

Talking Back to Chomsky

By Cynthia Peters

Our social change movements have benefited enormously from the work of Noam Chomsky. The incredible energy he brings to his speaking and writing means that millions have been exposed to his analysis of U.S. foreign and domestic policy. But he has one favorite rhetorical device that always makes me nervous. He'll suggest that something is obvious. Maybe he doesn't realize how much this puts people on the defensive. One can't help but wonder, "But what if it's not obvious to me?"

If Chomsky considers something to be obvious, and yet I puzzle over it, does that mean I'm stupid? Take, for example, the question he gets asked at the end of every talk. He says he gets letters about it every day. When I worked at South End Press in the 1980s, we used to ask him to include something about it at the end of his lengthy denunciations of U.S. imperial policy in Central America and the Middle East. If you go to these books, you'll find, after 600 pages of analysis, a short paragraph about what I am talking about.

It's the question of what individuals can do.

And Chomsky thinks it's obvious. In an interview with David Barsamian in the May 2004 issue of the Progressive, he says, "The fact is, we can do just about anything. There is no difficulty, wherever you are, in finding groups that are working hard on things that concern you."

On the one hand, he is right of course. There is no alternative to joining groups, which I take to mean organizing. And on my more hopeful days, I think that indeed the problem is that too many people just don't understand this obvious fact. They think that teaching kids to share and depriving their sons of toy guns is political work. They think that volunteering at the shelter and practicing "random acts of kindness" is going to bring about social change. They think that wearing hemp and riding their bikes to the food co-op can help build a better world.

If lots and lots of people think this, and we can reach them and convince them that social change is not going to come about via random and individual gestures -- if that's the piece that's holding them back from real organizing -- then we're in luck. Our mission is straightforward. We just have to be like Chomsky and go around telling people to get busy, the path is clear, the array of organizations to join or create is obvious.

But it strikes me that that is not what is holding people back. It strikes me that it is not at all obvious what we should do, and that by implying that it is, we risk making people feel stupid, when in fact they are quite right to ask the question, "What should I do?"

I have been politically aware and active for 25 years and yet I still wonder about exactly what I should do. Here are some of the problems that make doing social change work less than obvious.

The Proportion Problem

This is the problem that comes from having to operate in a world where the injustices feel like they are not measurable on any conceivable scale. This is the problem that leads you to think, "The horror of U.S. imperial policies is so overwhelming, there's nothing I could possibly do to make a difference in them." If you understand how the U.S. military corporate machine works, you start to think of it as an enormous beast, capable of mass annihilation just by breathing in and out. Its sharp claws wreak havoc in the course of its basic self-maintenance. A mindless action, such as a swish of the tail, unleashes horrendous human loss and environmental destruction.

The beast is terrible and mighty, and as a citizen of this beast you wonder what you should do. You look around to find out what other citizens are doing about it. You've heard Chomsky speak, after all, so you know you should go join an organization.

But you are so small compared to the enormity of the beast. There isn't even a scale that could measure both you and the beast. "Joining an organization" seems like magical thinking, and you gave that up when you were six.

You think to yourself, not irrationally, "There is no action that I can take -- not even a series of actions, not even a lifetime of actions -- that could be any match for the task at hand." That is the proportion problem.

The Strategy Problem

But maybe you decide to be an activist anyway. The beast is man-made, after all. If we created this thing, we ought to be able to take it apart. Maybe you are wrong, not about how small you are in relation to the beast (because there's no changing that), but in your assessment of how much power you have or might have, especially if you join with others.

So you start looking around. Citizens have been studying how the beast works, and they notice when it stretches out its claws, it hurts people, kills them, displaces them, leaves them unable even to subsist. You see that various groups are working desperately to mobilize a small handful of people to get the resources together to trim one toenail of our multi-clawed beast. This would ease the pain and suffering of the people who come into contact with the claw.

It barely seems reasonable to engage in this activity given the potential ferocity of the limb to which the nails are attached, but you are human and you see people will benefit at least a little by less sharp claws, so you are moved to join the effort.

But, wait, people are fighting about which toenail it would be best to trim and since they can't agree, they have split up and are now competing for toenail trimming resources. You hadn't been sure in the first place about whether toenail trimming would be all that effective, especially as the tail swishes, and the exhalations continue unabated, but now you see that you probably won't even accomplish the toenail trimming since there is so much disagreement about which toe to tackle.

Meanwhile, others are trying to devise tail-swishing containment devices. Still others are attempting to develop antidotes to the lethal exhalations. Some others have discovered that the circulation of the beast's blood automatically causes people to be robbed and demeaned. They are urging people to tame the beast in such a way that its systems can ultimately be dismantled and replaced, but they don't say how or with what.

So even if you overcome the proportion problem, and convince yourself that it is possible to defeat the beast, you enter into a world of social change activists all working in a disorganized fashion on different body parts of the beast. People don't even speak to each other, except when they happen to bump into each other standing in line at the funder's office waiting to get their modicum of toenail-clipping resources. You know there is an axe somewhere that would make quick work of the toenail -- maybe even the whole toe! -- but that would require planning and training in the use of axes. Oh well. That is the strategy problem.

The Vision Problem

But you see that it is possible to overcome the strategy problem. You have studied social movements and have seen that people have developed long-term plans and won gains over years of hard work. You are aware of others who want to think and act more strategically. It dawns on you, however, that in order to be strategic, you have to know what you are trying to accomplish in the end. As you begin to discuss this question with people, you discover that one of the reasons people aren't strategizing about how to wield the axe is that they're afraid that if they use it, the beast might fall down.

"Lo and behold, isn't that the point?" you ask. Apparently not. At least not for all those people who, whether they realize it or not, live by special arrangement in the protection of this beast. They favor duller claws -- perhaps even a fully de-clawed beast -- because direct gouging is distasteful and all the screaming that it induces is disruptive. These folks depend on the beast for certain privileges.

They want its breathing and circulation and the power of its limbs to remain intact, but they want the more bloody consequences of its actions to be moderated. You realize with horror that some of your most important allies in the de-clawing work, the ones who fund your project and occasionally give you 0.3 seconds on primetime are not allies at all when it comes to your vision of a better world.

Besides you don't have a vision of a better world anyway. You are well aware that "another world is possible." You've heard the slogans just like every other anti-beast activist. But there are almost no venues for exploring what this other world might look like, and it's hard to imagine spending the time on it anyway. The claws are still slashing, the tail is swishing, and the heart of the beast keeps pulsing relentlessly on.

You might as well get back to the toenail trimming, which at least has visible results, minimizes real pain, and makes you feel like you're doing something worthwhile. You'll have to ignore the true functioning of the beast and perhaps you'll begin to buy into the rationalizations that the beast is the only game in town. You don't want to make this tradeoff, but isn't it easier than confronting the fact that your supposed allies are actually beast beneficiaries? If you confront these allies, might you not simply alienate them, jeopardize your access to resources, marginalize yourself even more, and put at risk whatever toenail trimming might proceed if you just kept your mouth shut?

Let's say you are very stubborn. You make a strategic decision to relate to the beast-rationalizers as need requires, but you will also pursue a vision of a better world with other more like-minded anti-beast activists. You have to. Years of experience have taught you that without a vision, you can't have a strategy, and without a strategy, you won't really get anywhere.

Little did you realize, however, that this is the most risky journey of all -- one that could launch angry disagreements and estrangement among activists who have the most in common. You've seen how upset people get when they can't agree which toe to put in the crosshairs, and here you are asking people to come up with a shared vision for replacing the beast's circulatory and respiratory systems.

You are sorely tempted to step back from it all. Isn't it enough that you overcame the proportion problem and did the obvious thing -- found a group that was "working hard on things that concern you"?

No, you discover. It's not enough. If you're really serious about taking on the beast, you have to do much more. So you are faced with some crucial decisions (none of them with obvious answers) about how and where to use your energy, about which battles matter the most, about building alliances across enormous divides, about how to engage in strategy and vision even as you take baby steps to counter the worst effects of the claws.

In a Boston Globe book review (April 25, 2004), George Scialabba called Chomsky "America's most useful citizen." I don't disagree. He has laid bare the workings of the beast and explained its functioning -- critical components of any social change activist's toolbox. But I wish he would stop implying that how an individual responds to this beast is so obvious. If we think it's so obvious, we won't prepare ourselves for the problems, especially the three biggest ones explained above. We will not be effective. And we won't begin to build the kind of movements that will be a match for the beast unless we take these problems seriously and address them.