

ACADEMIA BLUES

“At a deaf man’s door take the door and walk away”

Proposal by the anonymous muse*

“A more practical proposal

is to help to change the culture of the domestic society enough
so that what should be now done could at least be made a subject of discussion”

Noam Chomsky

It is no exaggeration to call Mumford a megathinker and neither would it be an exaggeration to call him “a man for-all-seasons for our season”, nor would it make him unique; the composer and activist Mikis Theodorakis, or Chomsky, among others, could be called that too; maybe the most relevant function that such namescalling can effect is to define how one employs such idioms and expressions. It is no exaggeration to say that Mumford’s, or maybe other megathinkers’ rationalities too, were prophetic by five decades about our times, but this does not necessarily prove that so keen foresight and so deep insights are valuable; they might as well be as useless as obsolescent fossilized once-upon-a-time-insights since they are so out of tune with their times that they fail to make a difference**; maybe the most relevant function that such wonderings can effect is to see if their expositions and presentations can put things that by now have become, sorely, visible in a nutshell much more clear and effective in suggesting ways of action. And it is of merely academic or even pedantic and merely encyclopedic interest to ask if the independent rediscovery of these insights in the fulfillment of time is really independent or borrowed (even if second or third hand and so on) and, in case it’s borrowed, whether it was acknowledged or not, and, in case it was not, whether it was unconscious or plain plagiarism. The more urgent the problems are and the more relevant the suggestions for solutions are, the less relevant is to add qualifications and specifications to the word “rediscovery” of a problem or a proposal by an age that needs it, or to even refer at all to the first, or even best, thinkers who confronted it. To questions of the proverbial “simple man on the street” going like “where are the specialists, e.g. economists, of the opposition or of the even more radical marginal groups who would ask in public about the reasons of opting of the decision makers and would present their alternative proposals and argue in favor of their advantages and their feasibility? Are they working out their proposals? Are they only hidden by not being given the floor by the “hired mass media”? Are they not entitled to be given by the state the data they need to work out their proposals because they are not official enough because they are not officially hired and paid to work out their proposals? Does alternative funding make such free lance proposals less suspect than the hired ones? Does alternative funding make such free lance proposals more suspect than the hired ones? Why can’t we see, in at least some media, representatives of both the official and alternative proposals argue against each other’s optings and choices, analyses and sources so that we can form an opinion and vote? Even if it’s a wrong opinion it will be ours, and we will be more than willing, we will even be honored, to try and correct its faults when it is applied in practice; and anyway, now we vote for wrong opinions and optings that are not even ours. “Fatal error” in irresponsible “trial and error” is no excuse! There’s nothing more like irresponsible error than what is now happening in absence of our own intervention in the decision making. If these questions are just naïve wishful thinking not through their content but through the fact that they can never reach the level of affecting anybody in the decision making, since they are never going to reach any wider audience, then there sure are people with much more effective thinking and background who may have thought much harder about the issues; then why these ideas and their improvements that are not given any mass-media floor, are not presented to the youth being educated in the universities so that the graduates of them teach their families and acquaintances more about the alternative views and make them better understand the alternative views available on the web and Xerox some of them for the non-users of the web? If it’s a matter of academics being reluctant to use the floor they have, i.e. the classrooms and lecture halls, to reach their own audiences, namely the students, OK, if such reluctance is not only due to considering such use of their floor as part of the role of school (after all classrooms can be used for extracurricular extra hours too) and is due to the fear of being considered “anarchic” then what exactly is the anarchic element involved in putting books on libraries’ reserve shelves and assigning term papers on *Possibly Schwinger proposal too? No! Maybe master Suzuki’s, as many other graffiti lines also are. **Another of the (sublimated) reasons why Mumford remained “unknown” is that he, not only so early but also so deeply, connected many social effects to the prevailing scientific paradigm (that reduces biology to physics and artificial intelligence) that its ongoing survival exiled him to whether “obsolescence” or future.

alternative intellectuals? There's nothing that incriminates instructors teaching them more than it incriminates people objecting to that!". Before we give the floor to Chomsky for some more composed treatment of the issue let's use a lighter, or even frivolous, format to answer the frivolous, or even frankly disturbed yet equally funny, rationalizations and excuses that academia imbedded in an economically (and not only economically) absurd (and not only absurd) system says about itself (e.g. that alternative thinkers (like e.g. Mumford?!))lack either the up-to-date-ness/relevance or the time-distance/maturation for academic relevance or lack the rigor needed to be presentable in university courses and library reserve shelves): For somebody to convince in full rigor an American academic that he does have a point in some subject, this somebody needs to have equally many accomplishments with him in a subject as respected and as time consuming as the academic's own field, in which, to have as many accomplishments, one would have to have given so much time and effort, and to have left for the cultivation of other forms of responsible judgment and rigor so little time and effort as to be equally ignorant, unrigorous, immature and irresponsible as the academic (a statement of course needing modifications if either that somebody or the academic or both are sacred monsters with double talent and energy able to do well in two fields, like e.g. a Noam Chomsky; but still: if all it took to be convincing to peers was to be publishable by refereed journals in another (and mainstream too, subject) then why is Chomsky given the following additional discrediting by trivial "academics"?: Chomsky "is not convincing because he's been saying those things even before 9/11", a statement whose dual discrediting, frequently by the same persons, on people who hadn't been yelling since as early as Chomsky, is "OK, he's a late starter, where was he before 9/11?"). These well known pseudo-arguments and petty trivialities rationalizing either the idiocy/blindness or the guilt, or both, of various forms of reluctance and hesitation are not only amusing through the so called "catch 22"-type of humor but also through both humor of the blackest type (verging on the criminal and the "pulp-fiction"-like) and the most youthful type (verging on the graceful). Let's exemplify both types of such analogs that share with the academic's pseudo-argument the stupidity and the self-complacency that are both implicitly and explicitly present in their self-reference. The criminal analog of the academic's argument is the following result of some soldiers', at depth poor, self image: "To feel equal to an Iraqi insurgent and in fair duel and battle with him, one should have the help of a night-invisible plane with napalm bombs able to precisely shoot in the dark and an Iraqi should have only an M-1 rifle and a prohibition of using night vision aids upon penalty reserved for war criminals". But let's not go to so depressive and so far out analogs between complacency and its antipode (poorness of self-image). Let's return to academics: The (main) reason one must mirror so sarcastically the ludicrous part of their way of going about in so many things is that one would be rather disastrous, if he were able, to replace such healthy mutual mirroring and sarcasm and self sarcasm and self awareness by something more institutional like e.g. "replacement of academic and apolitical standards (determined by politically neutral referees) by judgment by (!) " "politically aware" referees and peer experts and by quotas about publications and activities related to "involvement"!" Thus, sarcasm merely subjective and innocuous(=able to influence but not to coerce) and right to vote for peers' jobs, after evaluating not only the quantity of their work but also the degree of moronization needed to achieve it, should be enough (or even, unfortunately, more than enough) of pontification. We don't applaud peer pressures advocating the return of Darwinian selection pressures towards homo politicus like the ones which, we heard, but didn't double-check, existed in ancient Athens where during a coup one had to risk taking some side, otherwise, by common agreement, one would be executed by no matter which side prevailed. We just mean that something has to reverse somewhat the Darwinian selection pressures towards homo scientificus-but-moronicus through which politically alive scientists are eliminated from science during the competition for jobs of subsistence-through-the-exercise-of-science. But let's say all that in a much briefer way afforded by somebody who, clearly, cleared all referee standards (of his day at least) and very aptly explains how people as gifted as Hawkings and Penroses and as American Nobelists are ruled by Perles and Blairs and Rumsfelds and "Bushes": We mean Plato in his line: "Smart people not involved in the common affairs automatically suffer a punishment. They are ruled by their inferiors". That line clearly seems still applicable and the only way it has become obsolete in history is through the equally clearly known two stages: 1. The "being ruled" part of the life of the smart people ruled by their inferiors became not so unbearable (if at least they didn't have too fancy sensitivities) if they became courtiers of kings 2. the fact they were courtiers has, by now, stopped being so visible after the kings were replaced by companies in a "democratic" society, so what may sound obsolete about it is that it is obsolete to say they're "kings' courtiers". Another thing with elements both common and not common with the above is that even the way for someone to be involved when these things are visible to him is that, maybe, to have an effect at all, one has to become courtier of

another court: the court of progressives, without whose audience or interest (and without some prerequisite, hopefully minimal, of obeying their pontification) what one says is a solitary exercise in futility or even autism, as irresponsible as non-involvement, unless there is something about one's "voice" that makes his "accountability and responsibility only to his vision" a case of art like the ones which do echo and conversely do inspire the "masses" to whom the court of progressives is itself accountable (if, of course, they too do not degenerate, as they do every now and then, to cultural groups writing papers for each other like many academics do; most of the times this happens in academia it is not due to the advanced methods some essential problems need but due to the jobs created by those methods irrespective of whether the problems to which they are applied are as essential as the problems that gave birth to those methods). OK, we did counteract the depression of the black humor type by going back to the academic life and to the analogs of its non-best sides in political cults too, let's also counteract both the boredom of the pedantry of these concerns and the depression of the humor about poor self image by going to that promised graceful youthful humor about self-complacency; self-complacency; of American whites in the case in hand: A line that was going around some years ago was: "So what was so very big deal about that film "Guess who's coming to dinner"? The only point it made was that if you're black and a brain surgeon teaching at Harvard medical school, and a candidate for a Nobel prize, then you don't have to feel inferior to an average white American"...OK, let's cut all that and go to Chomsky since the really relevant and practical part of any upshot to all the above and to the dots of its dropped sections is the following: There's a (rather subcritical) ceiling to the number of people who really get the message from Chomsky's, and from ZNet's, format, and a ceiling to the possibilities and to the imagination of alternatives that this message can suggest if one doesn't inspire artists too to get involved in it; and the US's existent artists who are capable of receiving it and expanding it need badly some seminars from countries with longer history and more deeply rooted traditions in that kind of art (countries with South-American-like dictatorships, i.e. South America itself and Greece. Also from Turkey. Seminars on Middle East need those prerequisite courses first) . What we personally have tried is to put together a transliteration , recontextualization etcetc of such things in formats more familiar to artist activists in USA, i.e. road movie formats, space-movie formats, and soap-opera/sidewalk-theater formats. Admittedly however, through the conditioning of both the artists and their audience by success standards working as absurdly as the standards of rigor we saw working for academics, the line "At a deaf man's door take the door and walk away" may be applicable to artists too...OK, let's go to Chomsky: Chomsky, when interviewed this summer, on the responsibility of intellectuals among other things, was asked and answering the following, among other things*:

...-But, in this case, the results of the Army Research Office's mission statement in harvesting scholarly work for better weapons design, it's professors, scholars, researchers, scientific designers, etc., who have these choices to focus serious intellectual effort and to be so used for such ends, and who aren't acting necessarily from direct orders but are acting more out of free will.

-It's freewill, but don't forget that there's a general intellectual culture that raises no objection to this. Let's take the Iraq war. There's libraries of material arguing about the war, debating it, asking 'What should we do?', this and that, and the other thing. Now, try to find a sentence somewhere that says that 'carrying out a war of aggression is the supreme international crime, which differs from other war crimes in that it encompasses all the evil that follows' (paraphrasing from Nuremberg). Try to find that somewhere. —I mean, you can find it. I've written about it, and you can find a couple other dozen people who have written about it in the world. But is it part of the intellectual culture? Can you find it in a newspaper, or in a journal; in Congress; any public discourse; anything that's part of the general exchange of knowledge and ideas? I mean, do students study it in school? Do they have courses where they teach students that 'to carry out a war of aggression is the supreme international crime which encompasses all the evil that follows'? So, for example, if sectarian warfare is a horrible atrocity, as it is, who's responsible? By the principles of Nuremberg, Bush, Rumsfeld, Cheney, Wolfowitz, Rice—they're responsible for sectarian warfare because they carried out the supreme international crime which encompasses all the evil that follows. Try and find somebody who points that out. You can't. Because our dominant intellectual culture accepts as legitimate our crushing anybody we like. And take Iran. Both political parties—and practically the whole press—accept it as legitimate and, in fact, honorable, that 'all options are on the table', presumably including nuclear weapons, to quote Hilary Clinton and everyone else. 'All options are on the table' means we threaten war. Well, there's something called the U.N. Charter, which outlaws 'the threat or use of force' in

*About the skipped parts (mainly discussing whether the Nuremberg judges applied double standards like today's) the reader can google "Chomsky, Schivone, War and responsibility, August 16 2007" from where we borrowed the rest too.

international affairs. Does anybody care? Actually, I saw one op-ed somewhere by Ray Takeyh, an Iran specialist close to the government, who pointed out that threats are serious violations of international law. But that's so rare that when you find it it's like finding a diamond in a pile of hay or something. It's not part of the culture. We're allowed to threaten anyone we want—and to attack anyone we want. And, when a person grows up and acts in a culture like that, they're culpable in a sense, but the culpability is much broader. I was just reading a couple days ago a review of a new book by Steven Miles, a medical doctor and bioethicist, who ran through 35,000 pages of documents he got from the Freedom of Information Act on the torture in Abu Ghraib. And the question that concerned him is, 'What were the doctors doing during all of this?' All through those torture sessions there were doctors, nurses, behavioral scientists and others who were organizing them. What were they doing when this torture was going on? Well, you go through the detailed record and it turns out that they were designing and improving it. Just like Nazi doctors. Robert Jay Lifton did a big study on Nazi doctors. He points out in connection with the Nazi doctors that, in a way, it's not those individual doctors who had the final guilt, it was a culture and a society which accepted torture and criminal activities as legitimate. The same is true with the tortures at Abu Ghraib. I mean, just to focus on them as if they're somehow terrible people is just a serious mistake. They're coming out of a culture that regards this as legitimate. Maybe there are some excesses you don't really do but torture in interrogation is considered legitimate. There's a big debate now on, 'Who's an enemy combatant?'; a big technical debate. Suppose we invade another country and we capture somebody who's defending the country against our invasion: what do you mean to call them an 'enemy combatant'? If some country invaded the United States and let's say you were captured throwing a rock at one of the soldiers, would it be legitimate to send you to the equivalent of Guantanamo, and then have a debate about whether you're a 'lawful' or 'unlawful' combatant? The whole discussion is kind of, like, off in outer space somewhere. But, in a culture which accepts that we own and rule the world, it's reasonable. But, also, we should go back to the roots of the intellectual or moral culture, not just to the individuals directly involved.

-As you mentioned before, whether students are taught serious moral principles: At my school, the University of Arizona, there are courses in bioethics—required ones, in fact, to hard scientific undergraduates (I took one, out of interest)—which mostly just discuss scenarios in terms of 'slippery slopes' and hypothetical questions within certain bounds, and still none at all in the social sciences or humanities. Do you think there should be? Would that be beneficial?

-If they were honest, yes. If they're honest they'd be talking about what we're talking about, and doing case studies. There's no point pontificating about high minded principles. That's easy. Nazi doctors could do that, too. Let's take a look at the cases and ask how the principles apply—to Vietnam; to El Salvador; to Iraq; to Palestine—just run through the cases and see how the principles apply to our own actions. That's what is of prime importance, and what is least discussed.

-As a note to end on, there seems to be some very serious aberrations and defects in our society and our level of culture. How, in your view, might they be corrected and a new level of culture be established, say, one in which torture isn't accepted? (After all, slavery and child labor were each accepted for a long period of time and now are not.)

-Your examples give the answer to the question, the only answer that has ever been known. Slavery and child labor didn't become unacceptable by magic. It took hard, dedicated, courageous work by lots of people. The same is true of torture, which was once completely routine. If I remember correctly, the renowned Norwegian criminologist Nils Christie wrote somewhere that prisons began to proliferate in Norway in the early 19th century. They weren't much needed before, when the punishment for robbery could be driving a stake through the hand of the accused. Now it's perhaps the most civilized country on earth. There has been a gradual codification of constraints against torture, and they have had some effect, though only limited, even before the Bush regression to savagery. Alfred McCoy's work reviews that ugly history. Still, there is improvement, and there can be more if enough people are willing to undertake the efforts that led to large-scale rejection of slavery and child labor—still far from complete.....

-I think at this point it may do well for us to go over a bit the beginnings and evolution of the ideological currents which now prevail throughout modern social intellectual life in the U.S. Essentially, from where may we trace the development of this strong coterie of technical experts in the schools, and elsewhere, sometimes having been referred to as a 'bought' or 'secular priesthood'?...(And) given the, albeit, self-proclaimed notion that this new class is entitled to decision-making, how close are they to actual policy, then?

-...(And) my feeling is that they're nowhere near as powerful as they think they are. So, when, say, John Kenneth Galbraith wrote about the technocratic elite which is taking over the running of society—or when

McNamara wrote about it, or others—there's a lot of illusion there. Meaning, they can gain positions of authority and decision-making when they act in the interests of those who really own and run the society. You can have people that are just as competent, or more competent, and who have conceptions of social and economic order that run counter to, say, corporate power, and they're not going to be in the planning sectors. So, to get into those planning sectors you first of all have to conform to the interests of the real concentrations of power. And, again, there are a lot of illusions about this—in the media, too. Tom Wicker is a famous example, one of the 'left commentators' of the New York Times. He would get very angry when critics would tell him he's conforming to power interests and that he's keeping within the doctrinal framework of the media, which goes back to their corporate structure and so on. And he would answer, very angrily—and correctly—that nobody tells him what to say. He writes anything he wants,—which is absolutely true. But if he wasn't writing the things he did he wouldn't have a column in the New York Times. That's the kind of thing that is very hard to perceive. People do not want—or often are not able—to perceive that they are conforming to external authority. They feel themselves to be very free—and indeed they are—as long as they conform. But power lies elsewhere. That's as old as history in the modern period. It's often very explicit. Adam Smith, for example, discussing England, quite interestingly pointed out that the merchants and manufacturers—the economic forces of his day—are the 'principal architects of policy', and they make sure that their own interests are 'most peculiarly attended to', no matter how grievous the effect on others, including the people in England. And that's a good principle of statecraft, and social and economic planning, which runs pretty much to the present. When you get people with management and decision-making skills, they can enter into that system and they can make the actual decisions—within a framework that's set within the real concentrations of power. And now it's not the merchants and manufacturers of Adam Smith's day, it's the multinational corporations, financial institutions, and so on. But, stray too far beyond their concerns and you won't be the decision-maker. It's not a mechanical phenomenon, but it's overwhelmingly true that the people who make it to decision-making positions (that is, what they think of as decision-making positions) are those who conform to the basic framework of the people who fundamentally own and run the society. That's why you have a certain choice of technocratic managers and not some other choice of people equally or better capable of carrying out policies but have different ideas.....

-How crucial is it, in your view, that students particularly consider and understand...the function in society of the highly technocratic social order of the academic community?

-How important it is, to an individual, depends on what that individual's goals in life are. If the goals are to enrich yourself, gain privilege, do technically interesting work—in brief, if the goals are self-satisfaction—then these questions are of no particular relevance. If you care about the consequences of your actions, what's happening in the world, what the future will be like for your grandchildren and so on, then they're very crucial. So, it's a question of what choices people make.

-What makes students a natural audience to speak to? And do you think it's worth 'speaking truth' to the professional scholarship as well or differently? Are there any short- or long-term possibilities here?

-I'm always uneasy about the concept of "speaking truth," as if we somehow know the truth and only have to enlighten others who have not risen to our elevated level. The search for truth is a cooperative, unending endeavor. We can, and should, engage in it to the extent we can and encourage others to do so as well, seeking to free ourselves from constraints imposed by coercive institutions, dogma, irrationality, excessive conformity and lack of initiative and imagination, and numerous other obstacles. As for possibilities, they are limited only by will and choice. Students are at a stage of their lives where these choices are most urgent and compelling, and when they also enjoy unusual, if not unique, freedom and opportunity to explore the choices available, to evaluate them, and to pursue them.

-In your view, what is it about the privileges within university education and academic scholarship which as you assert in some of the things you've written, correlate with them a greater responsibility for catastrophic atrocities such as the Vietnam War or those in the Middle East in which the United States is now involved?

-Well, there are really some moral truisms. One of them is that opportunity confers responsibility. If you have very limited opportunities, then you have limited responsibility for what you do. If you have substantial opportunity you have greater responsibility for what you do. I mean, that's kind of elementary, I don't know how it can be discussed. And the people who we call 'intellectuals' are just those who happen to have substantial opportunity. They have privilege, they have resources, they have training. In our society, they have a high degree of freedom—not a hundred percent, but quite a lot—and that gives them a range of choices that they can pursue with a fair degree of freedom, and that hence simply confers responsibility for the predictable consequences of the choices they make...