, and sometimes – I am the first to admit this - defiled by fancy jargon, remains in its core a mode of thinking which has its own rationality, inclusive of respect for empirical data. And I furthermore think that, in order to grasp the difficult predicament we are in today, to get an adequate cognitive mapping of our situation, one should not shirk the resorts of the continental tradition in all its guises, from the Hegelian dialectics to the French "deconstruction." Chomsky obviously doesn't agree with me here. So what if – just another fancy idea of mine – what if Chomsky cannot find anything in my work that goes "beyond the level of something you can explain in five minutes to a twelve-year-old because" because, when he deals with continental thought, it is his mind which functions as the mind of a twelve-years-old, the mind which is unable to distinguish serious philosophical reflection from empty posturing and playing with empty words?

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