

Untruthful Mandarins and Mandarins of Truth



Stephen Chan is the former dean of the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), London. He is a professor of international relations and holds the Chair in International Relations.

Noam Chomsky famously coined the term, the 'new Mandarins', meaning those who had abandoned the speaking of critical truth to power and, instead, mediated power's sense of self-serving truth to the wider world.¹ It was a warning against being drawn into positions of priesthood, of being the janitorial sanitation of power and policy.

It is easy to use many variations of the metaphor to describe Chomsky's warning to intellectuals. Imperial Chinese mandarins progressed up a strictly demarcated chain of seniority and non-revisionist service before being within the proximity of the emperor's court and perhaps even the emperor; Simone de Beauvoir wrote a famous novel about the mandarins of post-war France – the brilliant men and women who flitted between the writing of books and attending the salons of ministers, who constantly betrayed one another, betrayed fidelity, truth and even France.² High priests stood before thrones, as the Archbishop of Canterbury still does, and Lords Spiritual, Bishops, retain membership of the Lords. In the UK, these people speak for orthodoxies, even if sometimes liberal and far-sighted orthodoxies. Even an orthodoxy may be far-sighted. In Chomsky's rendition, however, all are merely janitorial, sanitorial, lavatorial. Chomsky presumes a single locus of power – not a diffusion among those he criticises – and that it is necessarily malign or given to malignancy in the conduct of international relations. He was writing at the time of the Vietnam war, when much rewriting of history accompanied a pronounced and sustained effort, through several US administrations, to deny others and support one's own.

Fifty years after Chomsky's critique, indictment and warning, is the implication of what he said sufficient for vexatiously difficult times? What he said of course chimes with the longevity of the vision of academic existence as cloistered, uncontaminated, seeking after truth in the Karl Jaspers rendition of *wissenschaft*, upon which all modern claims to academic freedom and autonomy sit – the Jaspers *wissenschaft* acting itself as a mediator and interpreter of a millennium of university independence and, more often than not, aloofness, otherworldliness.³ But the formulation has always been dyadic, binary, and simply oppositional: the world and the institutions of truth, and the world 'out there' of untruth. In the Chomsky rendition it assumes these characteristics even more starkly than before. The difference between Chomsky and Jaspers is in the Chomskian sallying forth from the bastions of objective and uninterested truth to attack, verbally at least – and to support others who attack more than verbally – the citadels of power and its interests.

However, it is not simply a case of choosing or not choosing to speak, or how to speak, or when to speak what kind of truth to power, or one aspect of power. There are too many generalisations in the Chomsky critique, alongside his stark binaries. In any case, 'power' often appropriates those it chooses will speak on its behalf. Nazi

Germany chose to be spoken for by Nietzsche, and chose to be inspired by Wagner and Goethe. They, at least, had no say in it.⁴ It seconded thinkers like Heidegger to its programme, not to endorse his ontological project, but to channel it – just as it channelled Nietzsche’s will to power – to its overwhelming sense of self-directed destiny.⁵ The post-war programme of Horkheimer and Adorno, and its sense of critical theory – to render philosophy too dense as well as too critical ever again to be simply used, to be used in a simplified form, by tyranny has made much critical work the product and consumption of an intellectual ghetto.⁶ It is not used by power because power has no interest in something so marginally self-contained. It does not break out. It does not speak truth to power – although it imagines it does – it speaks, as in this readership, mostly to itself.

As it is, others whom Chomsky might accuse as being the mandarins and high priests of power speak philosophy – quite well, as it turns out in the case of Fukuyama and his use of Hegel and Nietzsche;⁷ and quite badly in the case of Kagan and his use of Hobbes and Kant.⁸ The first point of this paper is that philosophy and conceptual apparatus is no defence against being silent in order to be securely pure and uncontaminated by power.

This paper seeks to outline the variations of what Chomsky calls mandarins or priests, how they differ within one country and among countries. It questions the assumption of non-contamination; and it moves forward to contemplate what becomes of normative impulse if, when confronted by horrors, corruption on a sliding scale either beckons or becomes inevitable. After all, Chomsky himself, in another seminal article, wrote approvingly of the workers’ collectives of Republican Catalonia, before their ‘betrayal’ by organised Communism – both the collectives and the Communist Government working in the name of revolution. Chomsky writes that the Communist effort was in fact counter-revolutionary, and thus establishes a further dyadic analysis – the collectives being *truly* revolutionary. He reworks the ground of an unending quarrel over who betrayed whom in Spanish Republicanism, but he does problematise the possibilities within an intellectual intervention – because, after all, it takes intellect both to support freedom and to engineer suppression, especially if great ingenuity is required to suppress freedom in the very name of freedom.⁹ But even the purest Republicans committed their own atrocities and staged their own kangaroo courts and unjust executions. In a dyadic formulation, siding with one against the other for the sake of a greater and more moral truth establishes its own elisions and contradictions. They appear not only in the support of rebellion but in working with governments. This paper seeks to explore the abnormative abyss that opens whenever one seriously steps outside *wissenschaft* and seeks to engage with the world. This paper proposes that the only normative avenue is to embrace a certain abnormativity. Standing purely aloof is immoral.

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Becoming mandarin

No one becomes mandarin straight-forwardedly. There is no self-abduction from a university one day to a government position the next. There are intermediate steps that are volitional to be sure – the wanting to have influence, but also the wanting

to create change. One joins a civil society group and seeks political allies; one joins a political party and becomes identified with a cause, exhibiting expertise and knowledge in key areas; something one broadcasts or writes is seen or read by those in power and regarded as useful. One sides with a rebel movement, as Edward Said did by becoming a member of the Palestine National Council, and is then used as a point of transaction between George Schultz in the US Government and the PLO – with Said finding himself expressing better impressions of Schultz finally than of Arafat.¹⁰ What Chomsky seemed to mean was the conscious and self-conscious determination to use such avenues for the clear purpose of entering a government role. In the Washington DC environment, where half the town seems to be climbing the same slippery pole, not all who climb are chosen; those chosen from one party

are discarded when the other party wins the elections; the gains are therefore short-term and are sought with great assiduousness despite their temporary nature. When the preferred patron-party falls from power, the mandarin returns to his or her groves of academe and ensures by writing in a certain way that he or she is poised for an eventual return. There is no such thing, in this formulation, as a redundant mandarin. The self-consciousness is of the once-and-future-mandarin, the priest merely on furlough, where the academy is itself the sabbatical from power.

And to the archetypes of this sort of French mandarin, corruption and perfidity are almost marks of personal worldliness, of weariness with pure ideals, while being put to the service of what are still great causes.

Immaculate influence in paris

Whereas the US variant of the mandarin must speak as those in power wish spoken, the Parisian model is often taken into a minister's cabinet, or into the Elysee, precisely because of a desire to have as a splendidly visible prestige symbol a thinker of at least occasional dissidence – around whom the professional career officials work, usually without any clear difficulty. But this is to express things one-dimensionally. What ecological niche did Régis Debray occupy as Mitterand's foreign policy adviser, against his background as a confidante of Che and as a habitué of a Bolivian prison which was a result of his association with Che?¹¹ No one could say he had not suffered for his engagement with rebellion. No one could say he had not exhibited his good faith to good cause. What precise ecological niche does the current glamour-boy, Bernard Henri Levy, occupy – with his Dior black suits, Charvet shirts, televisual conceits, and quite staunch intellectual shallowness?¹² Yet, his aura of actual intellect was such that he persuaded Sakozy, to whom he had instant access without ever having held an official post, to activate his warplanes in defence of Benghazi.¹³ What of the French archetype of the *home engage*, epitomised by someone like Andre Malraux, who necessarily transits across great culture and great engagements, great compromises and great perfidities?¹⁴ There is no Chomskian rendition that encompasses the wild range of such people. None occupies a university post, but Chomsky did not mean to say that only tenured academics can be corrupted as mandarins. And to the archetypes of this sort of French mandarin, corruption and perfidity are almost marks of personal worldliness, of weariness with pure ideals, while being put to the service of what are still great causes. The highly intellectual Dominic de Villepin who compellingly orated in the Security Council against intervention in Iraq was, nevertheless, the same man who helped turn an initial blind eye to genocidal Rwanda. Perhaps a key mark of Parisian political perfidity is that the politicians, without ever having been



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professional thinkers, can be as intellectual as those who claim original residence in thinking's sphere. No one sells out by joining a governmental set because all in these sets are inter-changeable anyway.

Bloomsburian new statesmen

Nor do the British exemplars of mandarins fit easily as objects within the Chomskian critique. In a way, the origins of the species were such that it was more high-born than the political status it might have sought. Bertrand Russell and Maynard Keynes were not serfs in the British class system. The high cultural circle of the Bloomsbury set provided a foundation for Leonard Woolf and the pacificism associated with his wife Virginia, the profound and sincere *noblesse oblige* of Leonard's views towards Africa (in some ways he was the Geldof of his days) and foreign policy in general¹⁵ – all as part of the deep if not always acknowledged impact he had upon Labour Party thinking on the international.¹⁶ George Bernard Shaw and the Webbs' impact on Fabianism was precisely an impact directed towards the idea of Labour as a commitment to a working class from the vantage point of a high middle class. In a pure Trotskyist or Maoist sense it was class-compromised from the very beginning and generates a critique considerably more vexed and nuanced than anything Chomsky could, in the more egalitarian environment of the US (his criticisms of the US notwithstanding), ever devise.

Late modern conundra

The epitome of what Chomsky meant resides in the person and career of Jonathan Moyo in Zimbabwe – in and out of favour in President Robert Mugabe's court and, when in favour, its pernicious spokesman and spin doctor, although he would probably wish to see himself as a patriotic but fleet-footed arch-Talleyrand figure; he would serve anyone for the good, of course, of the country. A former professor of politics and author of a groundbreaking study of Zimbabwean democracy,¹⁷

his abrupt transformation into a high modern mediator of truth, its distorter and rebrander, its packager into pop songs and jingles, its vengeful apostle in his relentless slander of opponents, see Moyo wishing precisely to be a high priest – preferably the highest priest, desirably the Borgia of Zimbabwe who becomes Pope.

Appended to a previously academic figure, such a description would seem at first a gross satire. That indicates the preciousness of the academic profession – its sense of immunity from corruption – which might have been Chomsky’s actual target. But such descriptions are unproblematically applied to journalists who, in the United Kingdom, inhabit the ecological niche of Moyo. Alastair Campbell who was the first to be described as a ‘spin doctor’ in the inner circle of Tony Blair; Andy Coulson (briefly) in the same role for David Cameron – both exemplify the functionary, allowed its own glamour and notoriety, provided it spins falsehood into firstly plausible truth and, secondly, pleasant truth and, thirdly, historically acceptable truth.

Whether they serve truth or distort it, academics have simply become one more profession amongst many that encompass a full range of functions. In this range, it is of no moment to accuse some of being the high priests of truth: anyone from any profession could be. Similarly, one doesn't have to be an academic to unleash real truth upon the world.

In the US, however, there are academic figures who do not spin what becomes history, but seek to transform history itself. Chomsky wrote before the full apotheosis of Henry Kissinger, the advent of Zbigniew Brzezinski, Madaleine Albright, Jeanne Kirkpatrick, Chester Crocker, and Condoleezza Rice. Such figures are unimaginable in the British and French systems and were beyond even Chomsky’s imagination at his time of writing. But, insofar as they departed from any conception of academic objectivity and the calling of *wissenschaft*, their positions in government were paralleled by others who also did not remain within the parameters of their normal boxes. Generals who dissent from the conduct of war, if not from actually entering certain wars, and ‘leak’ their dissent and secretly brief congressional members;

members of think tanks normally close to and of great service to US administrations who, when confronted by gross deception and perfidity, expose it (as in the famous case of Daniel Ellsberg);¹⁸ and members of administrations who feed journalists the details of subterfuge and deception within the heart of the governments they serve (the Deep Throat source for Woodward and Bernstein¹⁹) – what their histories indicate is that no boxes fit anymore and all professions have become malleable. Whether they serve truth or distort it, academics have simply become one more profession amongst many that encompass a full range of functions. In this range, it is of no moment to accuse some of being the high priests of truth: anyone from any profession could be. Similarly, one doesn’t have to be an academic to unleash real truth upon the world.

Track one (and a quarter)

This allows us to enter some trickier terrain beyond mere Chomskian name-calling. This terrain involves not a sense of guilt or shame for having intervened in the world in the service of a government, but a sense of guilt or shame if one intervenes in the world either independently or unofficially, and one fails – and that failure has great human consequences. And there is no external body to blame. Being uncontaminated and pure, one is blamed for nothing – except perhaps inaction; and

that inaction can be covered by the profession of uncontaminated critic. And an arrest or two does wonders for the CV of the activist truthful professor.

But, in terms of Chomsky's own experience, what would have happened to all the acts of solidarity if later, e.g. the Sandanistas of Nicaragua had morphed into a Stalinist society of self-perpetuation? What happens when, later, all the solidarities and support and interventions on behalf of Robert Mugabe's liberation of Zimbabwe, Isaias Afekwerki's liberation of Eritrea, and Paul Kagame's liberation of Rwanda, in the longer term, only enabled new dictatorships and crushings of dissent? What moral weight does the term 'later' hold? It is not as if one becomes mandarinesque only within the constitutional sureties of a developed and settled society. And what if 'later' is not applicable because it all happens far too quickly for 'later'? What happens if, even before the battle to oust Gaddafi is accomplished, the Transitional National Council in Libya, like Saturn, turns to eating its own children – when the scholarly solidarist is right in the middle of campaigns for recognition and assistance and, indeed like the 'doves' in the Council, when they are not being shot by 'hawks', also campaigning for negotiations with a wicked but miscomprehended Gadaffi? What if active intervention is always one blink of an eyelid away from being compromised and sullied? What if, in that blink of an eyelid, one enters a Kristevan realm of abjection; one sees abominations and inhabits the abnormative? Does one not enter such situations, content to sit back within a studied purity? These are questions that need asking if normative work is to have anything other than a Posy Simmonds meaning.

The presumption that private figures can mediate quite vicious conflicts has faded over time, except that its latest incarnation is in the form of private figures who were once extremely public: Kofi Annan, Jimmy Carter, Martti Ahtisaari, and Thabo Mbeki are all creatures who have their telephone calls returned.

Quarter of a century ago, Track II diplomatic work began to come into its own. The 1984 effort on the part of HW van der Merwe and Piet Muller, closely briefed by the Nationalist Government in South Africa, to open dialogue with the ANC in Lusaka, Zambia, was something both independent of government, unofficial, but with a direct feed-in route to government.²⁰ Unofficial diplomacy works best if that feed is in place or can readily be put into place when moments are judged ripe. The 1991 Track II that led to the Oslo process between Israel and the PLO is better-known than what happened in Zambia, but again represented an initiative spearheaded by unofficial actors who then handed a process already underway to official quarters.²¹ Religious actors have always played a major Track II role and one of the most conspicuous and successful was the intervention of the Santo Egidio monastery at the end of the 1980s in paving the way to ending the civil war in Mozambique.²² Here, there was a crossover between Track II diplomacy and third party mediation of conflict. The presumption that private figures can mediate quite vicious conflicts has faded over time, except that its latest incarnation is in the form of private figures who were once extremely public: Kofi Annan, Jimmy Carter, Martti Ahtisaari, and Thabo Mbeki are all creatures who have their telephone calls returned. They are successful at Track II because they have assured access and feed to Track I at the highest levels. In a very real sense, the distinction between Tracks I and II has faded with such actors. That has resulted in a hybrid formation, which I call Track I and a quarter. Unenvisioned by the original protagonists of Track II, but very much designed to address the debate as to how and when Track II should feed into Track I, and to what effect, Track I and a quarter is applied by the Brenthurst

Foundation in South Africa, not so much in mediation or for diplomatic missions – but to establish diplomatic principles and protocols and, in this way, clear the ground for official diplomatic agreement. Teams of about twenty people are brought together on each protocol project, with a standard formula of meeting in private seminars three times, each in a different global location. Recruited to these teams are former Track I actors, just one level below the examples I have named – often the very people who, as the background actors to people like Mbeki, actually make the agreements work, put the troublesome detail into the broad-brush making of peace by their seniors. They are mixed with a worldly brand of academics who have extra-academy experience, expertise and reputations but, all the same, deep scholarly knowledge; and senior international business people. All the participants have greater or lesser access to their home governments. All are brought together as an unofficial grouping, but the group is as knowledgeable as any Track I set of actors, and can instantly engage Track I in a number of different countries. Of late, former Presidents and recently-retired Generals have been added to the mix.²³

The Brenthurst model circumvents the need for a UN style commissioning body and chooses its own themes and reports to a more diverse, some would say more diffuse community. But the idea of an official body engaging the services or participation of 'unofficials' is also something that has developed latter-day variants.

Now, in fact, the formula is not too different to that used by several dozen large consultancy firms. The objective is to establish something operational. It may be normatively operational, desirable according to an enunciation of principles that have to do with equity and common sense – as opposed to philosophy. The difference is that the formula is not used for financial profit, and is funded by a charitable foundation. In a sense, the formula is a direct extrapolation from 'expert groups' or 'commissions' established by the UN or other major organisations, but which contain independent members drawn from the broad avenues of life described above, with a mandate to report

independent conclusions on a particular enquiry or problem identified by the commissioning body. The Brenthurst model circumvents the need for a UN style commissioning body and chooses its own themes and reports to a more diverse, some would say more diffuse community. But the idea of an official body engaging the services or participation of 'unofficials' is also something that has developed latter-day variants. 'Private military operatives' (deniably) used by official militaries is the tip of an iceberg. But official militaries may also, for instance, embark on sudden and extemporaneous war with a country like Libya – being told by their political masters that which they are fighting against, but having no idea for whom. The scholar with what had been benign contacts with rebel figures in Benghazi – before they became rebels – and who knows better than politicians, foreign office personnel and military planners the composition and disposition of the rebel council becomes suddenly a treasured commodity. How then should or could he or she respond? There are at least two variably contestable norms that tear away at aloofness and uncontamination: regime change, which became a clear NATO objective in the early days of the conflict, would be regarded by most colleagues as wrong; allowing columns of tanks to attack a lightly armed city, amidst much rhetoric of mercilessness, has its own very clear ethical problems (later disregarded by almost all in the attacks on Syrian cities). The siding with rebels, providing voice for the rebels in military councils to which they were not invited, and later being cast aside when utility was exhausted, is not an unusual position. It should be the

usual position of scholars who, without seeking to be mandarins, are exposed to the panoply of the world's wickedness – being not content to comment on wickedness from safe mountains in the high distance.

Tracklessness

And where no path exists? Let me close this problematisation of the simple Chomskian formula with a story. It is about a mandarin who left the mandarinat. Sent to a chronic war zone in a far away land, he helped bring about (what was to be an unsustainable) ceasefire between rebel and fragile government forces (it was the government that was fragile, not its forces). As he came down from the mountains where the war had been fought he passed shelled villages, already poor houses with huge shell holes and crumbling walls, and emaciated children begging on the roadsides. He felt contaminated and angry and helpless. He resolved to leave the mandarinat and become a scholar, so he could reveal the truth of all the things he had seen and experienced in this and other heartless conflicts. Perhaps he should have thought better. As he progressed down the road towards the capital city, devastation still apparent though lessening, but with ragged children still begging along the roadside, he saw the brave scholars – not helping, but making notes. Perhaps one of them thought to interview the children. In the name of truth.

NOTES

- 1 Noam Chomsky, *American Power and the New Mandarins* (New York: Pantheon, 1969).
- 2 Simone de Beauvoir, *The Mandarins* (London: Fontana, 1969).
- 3 Karl Jaspers, *The Idea of the University* (Boston MA: Beacon Press, 1959).
- 4 See Curtis Cate, *Frederich Nietzsche* (London: Hutchinson, 2002), 573.
- 5 From his attitude towards Cassirer in the early days of the Nazi project, Heidegger would seem not have needed huge persuasion for his being channelled. Peter E. Gordon, *Continental Divide: Heidegger, Cassirer, Davos* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2010).
- 6 Adorno's attitude towards music is even more revolutionary and minimalist in its appeal. Among many volumes, Theodor Adorno, *Night Music: Essays on Music 1928-1962* (New York: Seagull, 2009).
- 7 Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (London: Penguin, 1992).
- 8 Robert Kagan, *Paradise & Power: America and Europe in the New World Order* (London: Atlantic, 2003).
- 9 Noam Chomsky, 'Objectivity and Liberal Scholarship', in Conor Cruise O'Brien & William D. Vanech (eds), *Power and Consciousness in Society* (New York: New York University Press, 1969).
- 10 Zoe Heller, 'Radical Chic, The Independent on Sunday, 7 February (1993), 10-12.
- 11 His great radical book: Régis Debray, *Revolution in the Revolution?* (New York: Grove Press, 2000).
- 12 John Thornhill, 'Sons of Sartre', *Financial Times Weekend*, 24/25 May (2008), 32-33.
- 13 This is much claimed by Levy's circle, no doubt on behalf of Levy himself; and he was indeed in Benghazi at an early stage of the uprising. 'Ownership' of Levy became a prestige symbol within the Libyan National Transitional Council, but it was probably the Council itself that persuaded the French to plan the launch of their warplanes. National Transitional Council source to the author.
- 14 Although Levy himself paints a nuanced portrait of Malraux in all his inconsistencies but within his full romanticism: Bernard-Henri Levy, *Adventures on the Freedom Road: The French Intellectuals in the 20th Century*, London: Harvill, 1995), 211-226.
- 15 Julia Gallagher, *Britain and Africa under Blair: in pursuit of the good state* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2011).
- 16 Peter Wilson, *The International Theory of Leonard Woolf: A Study in Twentieth Century Idealism* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003).
- 17 Jonathan N. Moyo, *Voting for Democracy: Electoral Politics in Zimbabwe* (Harare: University of Zimbabwe Publications, 1992).
- 18 Ellsberg exposed covert US policy in Vietnam and the secret Department of Defense documents he discovered were published as *The Pentagon Papers* (Boston MA: Beacon Press, 1971).
- 19 'Deep Throat' much later was revealed to be the then Deputy Director of the FBI, William Mark Felt Sr. Carl Bernstein and Bob Woodward, *The Final Days* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1976).
- 20 H.W. van der Merwe, *Peacemaking in South Africa: A Life in Conflict Resolution* (Cape Town: Tafelberg, 2000), 138-155.
- 21 Abdelwahab El-Affendi, 'Making Peace Gambles: The Oslo Accords, the Sudanese "Comprehensive Peace Agreement" and their "Spirals of Insecurity"', *Journal of Peace, Conflict and Development*, Issue 17 (2011), 1-22.
- 22 Stephen Chan and Moises Venancio, *War and Peace in Mozambique* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1998), 1-33.
- 23 Greg Mills (ed), *The African Century* (Johannesburg: Brenthurst Foundation, 2009).