

## MIT Open Access Articles

### *The Responsibilities of Privilege: an Interview with Noam Chomsky on the Role of the Public Intellectual*

The MIT Faculty has made this article openly available. **Please share** how this access benefits you. Your story matters.

**Citation:** Chomsky, Noam, and Louis Reynolds. "The Responsibilities of Privilege: An Interview with Noam Chomsky on the Role of the Public Intellectual." *International Journal of Politics Culture and Society* 29, 1 (March 2016): 103-108.

**As Published:** <http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/s10767-015-9206-2>

**Publisher:** Springer Science and Business Media LLC

**Persistent URL:** <https://hdl.handle.net/1721.1/127796>

**Version:** Author's final manuscript: final author's manuscript post peer review, without publisher's formatting or copy editing

**Terms of use:** Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-Share Alike



## Edited Interview Transcript

<b>Interviewer</b>	Louis Reynolds
<b>Interviewee</b>	Noam Chomsky
<b>Date</b>	16.01.2015
<b>Location</b>	Skype

**The Responsibilities of Privilege: An Interview with Noam Chomsky on the Role of the Public Intellectual**

**Noam Chomsky**

**(Interviewer: Louis Reynolds)**

**Abstract:** The interview below was conducted on January 16<sup>th</sup> 2015. The purpose of this research is to understand how Professor Noam Chomsky became a prominent public intellectual. In particular, it explores his early political interventions, and his own reflections on his role within the anti-Vietnam War movement. Furthermore, it explores Chomsky's insights into the responsibilities and privileges that intellectuals are afforded within society. In this respect, the interview contributes to the sociological literature aimed at understanding the role that academics can play outside of the ivory tower.

**LR:** First of all, I would like to take you back to the article you wrote, entitled "The responsibility of intellectuals" (1967): why did you write it?

**NC:** Well that was actually a talk I gave at Harvard in 1966, which was then picked up and edited slightly, with footnotes, and it became an article. But that was after five years of extensive engagement in this. At the time that I wrote that article I was already beginning to be involved in direct resistance to the Vietnam War. A year earlier, in 1965, a friend and I had tried to organise tax resistance. By 1966 when I gave that talk, it was one of thousands of talks, we were beginning to organise what later became Resist, the national resistance support movement. It became open shortly after in 1967. But my own involvement began roughly 1961/'62, when the first information began to leak out about Kennedy's sharp escalation of US engagement in Vietnam — escalating it from support for a murderous client regime to direct aggression.

**LR:** In 1961, what role did you think you would have in the movement?



# UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE

Department of Sociology

**NC:** In 1961, unfortunately there was no movement, so I tried to give talks as I could. It meant meeting a few people in someone's living room or giving a talk in a church with four people there – the minister, the organiser, a drunk who walked in off the street and somebody who wanted to kill you. As late as October 1965, there were already several hundreds of thousands of American troops there and the war had expanded to North Vietnam and even beyond, although we didn't know about that. Even then, at that time in October 1965, that was the first national day of protest against the war. We tried to participate in it in Boston, a very liberal city, by organising a march to the Boston Common; that's the main place where there are talks/ demonstrations/ public events. The march took place, we got to the common, I was supposed to be one of the speakers, but the meeting was totally broken up by counter-demonstrators, many of whom were students. The only reason why there wasn't real violence was because of the huge contingent of state police. The next day, the liberal newspaper *The Boston Globe*, maybe the most liberal newspaper in the country, featured on the front page a denunciation of the demonstrators who were daring to make mild criticisms of US bombing in North Vietnam. It was almost impossible to talk about the bombing of the south. The next national day of protest, which was March 1966, roughly the time that that talk/article came out, we realised we couldn't have a public demonstration in Boston, so a meeting was set up in a church; the church was attacked. That's March 1966 when there were maybe a quarter million troops in South Vietnam. It was a long time before it came possible to speak of a significant movement; there were years when it was difficult to try and even discuss the topics.

**LR:** So in 1965, did you see yourself taking a prominent role in it, or did you just see yourself publishing articles?

**NC:** Well as I said, the first article that appeared in 1967 was a talk in 1966, and that was after five years of extensive engagement. From talks, organising meetings, organising demonstrations, on to efforts of direct resistance. So most of the articles later were an output of dozens of talks. There were times when I gave seven talks a day.

**LR:** Taking you back to that article/talk about responsibility of intellectuals. Do you think that academics/intellectuals have a responsibility to be politically involved or just a responsibility to tell the truth on political matters?

**NC:** I think every human being has responsibility for the actions that they are involved in and the consequences of those actions. In this case, we are talking about actions taken by the US government, with the complicity and sometimes direct support of the American people, including the intellectuals. Now the intellectual's degree of responsibility, well that depends on the opportunities afforded to you. If a person is more privileged and has access to more resources, to journals, to giving talks, to initiating/organising, then such a person has greater responsibility. Privilege confers responsibility, because it provides opportunities. So therefore, it follows, that intellectuals, who are quite privileged in this regard, have a greater responsibility. But only because they are human beings. Everyone has responsibility for being concerned with the consequences of their actions or inactions.

**LR:** That is very interesting. Do you think there is a particular article that you wrote that had the greatest impact?



Department of Sociology

**NC:** It's hard to know. Talks ranged from, as I said, in somebody's living room to later on, in the '60s, to many thousands of people and everything in-between. It wasn't just me of course, there were many others in this movement. It is hard to identify something specific that had a major impact. The article that you mentioned, on the responsibility of intellectuals, as I said that was given to an audience of maybe 30 or 40 students at Harvard.

**LR:** You talk there about other people who were involved. Was there anybody you wanted to specifically oppose? Were there any people who you specifically wanted to speak against?

**NC:** Argue against?

**LR:** Yes.

**NC:** The ones, for example, that were listed in that article, which ran through a pretty long list. Also those in other articles that I wrote at the time or later, who were the leading figures in intellectual life. I wasn't picking them at random. Mostly people who were influential and outspoken, mostly liberals— I didn't concentrate on the right, but on the liberal sort of end of the spectrum, liberal in the American sense, kind of social democratic end of the spectrum.

**LR:** In terms of your getting involved in the anti-war movement, did other academics influence you to get involved?

**NC:** Sometimes. For example I mentioned that by 1966, I was beginning to move from organising things like tax resistance to more direct involvement in resistance against the war and support for direct resistance and so on. One academic who influenced me significantly in making that shift was one of the most important intellectuals in that period, not too well-known unfortunately: Paul Lauter, who is now a Professor at Trinity College, specialised in comparative literature and English, who has done very important work in his own field but was also influential in helping organise and initiate activities beyond demonstrating and speaking (direct resistance). So he was one of the people that was influential in creating the organisation Resist that I mentioned.

**LR:** In terms of your experiences, do you think your training affected how people perceived your interest and the way it was received?

**NC:** Well the academic training and the opportunities granted to academics, which are significant, makes it possible for you to do things that are otherwise hard to do. You have access to resources, for example, to libraries, to time to write articles and travel around to give speeches. If you are working 50 hour weeks to put food on the table, you don't have those opportunities. So sure, the academic life offers opportunities, in training and experience, that can be put to use in circumstances like these.

**LR:** Do you think your involvement affected your academic work afterwards and the way that it was received?

**NC:** The effect on the way it was received?



# UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE

Department of Sociology

**LR:** Yes, on your academic, linguistic work. Do you think that was affected by your involvement in the war?

**NC:** Yes, it's possible. But if it's true it shouldn't be the case. The effect should be a result of the content, not the person who is speaking those words.

**LR:** So do you think you can split your status in this from your academic status?

**NC:** Well you are asking whether my academic position and record had an impact on the way that people received what I said. It had a dual impact. For some, it probably enhanced the impact, and for others, especially in the academic professions, it was regarded as totally improper—you should keep to your work, you are being paid to work on linguistics, so what right do you have to talk about American politics or international affairs. It's kind of striking, I have had an interesting personal history in that regard. Actually I don't really have a specific academic profession. I don't have professional training of the normal kind in any field including, what's called my own field, in linguistics. I was self-educated and so on. Of course in my academic professional development I was involved in many different fields, actually one of the reasons I am at MIT is that it is a science-based university who didn't really care about professional credentials, so it was a natural place for me. But in the course of this strange personal experience, I have worked in many different areas, from mathematics to political affairs. And I have noticed something quite striking: When I was invited to give talks on the work that I did on mathematical theory of automata, invited by say the Harvard graduate seminar on mathematics or by the Sorbonne department of mathematics, nobody ever asked me about my academic credentials. If anybody asked then people would have laughed. Who cares? What they care about is what you are saying. They all knew I wasn't a professional mathematician, so their only question is if this is something useful, can we fix it up and so on and so forth. On the other hand, if I ever gave a talk to a political science department, which was quite rare, the first thing that would come up is, what right do you have to talk about this? What are your professional credentials? In fact, I think there is a very striking generalisation, which holds across the academic field: the greater the depth and content of some fields, the less people care about credentials. And that's understandable— unattractive but understandable.

**LR:** It is particularly interesting how you differentiate those two things. You are very famous for your political interventions, but as you say there does seem to be a lot of criticism out there that you don't have the right. Do you feel that this was the case at the time? As well as throughout your whole career?

**NC:** Sure. Of course, any time that I was on a panel with a professional political scientist or historian, the first comment that they would make would be some joke about how they don't talk about linguistics, so how can I talk about this. As if these are things that need some sort of special, magical training that only super professionals have. In fact, these things are topics that you would view seriously just on the basis of your own ability to read and think and work through; there are no deep theories that you have mastered. It's not quantum theory.

**LR:** How important for you was your trip to Vietnam? How important was it for galvanising your work and your fight against the war?



# UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE

Department of Sociology

**NC:** Practically not at all. That was in 1970 if you remember. That was after many long years of engagement, by then I had already been arrested many times. I was up on trial, looking at a long jail sentence that was evaded by the Tet Offensive. That was a very useful trip for me, mainly because of the time I spent in Laos, which I wrote about. There I learnt a lot. I was able to do a lot of investigation. I was lucky to be taken around by a wonderful person, Fred Branfman, who had worked there for many years and was instrumental in bringing to the public the secret air war. I spent a lot of time with him, interviewed refugees and so on. I went to North Vietnam after that; the reason they wanted me to come was to lecture at the polytechnic university, the ruins of the polytechnic university. There was a brief bombing pause and they were able to bring people together in Hanoi, people who hadn't had any contact with the academic world for years because of the attack and they were very eager to come together and hear about just about anything. So I talked about anything I knew anything about – linguistics, philosophy, literature; I remember someone asking me what is Norman Mailer doing over the last couple of years, things like that. Sometimes there were questions about mathematics, almost about anything, and that is mostly what I did there. I travelled some, but why they wanted me there was really for that.

**LR:** Reflecting back, how important do you think Vietnam was for your career as a public intellectual?

**NC:** Well it is likely that I would not have become anywhere near as engaged if it had not been for the stimulus of the Vietnam War. And once you put your foot in lots of other things happen. I should say that it was nothing new to me. In the 1940s most of my life and activity was political activism. In the 1950s it shifted but in the early 1960s it returned to the original.

**LR:** Obviously now I am asking you questions about Vietnam, but is Vietnam still something that comes up quite a lot? Do people ask you questions and want you to talk about it?

**NC:** Sometimes. In fact, I have a couple of talks coming up at universities on reflections on the war and its significance. Nowhere near enough. I mean, it is the major crime of the post-Second World War era and it is pretty much suppressed. In the United States and in most of the rest of the Western world its significance is greatly underplayed and there have been no serious efforts to come to terms with the nature of the crime. You can see that almost right away. The war officially ended in 1975; the next president of the US was Jimmy Carter, famous for his human rights programmes. In 1977 he was asked in a press conference whether he thought the United States owed anything to the Vietnamese because of the nature of this war, which had killed millions of people and destroyed three countries and chemical warfare and so on. His answer was striking: It was 1977, he said we owe them “no debt” because “the destruction was mutual,” and that comment received no reaction. So we were saying a Vietnamese province and New York City are in the same state; the destruction was mutual. That's the president famous for his commitment to human rights. You go on a couple of years later to Ronald Reagan – “It was a noble cause.” Then you get to George Bush number one, the first Bush, the statesman Bush, and he said that we are a people who do not hold grudges and therefore we will allow the Vietnamese to re-enter the world system if they deal properly with the single moral issue that remains from the Vietnam War: namely if they devote their energies to finding “the bones of American pilots that they maliciously shot down over Vietnam.”



Department of Sociology

Now we are talking early '90s and it just goes on from there. It's pretty shocking and it's not just the United States.

**LR:** So did you see the education of people as the important battle at the time? Is that why you went and gave speeches and wrote articles? Was it about making sure people understood what was happening?

**NC:** Well, the effort was trying to bring forward that which was not being properly discussed and still is not being discussed. That is not just Vietnam, there are innumerable other issues; I couldn't go through them.

**LR:** Teach-ins were an important part of the movement. What are your reflections of teach-ins and their importance?

**NC:** They were very important. Teach-ins and other talks, meetings and sometimes small organisations, sometimes big groups— these acted as educational organisational activities which went on all the time. They had a major effect. They changed the country from one that was either apathetic or pro-war to one that had a very substantial anti-war movement by 1968. In fact, it's striking how the government reacted to it. If you read the Pentagon Papers (Gravel, 1971), their record ends in 1968; that is a couple of months after the Tet Offensive in January '68. But the Tet Offensive shook up Washington and the American establishment. It showed that the claims of success were untrue and had a big impact. Take a look then to see what is described in the Pentagon Papers— the Johnson administration wanted to send 200,000 more troops to Vietnam, the Joint Chiefs of Staff were opposed. They said these troops would be needed for civil disorder control in the United States, because there would be an uprising amongst the youth, women, ethnic minorities, and others who would be so strongly opposed to the policy that there was a need for disorder control. So they were opposed to sending more troops. That is an illustration of the power of the peace movement. A much larger general impact of the main success of the peace movement was to prevent the government from calling a national mobilisation in support of the war, something like what happened in the Second World War. To call a national mobilisation can be very healthy for the national economy. During the Second World War, when there was a real commitment to the war, we had a national mobilisation in wage controls, discipline, and so on, and the economy just boomed. Industrial production almost quadrupled, the country came out of the war economically way beyond what it had been when it went in. They couldn't do that in the case of Vietnam because there was too much opposition. It was necessary to fight what is called a "guns and butter war" and to keep the population placid and satisfied so there is not too much opposition. And a "guns and butter war" is very harmful for the economy; it leads to stagflation, a combination of stagnation and inflation, that has harmful effects on the economy, which led the business community to turn against the war. After the Tet Offensive they played a key role in convincing Washington to back away from the escalation and it was an indirect consequence of the peace movement that it blocked national mobilisation. I think that was its main effect.

**LR:** You talk about the importance of business turning against the war. Did you see that as a real turning point against the Vietnam War?





Department of Sociology

**NC:** Sure. As soon as the business community turned against the war, policy was going to change – they basically direct policy.

**LR:** You wrote the forward to Duffett’s book on the Russell Tribunal.. How important did you see that as a final condemnation from the intellectual community on what had happened?

**NC:** I should say that I was initially invited to be a member of the jury and I refused and I have refused on other tribunals. The reason is a certain feeling of ... I don’t know what the word is ... a lack of ... there is something about the tribunals that doesn’t strike me as correct, proper. These are not tribunals—the conclusion is determined before you start. That is not a tribunal; I don’t think it can be called a tribunal. These are enquiries by people who know what they believed, that are listening to evidence from people who pretty much agree with them, and their opinions are not going to change and they come out with conclusions. And the material presented at the Russell Tribunal I thought was very valuable, there were very important contributions there. That is why I agreed to write a comment on it, which became the introduction. But I didn’t actually participate. So I think it was valuable but it had very little impact on public opinion. It was bitterly condemned across the board: how dare these people talk about foreign policy and so on. In fact, the reaction was very much like the reaction of intellectuals to any criticism of state actions. So take the Dreyfus affair: it was important, it was the first time that the concept of intellectuals reached the common attention. The “Dreyfusards”, such as Émile Zola, today we respect and honour them but this was not what happened at the time. They were bitterly condemned, the mainstream intellectuals, the immortals of the French academy sharply condemned them, again the same terms – how dare these writers, scribblers, get up and criticise the glory of France and what do they know about policy and how can they attack our military? In fact, Zola himself had to flee France. That’s the way that dissidents are almost always treated, and the Russell Tribunal was similar. Take a look at the reaction to it, bitter condemnation almost across the board and the contents of the materials produced are not very well known.

**LR:** Thank you so much.

### **Bibliography**

Chomsky, N., (1967), "The Responsibility of Intellectuals". The New York Review of Books, 23 February, 1967.

Duffett, J., (1968) *Against the Crime of Silence: Proceedings of The Russell International War Crimes Tribunal*, New York: O’Hare Books.

Gravel, M., (1971), *The Pentagon Papers: The Defense Department History of United States Decisionmaking on Vietnam*. Boston: Beacon Press. 5 vols.