Chomsky's betrayal of truths

Steven Lukes

"It is the responsibility of intellectual", Noam Chomsky wrote in an essay published in 1970, "not to expose lies." His fine essays those years brilliantly exposed the ways in which liberal intellectuals, contrary to what rightly called the "deceit and dis- in Cambodia. Last year he published a book After the Bomb: Propaganda and the "We have not developed enough..." a world authority on the use of socialism in reference to their pictures, accounts that "we have not developed or understood the real nature of the Indochinese regimes."But course he is not stupid, does this. It is unafected by whatever may be..."

Chomsky in turn protects himself against being shot down by the facts; writing, "When the facts are in, it may turn out that..."

But even if that turns out to be the case, will the political positions taken after the conclusions, we have reached on the central question addressed here be changed? Or will publicly presented facts have been selected, modified, or even disappeared, leaving only that certain image offered to the general population behind? The answer to this question seems clear, and is unaffected by whatever may yet be discovered about Cambodia after labor, or of life.

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have taken collectively in the cooperative..."

Could this be the "pee,V".."

If we select the appropriate analogy, it is almost certainly not to the Nazis but to "France..."

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Dear Steven,

Many thanks for sending me your THES article and the material from Milton Osborne.

I am extremely unhappy with your article and want to tell you why in detail.

You ask: 'What, then, is Chomsky doing contributing to deceit and distortion surrounding Pol Pot's regimes in Cambodia?'. This is a very grave and damaging accusation, which demands careful and specific evidence of 'deceit and distortion'. There is no such evidence in your article.

You say, that Pol Pot's regime is subjected by Chomsky and Herman to 'an extraordinary and perverse scrutiny'. Not so. At no point do they claim that their book constitutes a 'scrutiny', extraordinary, perverse or otherwise of the Pol Pot regime. In fact, your own quotation from them to the effect that 'when the facts are in, it may turn out that the more extreme condemnations were in fact correct', this clearly indicates that they do not claim to have conducted the 'scrutiny' you suggest. It could also be taken to suggest an honest admission that the facts are not in. Instead, you treat it as an attempt by Chomsky to 'protect himself from refutation by the facts'. This is unwarranted and unworthy. One might as well say that Lukes is trying to protect himself from accusations of this and that by saying (as you do) 'of course, propaganda has been made out of the Cambodian tragedy'. Imputations of this sort are best avoided.

You attack Chomsky's 'focus of concern and method' on grounds which strike me as odd. You say that he follows 'an apparently rigorous but actually ludicrous method', which turns out to be a demand for 'verifiable evidence', 'documentary sources', material that can be checked. What the hell is wrong with that? You say that Chomsky 'exultantly' attacks Ponchaud (why 'exultantly'?!) for 'carelessness with regard to quotes, numbers and sources', which you dont dispute and indeed half admit by saying that 'such carelessness is always deplorable', but then go on to attack Chomsky for 'a pedantry that is grotesque', 'given the circumstances, the meagre results he attains, and so on. This is simply bluster.

I am afraid (note the use of language, pedantry, grotesque, meagre results) rather than what is here appropriate, namely the fact that Chomsky and Herman's analysis of Ponchaud and other reporting does cast doubt on a great deal that appears in the material analysed.

You yourself speak of 'inflated figures, faked photographs, invented atrocities'; of the fact that 'of course apologists have obscured or completed eliminated' the U.S. role; and so on. You don't seem to me to make nearly enough of this. That is a large part of Chomsky and Herman's case; and it does not involve 'deceit and distortion', but the combating of deceit and distortion under extremely difficult conditions.

As I see it, the real difference between you and Chomsky is that you see the regime itself as having been mainly responsible for deliberate mass terror and mass killing, and he does not. You speak of 'the Cambodian experiment' as a 'ghastly exercise in mass terror and forced collectivisation', and suggest a kind of extreme extension of Stalinist collectivisation in Russia. My own feeling is that much of what happened in Cambodia between 1975 and 1978 was not the result of the 'experiment' you refer to simply because there was nothing like the apparatus of terror and the administration of 'collectivisation' that such 'experiments' require. The figure of 3,000,000 people killed by the regime is, on this score, absurd, and an exercise in simple invention. The Russians had the apparatus, and so
had the Nazis. The Cambodians did not. There was very little unorganised killing in either Russia or German-occupied territories, or at least no great deal, and a massive amount of organised killing. The reverse seems to me to have been true in Cambodia. This does not make the matter any better, but it is a different picture from the one now prevalent as peddled by media with suspect motives. On the whole, Chomsky seems to me closer to the truth than you are, with the large caveat that the facts are not in. But for you to treat what he says and what you quote him as saying as 'deceit and distortion' is absolutely wrong. I would myself want to be more categorical than is Chomsky in denouncing the Pol Pot regime, but that has nothing to do with the kind of denunciation of Chomsky and Herman in which you engage, in language so inflamed and with so little argument. You seem to me to have been so influenced by the quite horrifying reports about what happened in Cambodia that you are hitting out at people who do not deny that a lot of terrible things did happen, but who want to apply nonetheless canons of evidence which are not in the least 'grotesque'. I don't think this is apologetic, and I am truly sorry that you should have thought it necessary to have written as if it was. Chomsky is no sacred cow, and I think his political views are some way from mine. But he is a man of great courage and integrity and it would take a lot more than you provide here to convince me that your strictures on him are merited.

Your ever,

Ralph Miliband

P.S. I will be back in London in mid-December and I would like the proofs of my article sent there, please. I don't, after this extra delay, want the thing to go adrift.
Darling?

Yes my sweet love.

Kiss me again.

Ahah.

Oooh.

Do you know something my little pocket shrimp? This is the loveliest Boxing Day I’ve ever had.

And me. And me.

I’ve forgotten all about that silly thesis.

Silly thesis. And you’re not thinking about your old lecture notes are you?

A million miles away, my princess. Do you think anyone else in the department is having such a good time as us?

Impossible.

Isn’t it wonderful when you feel so close to someone that you’re almost one being?

A single body.

A single ego.

But still of course with our independence intact.

Absolutely. Just living in our own little world outside each other.

And yet this time last Christmas we were just two people who passed each other in the department corridor.

Two names in the prospectus.

Just two members of the General Academic Board.

Not any more.

Never again.

Ahah.

Oooh.

And you’re sure you liked my present?

Loved it. Just what I wanted. Can’t wait to see their eyes when I work in with it on the first day of term.

The best brie from the faculty.

It’s real leather, you know.

I know my sweet.

And with an extra wide gusset for your big fat books.

Is that what they really said? Oh you funny funny shrimp face. And did you like yours?

You know I did. Such lovely books, so clever. That beautiful Fay Weldon and that naughty Amis Nin.

We’ll read some more tonight. Perhaps the one about the evil baron.

Before the late night film.

Oh yes please. But after the cold champagne.

And no liqueur chocolates. Yummy scrumptious.

No boy. And if you are good shall have the Tio Maria. Such a baby.

That really just a little boy. Little horse you are. Come to Mummy or another kiss.

UGC control and the un

Mr. Arblaster will probably familiar with the Conference of University Administrators Final Report on Forecasting and University Expansion (1973) which explored the relationships between AFR and demographic change. It is a nut shell, between now and 1980, if university entry conditions are unchanged, the expansion could decline from the present 300,000 to 250,000. So we lose one student in six—is this to be translated into one less place in six or one university in six? It would be ostrich-like to assume that until per cent higher than they need be.

The realistic alternative is "rationalization"—which can be traumatic for some. Rationalization is like a road accident—everyone hopes that it will happen to someone else. If the universities do not rationalize themselves, it will surely be imposed and the UGC will be failing in their duty if they did not catalyse the process with urgency, as to pre-empt the widening of the instrument to richer university—less sensitivity than was demonstrated by the Atkinson report.

There is another way. If the Government funds the university issue of Indochina, then is it not reasonable—especially as we have already exposed the devastating fact in a previous volume—to seize upon the pattern here—especially in the disorient reality of real horrors committed.

No major American journal has reviewed the first volume. The selective criticism of Steven Lukes is that nothing is happening that does damage to Lukes’ own perspective, else why does he not regard himself to be the disturbing conclusion. Lukes believes that the implication of the Chomsky thesis: that the Western media and the United States that are not about to exploit and distort the situation in Indochina in order to serve ideological interests. He is not as significat as the actual and undisguised fact of the atrocities committed by the communists.

But is Chomsky’s purpose merely to relativize the facts of the mass exterminations, or is it to point out in this society of the evidence of the systematic manipulations of the mass media and the consequent loss of verifiable truths, truths that should have the calculations of the State Department, the corporate elite, and the mass media to be demolished and the evolution of societies who would seek some alternative to the regimes currently propped up by the United States?

By ignorance, I mean the volume of Chomsky/Herman book, Lukes has attempted to judge the thesis of Chomsky on the particular data he uses. For example, with Indochina. He does not even mention this first volume: The Washington Connection and World Fascism, and makes it seem that Chomsky had no business quarrelling with the facts presented by the reputable mass media in regard to Indochina.

If in investigations it is discovered that gross lying has taken place, and that lying seems part of an overall scheme which has as its basis some mechanism of deceit that goes well beyond the present...
Postwar Indochina

Sir—The correspondence prompted by Steven Lukes's comments (THES, November 7) about a major section of After the Coup:ism: Postwar Indochina and the Reconstruction of Imperial Ideology is distinguished by its common quality of careful mistakes. Professors Chomsky and Herman claim to have set out not "to establish the facts with regard to postwar Indochina, but rather to investigate their refraction through the prism of Western ideology." Despite this caveat, they do attempt to provide an explanation for the "fearful toll" exacted in Cambodia after April 1975. A constant repetition of the theme of peasant revenge and undisciplined troops leaves the reader in no doubt whatsoever of the alternative establishment of the facts which they seek to expound. It is this unsubstantiated argument which merits Steven Lukes's criticism that Chomsky has lost all sense of perspective.

I would point out that in the course of their analysis, Chomsky and Herman rely greatly on the writings of Ben Kiernan and Steven Heder, especially to refute refugee accounts of organized terror. Yet, in the Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars in 1975, Kiernan maintains: "It is quite clear that I was wrong about an important aspect of Kampuchean communism: the brutal authoritarian trend within the revolutionary movement after 1973 was not simply a grassroots reaction, and expression of popular outrage at the killing and destruction of the countryside by United States bombs, although that helped it along decisively. There can be no doubt that the evidence clearly points clearly to a systematic use of violence against the population by that chauvinist section of the revolutionary movement that was led by Pol Pot." Moreover, in a paper presented in June 1983, Heder wrote of "the relentless use of terror by the party apparatus as a whole against the population as a whole and by the Pol Pot-Tuol Sleng, Duch coalition at the Party Center."

Yours faithfully,

MICHAEL LEIFER
London School of Economics and Political Science
Houghton Street
London WC2

Letters for publication should arrive on Tuesday morning at the latest. They should be as short as possible and should be written on one side of the paper only. The editor reserves the right to cut or amend them if necessary.
The error is transparent. Our task is merely to compare the picture that reached the public, and the one we know there was a systematic bias, not only with regard to Cambodia. This yields the ways and means of the actual facts but only the importance of the evidence is used. We made this clear explicitly and clearly that there could be no confusion. We even cite it twice. When the facts are in, it may turn out that the reasons for com- deminations were in fact corett, but even then the case will, in no way alter the conclusions we reached. The central question addressed here: how the available facts were selected, modified, or sometimes inventecl to create a certain image Ponchaud, Lukes's favourite, who was begun as our book went to press, failed to account for this fact, the media for proving the higher figures might prove to be correct. We then mained open as we wrotn note that crucial quesri?ns. The errors were eliminated. Two ater quietly seriously distorts the killing.1979). Since the media lacks credibility when sub- sources lack credibility when sub- sources lack credibility when sub-

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SUSPENDING CHOMSKY’S DISBELIEFS

By Steven Lukes

In THEES (November 7) I accused Noam Chomsky of “contributing to deceit and distortion surrounding Pol Pot’s regime” in his book with E. S. Herman, After the Cataract (1979). In March 1979, at the height of the debate over the US bombing of Cambodia, Chomsky made the following statement in the New York Times: “The US bombing of Cambodia was our worst mistake of the century and there was no reason for it.” This is not a minor point. Whether Chomsky’s statement was correct or not, it was a major public claim that had a profound impact on the debate over the war.

Steven Lukes

I have received a number of letters from readers of THEES expressing their disagreement with my criticism of Chomsky. Some of these letters argue that Chomsky’s statement was correct, while others argue that it was incorrect. I believe that it is important to consider the evidence in this debate, rather than simply relying on personal opinions.

Chomsky’s statement is based on the view that the US bombing of Cambodia was a mistake. This view is shared by many people, including the former Secretary of Defense, Donald Rumsfeld. Rumsfeld has said that the US bombing of Cambodia was a “terrible mistake.”

However, there is also a large body of evidence that suggests that the US bombing of Cambodia was not a mistake. For example, the US government has acknowledged that the bombing was a failure. In 1979, the US government admitted that the bombing was a failure and that it had caused “a great deal of suffering” to the people of Cambodia.

Furthermore, the bombing was not the only factor that contributed to the failure of the US war in Vietnam. The war was also characterized by的特点: a lack of clear strategy, a failure to plan for a victory, and a lack of support from the people of Vietnam.

In conclusion, I believe that the evidence suggests that Chomsky’s statement is incorrect. The US bombing of Cambodia was not a mistake. The war in Vietnam was a failure, but the failure was not due to the bombing itself.

By Steven Lukes

COUNCIL ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS

NEW POLICY FOR EUROPE

COUNCIL ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS

NEW POLICY FOR EUROPE

BY PAUL FLATHER

Angry letters from the POWs of the South Bank have provoked a heated debate among the Council on Foreign Affairs about the admission of the POWs to the university’s courses in their polytechnics. In a recent letter, one of the POWs, who is a member of the South Bank’s Graduate Committee, expressed his opposition to the admission of the POWs. He argued that the admission would be a “great mistake.”

The Council on Foreign Affairs has responded to this letter by stating that the admission of the POWs is necessary. They argue that the POWs have a right to education and that they should be allowed to attend the university’s courses.

The Council on Foreign Affairs has also stated that the admission of the POWs will not have a negative impact on the university’s students. They argue that the POWs are not a threat to the university’s students and that they will be treated fairly.

The debate over the admission of the POWs is ongoing, and the Council on Foreign Affairs will continue to monitor the situation and make decisions based on the best available evidence.
7th May, 1981.

Dr. Steven Lukes,
Balliol College,
Oxford, OX1 3BJ.

Dear Steven,

Thank you for sending the file of your controversy with Noam Chomsky and its peripheral results. I really do strongly agree with Noam Chomsky, and I think that your original attack was grossly unfair while your later justification was quite unworthy of you. You consistently ignore the stated intentions of the authors of THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF HUMAN RIGHTS, and your polemic actually endorses Leifer's astonishing complaint that Chomsky and Herman did not observe the contents of books that were published after theirs had already gone to press.

In short, you do not come out of any of this very well, and it is remarkably honest (or perhaps a bit ingenuous) of you to have felt that the exchange was worth circulating.

It all makes me very sad ...

Yours,

Ken Coates
Sir, - In our study of US foreign policy and ideology (Political Economy of Human Rights, 1979), E.S. Herman and I alluded twice to the belief that "benign or constructively bloodbath", which are satisfactory to US interests, and "nefarious bloodbaths", committed by official enemies. In a sense of criticism, the for the former are typically treated with silence, denial or apologetics, while the latter are seized upon for propaganda purposes, often with reliance on evidence that is dubious or simply fabricated. Atrocities that we could mitigate or terminate are ignored or denied (eg, the US-supported massacres in Timor), while those beyond our reach elicit great outpourings of humanitarian sentiment and outrage (eg, Pol Pot massacres). While there are exceptions, this tendency is striking and plays a significant role in creating an ideology that is supportive of continuing atrocities.

As one example in our book, we dealt with Khmer Rouge atrocities (vol II, chapter 7). However, the reaction fits the general pattern quite well. Since these atrocities could be attributed to an official enemy and there was little that could be done about them (underhg once, consistent fabrication of evidence, obliteration of past history (including the US role), refusal to evaluate the credibility of those transcriptions, and roopty routinely in the case, say of germ warfare charges against the US in Korea), and selection of the most extreme condemnations from the record of atrocities in Cambodia. We also described the ludicrous pretense that a great debate was raging over Khmer Rouge atrocities, with the courageous defenders of human rights either ignored or denounced. Lukes claims that we were "exclusively concerned with demonstrating the 'systematic bias' in the Western media and that [we] did not give our views concerning the Pol Pot regime". What the"what was in each case fabricated or seriously distorted, exactly in the manner of the one reviewed in print. In a second try (THEES March 27), Lukes angrily abandoned all the "evidence" and "I'm bored in print. tactfully concealing its true character, and offers further examples, no less specious.

Lukes begins by stating that he first claimed that we were "exclusively concerned with demonstrating the 'systematic bias' in the Western media and that [we] did not give our views concerning the Pol Pot regime". What we did was, in fact, to point out how the Vietnamese and Cambodians faced the problems left at the war's end. We wrote that in contrast to the Vietnamese, "the victors in Cambodia undertook and used drastic measures to accomplish this task. Returning the population from the urban concentrations to which they had been driven by US bombardments", we added, "the Cambodians, in the sanitized American edition of his book.

Lukes then presents his new "evidence". He cites Leifer (with Steven Lukes) and states that we "conclude that Pol Pot's regime was 'simply forcing the urban population to the countryside ...' (etc as we wrote); nothing more than this. This proves that we denied Pol Pot atrocities. Lukes proceeds to state that our thesis asserts that "the deaths in Cambodia were not the result of systematic slaughter and starvation". He interprets this statement as meaning that "it was plausible to believe what has now turned out to be true". But we meant what we wrote, not what he wishes he had written: our conclusions had to do with the credibility of the evidence available at the time we wrote the book. In fact, if the more extreme condemnations were to prove true, exactly as we explained in the quote given above. Suppose, in fact, that the evidence now available is sufficiently overwhelming to demonstrate Pol Pot's role in the deaths in Cambodia. It is not clear that this would in no way alter the conclusions we have reached.

The remainder of Lukes's efforts consists of quotes from others, some true, some false, but not to the point. For example, in his critique of our book, he quotes Chomsky as saying that there is no evidence to support the claim that Pol Pot reduced the population of Cambodia to a fraction of what it was before the war. However, this is not what Chomsky actually said. In fact, Chomsky argued that the reduction in the population of Cambodia was due to a combination of factors, including war-related destruction and a reduction in the birth rate. Lukes then goes on to say that "it is no difficulty in documenting major atrocities and oppression, primarily from the reports of refugees". We would be glad to discuss this with a person who accepted the basic ground rules of rational and honest discussion. But plainly there is no reason for discussing this matter with Steven Lukes, as he has amply demonstrated.

Sincerely yours, NOAM CHOMSKY

Department of Linguistics and Philosophy
Massachusetts Institute of Technology
Cambridge, Mass.

Sir, - I refer to the dispute between Steven Lukes, Noam Chomsky et al over the nature of Chomsky's writings on Kampuchea.

Chomsky's position has been disastrous at times since the Khmer Rouge victory in 1975. By continually concentrating on mistakes which journalists and writers made and on the war in which western governments exploited the stories of Khmer Rouge, he deflected attention from the far more important issue of whether or not gross abuses of human rights were being committed there.

Assume, given his intellectual talent, that Chomsky actually went to talk to Khmer Rouge refugees in Thailand, he would have realized that a terrible crime was indeed being committed. His political influence is such that he could have played an important part in mobilizing opinion against the Khmer Rouge. Had world opinion, left as well as right, been so mobilized (as happened, for example, in the case of Chile after 1973) then much greater pressure could have been brought to bear -at least upon the Khmer Rouge's principal sponsor in Peking.

Instead Chomsky's well-known views helped push many people through the world into the ideological illusion that the horror stories about the Khmer Rouge were either planted by the CIA, fabricated by journalists or both. That is a sorry role. Steven Lukes is absolutely right to criticize him. Yours faithfully, WILLIAM SHAWCROSS

17 Parkhill Road, London N.W.3.