

Does this man ever sleep?

Noam Chomsky: A Life of Dissent

by Robert F. Barsky

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The world's most cited living person is a theoretical linguist. Noam Chomsky has published about 70 books and more than 1,000 articles, shaken up the study of natural language syntax several times, and won the Kyoto Prize for Basic Sciences, while supervising scores of PhD students at Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), spending 20 hours a week on personal correspondence, lecturing all over the world, building a worldwide reputation as a radical critic of American foreign policy and media culture, and being father to three children. Does he ever sleep?

Robert Barsky's book does not tell us. It offers hardly any clear glimpses of Chomsky's personal life, despite being so rich in quotations from him that the blurb touts it as "the autobiography that Chomsky says he will never write". It has the faults of autobiography but not the virtues — there are scattered subjective judgements and unverified anecdotes from Chomsky without any connected first-person narrative to give a sense of him as a person.

Barsky does not compensate by providing competent intellectual biography. His letters from Chomsky are basically his only primary source (although a few photographs appear here for the first time). Barsky does not mention undertaking any interviews with people significant in Chomsky's life. He seems unacquainted not only with linguistics — references to Chomsky's work are in vapid phrases such as "conducting linguistic research that could lead us to a better understanding of the mind/brain" — but also with linguists. Two linguists' names (apart from Chomsky's) appear in his acknowledgments, and one of those is misspelled. Most of Chomsky's MIT colleagues — Bromberger, Flynn, Hale, Harris, Keyser, O'Neil — go unmentioned.

Barsky has simply not done the fact-checking and critical analysis that we expect from a biographer. The 1958 Texas conference at which Chomsky debated with leading establishment opponents is described by Chomsky in a letter written 37 years later; Barsky quotes no other participant. The section on "Chomsky as teacher" cites no discussions with any of his 60 or so doctoral students. Barsky just recycles three quotations from women graduates about whether Chomsky is a sexist, taken from a 1988 magazine article.

Interesting questions about Chomsky's career remain for a conscientious intellectual biographer to explore; for example, the

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Chomsky: author of more than 1,000 articles.

almost total absence of refereed journal papers from his voluminous publications (essentially all his work seems to be published by invitation), or his baffling insistence that he has been shunned and ignored throughout his career. (In truth he has been welcomed worldwide as a political speaker and has increasingly dominated formal linguistics — more than 80 per cent of the theoretical syntax papers at the last two conferences of the Linguistic Society of America were Chomskyan.) One will not find these topics examined in Barsky's book.

The writing is pretentiously sycophantic, from the opening sentence ("The task of writing a biography of Noam Chomsky gives new meaning to the word *daunting*") to the final verbless encomium ("Noam Chomsky, sixty-eight years old, institute professor, linguist, philosopher, grandfather, champion of ordinary people"). Between these bookends of cliché lie 215 pages of narrative ranging from soporifics such as "they were determined to provide a serene and comfortable life for their young children" to ludicrous verbiage such as "Humboldt and other enlightenment thinkers don't *join* the intellectual milieu surrounding and influencing Chomsky, they were always already there, waiting to be reilluminated".

Barsky does not even reilluminate the chronology of major events in Chomsky's life. The section called "The founding of MIT's graduate program in linguistics" forgets to tell us when the programme was founded (1959 or earlier is implied; actually the first regular graduate class entered in 1961). Events such as the 1975 Royumont debate with Piaget or Chomsky's pivotal 1979 sabbatical in Pisa are overlooked completely.

Chomsky's political life dominates Barsky's perspective. Vastly more is said about Chomsky's links to radical leftist groups and Jewish political organizations than about his academic work. But, even in the political

arena, his life story is not adequately chronicled. The reader cannot find out from this book when it was (some time during the Vietnam War) that Chomsky visited Hanoi — or even that he went there at all. Nor can we find out from the section called "Chomsky and Montreal" whether he ever visited that city. Omitting the one fact that we might have expected, the section drifts off mysteriously into a discussion of Quebec fascism in 1942.

The most serious of Barsky's omissions is his failure to check Chomsky's recollections for accuracy or consistency. Chomsky's testimony about his celebrated academic war against "generative semantics" (GS), roughly from 1967 to 1975, amounts to denying that he even participated in it, which is an astonishing historical claim, even from a victor. Chomsky adds that "every single appointment" made in his department in the relevant period was of a GS practitioner. The idea that Chomsky, with his enormous prestige, could not have ensured the appointment of the colleagues he wanted cannot be taken seriously. He cites Paul Postal as an example of a GS hiring; but Postal left MIT in 1965, years before the battle over GS began.

Furthermore, Chomsky omits mention of Joan Bresnan — a major opponent of GS who was hired during 1974–75 with Chomsky's strong support. Then, in a later section, where a charge of running a patriarchal department is being discussed, he offers in defence his successful advocacy of Bresnan's appointment. Barsky does not explore the conflict between these passages (and fails to mention Bresnan in his index).

If Chomsky never writes an autobiography, and this amateurish cut-and-paste hack job is his biography, then the life of the most lionized intellectual of the twentieth century and most famous linguist in history will remain largely *terra incognita*. □

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Funding fathers

Der Stifterverband für die Deutsche Wissenschaft 1920–1995

by Winfried Schulze

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The Stifterverband für die Deutsche Wissenschaft was founded in 1920 by representatives of German industry, banks and insurance companies to promote science in dire postwar times. Ever since, it has been an important source of funds for research in Germany. On 12 December 1995 the organization celebrated its seventy-fifth anniversary. To mark the occasion, Winfried