NOAM CHOMSKY - THE TOP PUBLIC INTELLECTUAL

Călina GOGĂLNICEANU
„Al. I. Cuza" University of Iaşi

Abstract: *Our paper is meant to be a review of some of the top public intellectuals nominated by approximately 20,000 British and American people within a poll initiated by the famous British magazine Prospect. Since Noam Chomsky won 4,800 votes, we have also pointed out his manifold intellectual contribution not only through his achievements in linguistics but also through his political courage materialized in his democratic and humanitarian views favouring "pacifist platitudes" and disfavouring belligerent actions.*
Keywords*:linguistics, politics, intellectual*

The famous ten year-old British magazine Prospect, with a circulating figure of about 25,000, has initiated together with Foreign Policy magazine a poll to nominate the top public intellectuals out of 100 proposed names.

A very large number of people voted in this poll, that is over 20,000, the majority of them coming from Britain and America, but also from countries of Europe or from some English speaking countries. Judging by the age of the favourites on the list, the conclusion is that voters are over the age of 50, as they have chosen familiar names that were born before the Second World War.

The results of the poll indicate that there are only three women in the top twenty and none in the top ten and France has only one name in the top forty.

Chomsky won with 4,800 votes. He is followed by Umberto Eco, the 73 year old professor of semiotics at the University of Bologna, best known for his novels The Name of the Rose and Foucault's Pendulum. He has also studied Aquinas' philosophy and pointed out the importance of aesthetics. Richard Dawkins is the third on the list of winners. He is 64 and a professor of science at Oxford. He is known to be an atheist and is currently working on a documentary entitled The Root of All Evil focusing on religious matters. Vaclav Havel, the central figure in the Czech "velvet revolution" was the president of Czechoslovakia and between 1993 and 2003 he was the president of the Czech Republic. At present he is fervently supporting the human rights especially in countries where they are not observed like in Cuba and Burma. The political 56 writer, Christopher Hitchens, has been a contributor to the well known American magazines Nation, Vanity Fair, Atlantic and is a supporter for Bush's war on terror while the next one after him in the poll, Milton Friedman influenced the early years of Margaret Thatcher's governing, has spoken for individual freedom and has tried to demonstrate that taxes can be cut down.

The Bonus Balls named five personalities, the fifth being the ex-president Bill Clinton.

BDD-A5473 © 2006 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.108 (2026-11-17 21:49:23 UTC)

Going back to the winner of the poll, Noam Chomsky, we have to point out that he has been a controversial personality, an engaged intellectual, known for his political courage, the scholar who has changed linguistics, a man of great achievement.

In linguistics, he based his theory on the fact that human beings have the ability to create an infinite number of sentences starting from a finite number of words and symbols. Apparently, his conception is very simple as he becomes aware of the existence of an innate shared linguistic, mainly syntactic, capacity in humans. Due to this innate syntactic capacity language is subject to systematic change. He tried to explain the Great Vowel Shift in English as being a result of a generational dynamic.

Although one of the most influential linguists of the last and present century, Chomsky has been criticized for his ideas and for his empirical results after applying his theories to language acts.

In politics, Chomsky has always been against western military intervention. He critically pointed out the way in which governments of powerful countries, media and business have been ruling the world. Any military intervention leads to destruction, drug traffic, and religious hatred. With his democratic and humanitarian views he openly states that he favours “pacifist platitudes” to belligerent actions. He is afraid that once soldiers invading countries will harm and will get the taste of harming.

Chomsky protested against the American war in Vietnam in his book American Power and the New Mandarins (1969), comparing this policy to that of Hitler’s. In the Prosperous Few and the Restless Many (1994) he dealt with the Kosovo war and by his considerations of bombing Serb camps he attracted much criticism on himself. In dealing with other Nato interventions, although he was basically right in his judgments, he was criticized for not having understood the efforts made by western countries to stop genocide in some countries and also for having been politically rhetorical.

In spite of all the criticism, sometimes justified, directed to his linguistic theories and his political views, Chomsky will remain one of the “revolutionary” minds of modern age. A public personality who has influenced the way of thinking both in language investigation and in philosophical approaches to different domains of life, he will remain a controversial figure anyway.

Nevertheless, the result of the poll under discussion proves that Chomsky is rightly considered to be one of the top public intellectuals.

BDD-A5473 © 2006 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.108 (2026-11-17 21:49:23 UTC)