Part VI
Public Intellectualism
Youth-generated image based on the criminalization of urban youth through the passage of California’s Proposition 21.
On Target Artist Statement

On Target was a project of Southern Exposure’s Artists in Education Program called Mission Voices. Three artists, Victor Cartegena, John Leaños, and Lexi Leban, worked with youth from Casa de los Jovenes, Horizons Unlimited, and Youth in Action on an eight-week collaboration that culminated in an art exhibition and performance. On Target arose from participants desire to respond to anti-youth sentiment and legislation, particularly Proposition 21. The exhibition demonstrated the poignancy of youths’ response to discrimination and referred to the public discourse that marked youth as “deviant” targets of public scrutiny and legislative punishment. Through photography, painting, video, and sound installation, the Mission Voices collective attempted to disassemble stereotypes and create understanding by examining how anti-youth sentiment often posits youth as “other” in contemporary society.
Robert Borofsky: You write, in *Powers and Prospects*, that “the responsibility of a writer as a moral agent is to try to bring the truth about matters of human significance to an audience that can do something about them.” Would you generalize that to intellectuals and academics more generally or not?

Noam Chomsky: If a person chooses not to be a writer, or speaker, then (by definition) the person is choosing not to be engaged in an effort, as you quote me, “to bring the truth about matters of human significance to an audience that can do something about them,” apart, perhaps, from some circle of immediate associates. Whether the person should then be called “an intellectual” seems to reduce the issue to a question of terminology. As for academics, I do not see why their responsibilities as moral agents should differ in principle from the responsibilities of others: in particular, others who also enjoy a degree of privilege and power, and therefore have the responsibilities that are conferred by those advantages.

RB: Long ago (1967), in the *New York Review of Books*, you indicated “it is the responsibility of intellectuals to speak the truth and expose lies.” Would you interpret that as paralleling the popular Foucault phrase, “speaking truth to power” or are you referring to something more inclusive?

NC: The statement quoted from the *NYRB* is elliptical. A more appropriate expansion is the statement you quoted from *Powers and Prospects*, a transcript of a talk to a writers conference in Australia in 1996, where I had been asked to talk on “writers and intellectual responsibility”—a question that I said I found “puzzling” because I knew of nothing to say about it beyond truisms, though these were perhaps worth affirming because they are “so commonly denied, if not in words, then in consistent practice.” I then gave a series of illustrations that seemed (and seem) to me pertinent and important.

In that talk I also made some remarks about the call “to speak truth to power,” which perhaps I may quote here:

To speak truth to power is not a particularly honorable vocation. One should seek out an audience that matters—and furthermore (another important qualification), it should not be seen as an audience, but as a community of common concern in which one hopes to participate constructively. We should not be speaking TO, but WITH. That is second nature to any good teacher, and should be to any writer and intellectual as well.
Again, I don’t suggest that the observations are surprising or profound. Rather, they seem to me the merest truisms. I was not aware that Foucault had used the phrase “speaking truth to power.” I had thought it was an old Quaker phrase. At least, that is the context in which I had heard it since childhood. I don’t recall actually seeing the original source. I don’t entirely agree with the slogan, for reasons explained in the Australia talk just mentioned.

RB: You write, again in *Powers and Prospects*, about the moral culpability of those who ignore major moral crimes in free and open societies—especially intellectuals who “have the resources, the training, the facilities and opportunities to speak and act effectively.” Would you mind elaborating? What do you feel are the responsibilities of intellectuals—both within and outside academia—in free and open societies?

NC: Again, I don’t feel that I have anything to say beyond moral truisms. Suppose that I see a hungry child in the street, and I am able to offer the child some food. Am I morally culpable if I refuse to do so? Am I morally culpable if I choose not to do what I easily can about the fact that 1,000 children die every hour from easily preventable disease, according to UNICEF? Or the fact that the government of my own “free and open society” is engaged in monstrous crimes that can easily be mitigated or terminated? Is it even possible to debate these questions? Nothing more is implied in the statement quoted.

It also seems beyond controversy that moral responsibilities are greater to the extent that people “have the resources, the training, the facilities, and opportunities to speak and act effectively.” This has nothing particular to do with academia, except insofar as those within it tend to be unusually privileged in the respects just mentioned. And the responsibilities of someone in a more free and open society are, again obviously, greater than those who may pay some cost for honesty and integrity. If commissars in Soviet Russia agreed to subordinate themselves to state power, they could at least plead fear in extenuation. Their counterparts in more free and open societies can plead only cowardice.

Relation To Said’s Sense Of The Intellectual

RB: Edward Said writes, in *Representations of the Intellectual*, that: “the intellectual is an individual with a specific public role in society that cannot be reduced simply to...a faceless professional...the intellectual is...endowed with a faculty for...articulating a...philosophy or opinion to, as well as for, a public. And this role has an edge to it, [involving] someone whose place it is publicly to raise embarrassing questions, to confront orthodoxy...to be someone who cannot easily be co-opted by governments...whose raison d’être is to represent all those people and issues that are routinely swept under the rug.” Would you agree with Said?

NC: Edward Said is a very honorable representative of the “intellectual” in the sense of the term that he defines. That is his proposal as to how the term should be used. It surely does not describe those who are called “intellectuals” in standard usage, as he would be the first to agree. One can neither agree nor disagree with a terminological proposal, as long as it is clear that it is just that: terminological. As to whether those who fit the common meaning of the term “intellectual” should act in the manner that Said prescribes, that’s another question. Needless to say, I agree with him that they should, and that they commonly do not.

Intellectuals (in the standard sense of the term, not Said’s prescriptive sense) are the people who write history. If the authors and custodians of history turn out to have an attractive image, it is only reasonable to look beyond and ask whether the image they construct is accurate. I think such an inquiry will reveal a rather different picture: namely, it will reveal
a very strong tendency for the intellectuals who are respected and privileged to be those who subordinate themselves to power.

To use the terms that are reserved for official enemies, it is the commissars and apparatchiks, not the dissidents, who are respected and privileged within their own societies. The observation, I am afraid, generalizes broadly. To go back to a moment of Western civilization remote enough in time so that we should be able to look at it dispassionately, ask what happened during World War I. What was the typical behavior of respected intellectuals in Germany, England, the United States? What happened to those who publicly questioned the nobility of the war effort, on both sides? I do not think the answers are untypical.

**RB:** Said points to Antonio Gramsci as a model intellectual. Who would you see as model intellectuals today?

**NC:** The people I find most impressive are generally unknown at the time of their actions and forgotten in history. I know of people whose actions and words I admire and respect. Some are called “intellectuals,” some are not.

I do not feel that we should set up PEOPLE as “models”; rather actions, thoughts, principles. I have never heard of anyone who was a “model person” in all aspects of his or her life, intellectual life or other aspects, nor do I see why anyone should care. We are not engaged in idol worship, after all.

In the case of Gramsci, the Fascist government agreed that he was a “model intellectual” in Said’s sense, and for that reason determined, in their words, that “we must stop this brain from functioning for twenty years.” Gramsci’s words and actions explain their assessment, though I think we should refrain from using the term “model intellectual” for him or others.

**Challenging The Media’s Manufacturing Of Consent**

**RB:** You have noted that propaganda tends to be more prevalent in democratic societies than in totalitarian ones because there is a greater demand for governments to disguise their actions from citizens. In *Manufacturing Consent*, you argued that the media establish and defend the agenda of dominant social groups. Is there hope to subvert this dominance in democracies? What do you think can realistically be done?

**NC:** The answer to subversion of democracy is more democracy, more freedom, more justice. History records endless struggles to enlarge those realms, inspiring ones; it also records painful reversals and setbacks. What can realistically be done depends on the historical moment. The same is true with regard to the agents.

In general, we should be able to agree that those who have greater opportunities and face fewer impediments have a greater responsibility to do more to help achieve such ends. Those of us lucky enough to have a share of privilege in the more free societies should not be asking this question, but doing something to answer it.

**RB:** Academics, as a privileged class, might be viewed as well positioned to critique the media’s messages. Yet many of their efforts seem half-hearted. Are academics mostly servants of the power structure intent on keeping their elite positions?

**NC:** Academics are mostly professionals, involved in their work and other concerns of their own, with no particular interest in the workings of the ideological system. I wouldn’t say that the efforts of academics to critique the media’s messages are “half-hearted.” As far as I am aware, the efforts scarcely exist: very few even pay attention to the question.

People who spend their working hours in a lab or research library or a classroom might be intent primarily on keeping or advancing their elite positions, thereby lending tacit sup-
port to power structures. Or they might not be. Some may be “servants of the power structure,” but that has to be shown. I think it often can be shown, but the burden of proof is on the critic who puts forth that thesis in particular cases.

RB: Edward Said asserts one task of intellectuals is “to break down the stereotypes and reductive categories that are...limiting to human thought and communication.” Is that what you feel you are essentially doing in Manufacturing Consent?

NC: Anyone in a position to overcome barriers to free thought and communication should do so. That much at least seems clear: Parents who care about their children, for example, or artisans, or farmers, or anyone who is serious about living a decent life.

The term “intellectual” is used conventionally to refer to people who happen to have unusual opportunities in this regard, and as always, opportunity confers moral responsibility. To live a life of honesty and integrity is a responsibility of every decent person. Those lucky enough to qualify as “intellectuals” have their own special responsibilities, deriving from their good fortune. Among these is the task that Said describes, surely an important one.

The book Manufacturing Consent, which I co-authored with Edward Herman, begins with a description of the structure and institutional setting of the commercial media, and then draws some rather simple-minded conclusions about what we would expect the media product to be, given these (not particularly controversial) conditions. The book itself is then devoted to a series of case studies, selected, we hope, to offer a fair and in fact rather severe test of those conclusions. We believe that the empirical evidence we review there—and elsewhere, in a great deal of joint and separate work—lends substantial support to the conclusions; whether that is true is for others to judge.

Of course, we have a purpose: namely, to encourage readers to undertake what might be called “a course in intellectual self-defense,” and to suggest ways to proceed; in other words, to help people undermine the dedicated efforts to “manufacture consent” and to turn them into passive objects rather than agents who control their own fate. Bear in mind that we did not devise the terms “manufacture of consent” and “engineering of consent.” We borrowed them from leading figures in the media, public relations industry, and academic scholarship. As we discuss there and elsewhere, recognition of the importance of “manufacturing consent” has become an ever more central theme in the more free societies.

As the capacity to coerce declines, it is natural to turn to control of opinion as the basis for authority and domination—a fundamental principle of government already emphasized by David Hume. Our concern is to help people counter the efforts of those who seek to “regiment the public mind every bit as much as an army regiments the bodies of its soldiers,” so that the self-designated “responsible men” will be able to run the affairs of the world untroubled by the “bewildered herd”—the general public—who are to be marginalized and dispersed, directed to personal concerns, in a well-regulated “democracy.” An unstated but crucial premise is that the “responsible men” achieve that exalted status by their service to authentic power, a fact of life that they will discover soon enough if they try to pursue an independent path.

Democracy

RB: In various interviews, you affirm a clear respect for democracy—for the central institutions in a society being under popular control. Can you elaborate on why you feel this is so critical?
NC: It seems self-evident that we should want people to be free, to be able to play an active part in making decisions about matters of concern to them, to the largest possible extent. We should therefore be opposed to institutional barriers to that freedom: Military dictatorships, for example. Or states run by a Central Committee. Unaccountable private power concentrations that dominate economic and social life have the means to seek to “regiment the public mind,” and become “tools and tyrants” of government, in James Madison’s memorable phrase, as he warned of the threats he discerned to the democratic experiment if private powers were granted free rein. Since his day (and long before), there have been constant struggles over “democratic governance.”

Should people be mere “interested spectators of action,” not “participants,” restricted to lending their weight periodically to one or another sector of the “responsible men,” as advocates of “manufacture of consent” have recommended? Or should their rights transcend these highly restricted bounds? Sometimes the former forces are in the ascendance, and “democratic governance” is eroded, though anyone familiar with intellectual history would expect that the slogans will be passionately proclaimed as they are drained of substantive content. We happen to be living in such an era, but as often before, there is no reason to suppose that the process is irreversible. The “end of history” has been proclaimed many times, always falsely.

RB: In an interview a few years ago, you favorably cited John Dewey’s assertion that “the goal of production is to produce free people.” Are we succeeding or failing at that goal in your opinion?

NC: What is failure for some is success for others. It depends on where they stand in the struggles over “democratic governance” and related rights—civil, social and economic, and broadly cultural, to adopt the framework of the Universal Declaration that is formally endorsed but constantly undermined.

The current period of regression is registering some success in “producing people” who are subordinated to external power, diverted to such “superficial things” as “fashionable consumption” and other pursuits more fitting for the “bewildered herd” than participation in determining the course of individual and social life. To that extent, it is failing to “produce free people.” Whether “we” are succeeding or failing depends on who we choose to be.

Universities

RB: You have talked about the conservative nature of universities, especially in the United States using as an illustration that modern linguistics developed on the academic margins rather than at the leading academic centers. Is there hope the universities might become more than servants of the status quo? What, in your most positive assessment, might be the university’s role, or the role of faculty members, in democratic societies?

NC: Universities are less constrained by authority and rigid doctrine in the United States than in most other societies, to my knowledge. But it is only natural to expect that guilds will tend to “protect their turf” and to resist challenge. The tendencies are considerably weaker in the natural sciences, which, for the past several centuries, have survived and flourished through such constant challenge, and therefore, at best, seek to encourage it. Serving the status quo in political and socioeconomic realms is a different matter.

I don’t really see what can be said about the role of faculty members, or universities, beyond the truisms voiced earlier, and their elaboration in various domains, ranging from
focused intellectual pursuits to the concerns of the larger society and future generations. About specific social issues, there is a great deal to say that departs very far from truism and is, accordingly, significant and controversial. That would take us to specific issues of the highest importance, which cannot be seriously addressed here, unfortunately, in a few words.

**RB:** In an interview some years ago, you indicated that “corporations plainly want academic scholarship to create a web of mystification that will avoid any public awareness of the way in which power actually functions in the society.” How do you perceive academics creating these webs of mystification?

**NC:** The observation is much more general, and I surely can’t take credit for it. It is familiar to mainstream academic scholarship. One very prominent political scientist, in his standard text *American Politics* 20 years ago, observes that “The architects of power in the United States must create a force that can be felt but not seen.” The reason is that “Power remains strong when it remains in the dark; exposed to the sunlight it begins to evaporate” (Samuel Huntington).

As the book appeared, he gave a good illustration in an interview in a scholarly journal, describing deception by academics and others about the roots of U.S. foreign policy: “you may have to sell [intervention or other military action] in such a way as to create the misimpression that it is the Soviet Union that you are fighting. That is what the United States has been doing ever since the Truman Doctrine.”

That’s frank and honest. There is extensive critical scholarship that provides illustrations in many areas of scholarship. I’ve discussed many cases myself while also citing and often relying on academic studies that disentangle these webs of mystification woven for the general public. It’s impossible to provide illustrations that would even approach accuracy, let alone carry any conviction, without going well beyond the bounds of this discussion. I should, however, stress again what I said before: The U.S. is by no means unusual in this regard, and I suspect has a considerably better record than the norm.

**RB:** Ivan Illich has talked about “disabling professions”—or really disabling professionals—who systematically disempower others through their claims to expertise. To what degree do you perceive elite experts, and more broadly academics, being a “new class” of apparatchiks who function to reinforce rather than challenge the status quo in America?

**NC:** That intellectuals, including academics, would become a “new class” of technocrats, claiming the name of science while cooperating with the powerful, was predicted by Bakunin in the early days of the formation of the modern intelligentsia in the 19th century. His expectations were generally confirmed, including his prediction that some would seek to gain state power on the backs of popular revolution, then constructing a “Red bureaucracy” that would be one of the worst tyrannies in history, while others would recognize that power lies elsewhere and would serve as its apologists, becoming mystifiers, “disablers,” and managers while demanding the right to function in “technocratic isolation,” in World Bank lingo.

I would, however, question the implication that there is some novelty in this beyond modalities, which naturally change as institutions change and develop. Isaiah Berlin described the intellectuals of Bakunin’s “Red bureaucracy” as a “secular priesthood,” not unlike the religious priesthood that performed similar functions in earlier times—functions described acidly by Pascal in his bitter rendition of the practices of the Jesuit intellectuals he despised, including their demonstration of “the utility of interpretation,” a device of manufacturing consent based on reinterpretation of sacred texts to serve wealth, power, and privilege. Berlin’s observation is accurate enough, and applies at home as well, and even...
more harshly for the reasons already mentioned: the apparatchiks and commissars could at least plead fear in extenuation.

As usual, we are easily able to perceive the mote in the eye of the official enemy, and to condemn it with impressive eloquence and self-righteousness; the beam in our own eye is harder to detect, although—or more accurately because—to detect it, and remove it, is vastly more important on elementary moral grounds, and commonly more important in terms of direct human consequences as well. Intellectuals have historically played a critical function in performing these tasks, and Illich is right to observe that claims to scientific expertise and special knowledge are often used as a device. Those who actually do have a valid claim to such special competence have a particular obligation to make very clear to the general public the limits of what is understood at any serious level; these limits are typically very narrow in matters of significance in human affairs.

**Education**

*RB*: You have made the point that there are different types of education. Mass education, you observe, can produce docility. Is this what you perceive happening in the large public universities today? Where do you perceive the education which focuses on creativity and independence taking place?

*NC*: Again, I pretend no originality in observing that mass education was motivated in part by the perceived need to “educate them to keep them from our throats,” to borrow Ralph Waldo Emerson’s parody of elite fears that inspired early advocates of public mass education. More generally, independent farmers had to be trained to become docile workers in the expanding industrial system. It was necessary to drive from their heads evil ideas, such as the belief that wage labor was not much different from chattel slavery. That continues to the present, now sometimes taking the form of an attack on public education.

The attack on Social Security is similarly motivated. Social Security is based on the conception that we should have sympathy for others, not function merely as isolated “rational wealth maximizers.”

As elite attitudes towards public education over time illustrate, simple formulas are far from adequate. There are conflicting tendencies. In the sciences particularly, the large public universities must and do take an active role in fostering creativity and independence; otherwise the fields will wither, and along with them even the aspirations of wealth and power.

In my experience at least, the large public universities do not fall behind in fostering creativity and independence, often the contrary. The focus on creativity and independence exists in pockets of resistance in the educational system, which, to thrive, should be integrated with the needs and concerns of the great majority of the population. One finds them everywhere.

**The Future**

*RB*: Is there hope for the academy? Do you have hope for MIT, for example? For American universities more generally? What do you realistically think might be accomplished by writers, poets, scholars, activists—placing yourself in whatever category you feel appropriate—within and outside of academia during the next decade?

*NC*: Intellectuals of the categories you mention happen to enjoy unusual privilege, unique in history, I suppose. It’s easy enough to find ugly illustrations of repression, malice, dishonesty,
marginalization and exclusion in the academic world. By comparative standards, however, constraints are slight. Dissidents are not imprisoned as in the domains of the Kremlin, in the old days. They do not have their brains blown out by elite forces armed and trained by the reigning superpower, as happens in Washington’s domains—with no particular concern at home—an important fact, one of many that help us learn about ourselves, if we choose. How many educated Americans can even remember the names of the assassinated Jesuit intellectuals of El Salvador, or would know where to find a word they wrote? The answers are revealing, particularly when we draw the striking—and historically typical—contrast to the attitudes towards their counterparts in enemy domains.

Given their unusual privilege, Western intellectuals can realistically accomplish a great deal. The limits are imposed by will more than objective circumstances. And about human will predictions are without value.

RB: What would your vision be for a politically engaged university?
NC: Personally, I am uneasy about the notion of “a politically engaged university,” for reasons I wrote about over 30 years ago, at the height of protest and resistance (reprinted in For Reasons of State). At the time, I felt that we could hardly improve on the conception of the university expressed by one of the founders of the modern system, Wilhelm von Humboldt, also one of the founders of classical liberalism. That seems to me true today as well, though ideals of course have to be adapted to changing circumstances.

Individuals in a university—students, faculty, staff—can choose to become politically engaged, and a free university should foster a climate in which those are natural choices. Insofar as the universities are free and independent, they will also be “subversive,” in the sense that dominant structures of power and their ideological support will be subjected to challenge and critique, a counterpart to attitudes that are fostered in the hard sciences wherever they are taken seriously.

But that does not mean that the university should be “politically engaged” as an institution. It is one thing for the institution to offer space for serious engagement, in thought and action, and to encourage free and independent use of such opportunities; it is something else for the university to become engaged as an institution, beyond a fairly narrow range where true consensus exists, and even that raises questions. The two tendencies are antithetical in significant respects. These are distinctions that should be kept in mind, however one feels that the problems and dilemmas that constantly arise should be resolved.