

The Opinion Pages

THE STONE NYT NOW

Noam Chomsky on the Roots of American Racism

By George Yancy and Noam Chomsky

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The Stone is a forum for contemporary philosophers and other thinkers on issues both timely and timeless.

This is the eighth in a series of interviews with philosophers on race that I am conducting for The Stone. This week's conversation is with Noam Chomsky, a linguist, political philosopher and one of the world's most prominent public intellectuals. He is the author of many books, including, most recently, "On Western Terrorism: From Hiroshima to Drone Warfare," with Andre Vltchek.

– George Yancy

George Yancy: When I think about the title of your book “On Western Terrorism,” I’m reminded of the fact that many black people in the United States have had a long history of being terrorized by white racism, from random beatings to the lynching of more than 3,000 black people (including women) between 1882 and 1968. This is why in 2003, when I read about the dehumanizing acts committed at Abu Ghraib prison, I wasn’t surprised. I recall that after the photos appeared President George W. Bush said that “This is not the America I know.” But isn’t this the America black people have always known?

Noam Chomsky: The America that “black people have always known” is not an attractive one. The first black slaves were brought to the colonies 400 years ago. We cannot allow ourselves to forget that during this long period there have been only a few decades when African-Americans, apart from a few, had some limited possibilities for entering the mainstream of American society.

We also cannot allow ourselves to forget that the hideous slave labor camps of the new “empire of liberty” were a primary source for the wealth and privilege of American society, as well as England and the continent. The industrial revolution was based on cotton, produced primarily in the slave labor camps of the United States.

As is now known, they were highly efficient. Productivity increased even faster than in industry, thanks to the technology of the bullwhip and pistol, and the efficient practice of brutal torture, as Edward E. Baptist demonstrates in his recent study, “The Half Has Never Been Told.” The achievement includes not only the great wealth of the planter aristocracy but also American and British manufacturing, commerce and the financial institutions of modern state capitalism.

It is, or should be, well-known that the United States developed by flatly rejecting the principles of “sound economics” preached to it by the leading economists of the day, and familiar in today’s sober instructions to latecomers in development. Instead, the newly liberated colonies followed the model of England with radical state intervention in the economy, including high tariffs to protect infant industry, first textiles, later steel and others.

There was also another “virtual tariff.” In 1807, President Jefferson signed a bill banning the importation of slaves from abroad. His state of Virginia was the richest and most powerful of the states, and had exhausted its need for slaves. Rather, it was beginning to produce this valuable commodity for the expanding slave territories of the South. Banning import of these cotton-picking machines was thus a considerable boost to the Virginia economy. That was understood. Speaking for the slave importers, Charles Pinckney charged that “Virginia will gain by stopping the importations. Her slaves will rise in value, and she has more than she wants.” And Virginia indeed became a major exporter of slaves to the expanding slave society.

Some of the slave-owners, like Jefferson, appreciated the moral turpitude on which the economy relied. But he feared the liberation of slaves, who have “ten thousand recollections” of the crimes to which they were subjected. Fears that the victims might rise up and take revenge are deeply rooted in American culture, with reverberations to the present.

The Thirteenth Amendment formally ended slavery, but a decade later “slavery by another name” (also the title of an important study by Douglas A. Blackmon) was introduced. Black life was criminalized by overly harsh codes that targeted black people. Soon an even more valuable form of slavery was available for agribusiness, mining, steel — more valuable because the state, not the capitalist, was responsible for sustaining the enslaved labor force, meaning that blacks were arrested without real cause and prisoners were put to work for these business interests. The system provided a major contribution to the rapid industrial development from the late 19th century.

That system remained pretty much in place until World War II led to a need for free labor for the war industry. Then followed a few decades of rapid and relatively egalitarian growth, with the state playing an even more critical role in economic development than before. A black man might get a decent job in a unionized factory, buy a house, send his children to college, along with other opportunities. The civil rights movement opened other doors, though in limited ways. One illustration was the fate of Martin Luther King’s efforts to confront northern racism and develop a movement of the poor, which was effectively blocked.

The neoliberal reaction that set in from the late ‘70s, escalating under Reagan and his successors, hit the poorest and most oppressed sectors of society even more than the large majority, who have suffered relative stagnation or decline while wealth accumulates in very few hands. Reagan’s drug war, deeply racist in conception and execution, initiated a new Jim Crow, Michelle Alexander’s apt term for the revived criminalization of black life, evident in the shocking incarceration rates and the devastating impact on black society.

Reality is of course more complex than any simple recapitulation, but this is, unfortunately, a reasonably accurate first approximation to one of the two founding crimes of American society, alongside of the expulsion or extermination of the indigenous nations and destruction of their complex and rich civilizations.

G.Y.: While Jefferson may have understood the moral turpitude upon which slavery was based, in his “Notes on the State of Virginia,” he says that black people are dull in imagination, inferior in reasoning to whites, and that the male orangutans

even prefer black women over their own. These myths, along with the black codes following the civil war, functioned to continue to oppress and police black people. What would you say are the contemporary myths and codes that are enacted to continue to oppress and police black people today?

N.C.: Unfortunately, Jefferson was far from alone. No need to review the shocking racism in otherwise enlightened circles until all too recently. On “contemporary myths and codes,” I would rather defer to the many eloquent voices of those who observe and often experience these bitter residues of a disgraceful past.

Perhaps the most appalling contemporary myth is that none of this happened. The title of Baptist’s book is all too apt, and the aftermath is much too little known and understood.

There is also a common variant of what has sometimes been called “intentional ignorance” of what it is inconvenient to know: “Yes, bad things happened in the past, but let us put all of that behind us and march on to a glorious future, all sharing equally in the rights and opportunities of citizenry.” The appalling statistics of today’s circumstances of African-American life can be confronted by other bitter residues of a shameful past, laments about black cultural inferiority, or worse, forgetting how our wealth and privilege was created in no small part by the centuries of torture and degradation of which we are the beneficiaries and they remain the victims. As for the very partial and hopelessly inadequate compensation that decency would require — that lies somewhere between the memory hole and anathema.

Jefferson, to his credit, at least recognized that the slavery in which he participated was “the most unremitting despotism on the one part, and degrading submissions on the other.” And the Jefferson Memorial in Washington displays his words that “Indeed I tremble for my country when I reflect that God is just: that his justice cannot sleep forever.” Words that should stand in our consciousness alongside of John Quincy Adams’s reflections on the parallel founding crime over centuries, the fate of “that hapless race of native Americans, which we are exterminating with such merciless and perfidious cruelty...among the heinous sins of this nation, for which I believe God will one day bring [it] to judgment.”

What matters is our judgment, too long and too deeply suppressed, and the just

reaction to it that is as yet barely contemplated.

G.Y.: This “intentional ignorance” regarding inconvenient truths about the suffering of African- Americans can also be used to frame the genocide of Native Americans. It was 18th century Swedish taxonomist Carolus Linnaeus who argued that Native Americans were governed by traits such as being “prone to anger,” a convenient myth for justifying the need for Native Americans to be “civilized” by whites. So, there are myths here as well. How does North America’s “amnesia” contribute to forms of racism directed uniquely toward Native Americans in our present moment and to their continual genocide?

N.C.: The useful myths began early on, and continue to the present. One of the first myths was formally established right after the King of England granted a Charter to the Massachusetts Bay Colony in 1629, declaring that conversion of the Indians to Christianity is “the principal end of this plantation.” The colonists at once created the Great Seal of the Colony, which depicts an Indian holding a spear pointing downward in a sign of peace, with a scroll coming from his mouth pleading with the colonists to “Come over and help us.” This may have been the first case of “humanitarian intervention” — and, curiously, it turned out like so many others.

Years later Supreme Court Justice Joseph Story mused about “the wisdom of Providence” that caused the natives to disappear like “the withered leaves of autumn” even though the colonists had “constantly respected” them. Needless to say, the colonists who did not choose “intentional ignorance” knew much better, and the most knowledgeable, like Gen. Henry Knox, the first secretary of war of the United States, described “the utter extirpation of all the Indians in most populous parts of the Union [by means] more destructive to the Indian natives than the conduct of the conquerors of Mexico and Peru.”

Knox went on to warn that “a future historian may mark the causes of this destruction of the human race in sable colors.” There were a few — very few — who did so, like the heroic Helen Jackson, who in 1880 provided a detailed account of that “sad revelation of broken faith, of violated treaties, and of inhuman acts of violence [that] will bring a flush of shame to the cheeks of those who love their country.” Jackson’s important book barely sold. She was neglected and dismissed in

favor of the version presented by Theodore Roosevelt, who explained that “The expansion of the peoples of white, or European, blood during the past four centuries...has been fraught with lasting benefit to most of the peoples already dwelling in the lands over which the expansion took place,” notably those who had been “extirpated” or expelled to destitution and misery.

The national poet, Walt Whitman, captured the general understanding when he wrote that “The nigger, like the Injun, will be eliminated; it is the law of the races, history... A superior grade of rats come and then all the minor rats are cleared out.” It wasn’t until the 1960s that the scale of the atrocities and their character began to enter even scholarship, and to some extent popular consciousness, though there is a long way to go.

That’s only a bare beginning of the shocking record of the Anglosphere and its settler-colonial version of imperialism, a form of imperialism that leads quite naturally to the “utter extirpation” of the indigenous population — and to “intentional ignorance” on the part of beneficiaries of the crimes.

G.Y.: Your response raises the issue of colonization as a form of occupation. James Baldwin, in his 1966 essay, “A Report from Occupied Territory,” wrote, “Harlem is policed like occupied territory.” This quote made me think of Ferguson, Mo. Some of the protesters in Ferguson even compared what they were seeing to the Gaza Strip. Can you speak to this comparative discourse of occupation?

N.C.: All kinds of comparisons are possible. When I went to the Gaza Strip a few years ago, what came to mind very quickly was the experience of being in jail (for civil disobedience, many times): the feeling, very strange to people who have had privileged lives, that you are totally under the control of some external authority, arbitrary and if it so chooses, cruel. But the differences between the two cases are, of course, vast.

More generally, I’m somewhat skeptical about the value of comparisons of the kind mentioned. There will of course be features common to the many diverse kinds of illegitimate authority, repression and violence. Sometimes they can be illuminating; for example, Michelle Alexander’s analogy of a new Jim Crow, mentioned earlier. Often they may efface crucial distinctions. I don’t frankly see

anything general to say of much value. Each comparison has to be evaluated on its own.

G.Y.: These differences are vast and I certainly don't want to conflate them. Post-9/11 seems to have ushered in an important space for making some comparisons. Some seem to think that Muslims of Arab descent have replaced African-Americans as the pariah in the United States. What are your views on this?

N.C.: Anti-Arab/Muslim racism has a long history, and there's been a fair amount of literature about it. Jack Shaheen's studies of stereotyping in visual media, for example. And there's no doubt that it's increased in recent years. To give just one vivid current example, audiences flocked in record-breaking numbers to a film, described in The New York Times Arts section as "a patriotic, pro-family picture," about a sniper who claims to hold the championship in killing Iraqis during the United States invasion, and proudly describes his targets as "savagely, despicable, evil ... really no other way to describe what we encountered there." This was referring specifically to his first kill, a woman holding a grenade when under attack by United States forces.

What's important is not just the mentality of the sniper, but the reaction to such exploits at home when we invade and destroy a foreign country, hardly distinguishing one "raghead" from another. These attitudes go back to the "merciless Indian savages" of the Declaration of Independence and the savagery and fiendishness of others who have been in the way ever since, particularly when some "racial" element can be invoked — as when Lyndon Johnson lamented that if we let down our guard, we'll be at the mercy of "every yellow dwarf with a pocket knife." But within the United States, though there have been deplorable incidents, anti-Arab/Muslim racism among the public has been fairly restrained, I think.

G.Y.: Lastly, the reality of racism (whether it's anti-black, anti-Arab, anti-Jewish, etc.) is toxic. While there is no single solution to racism, especially in terms of its various manifestations, what do you see as some of the necessary requirements for ending racist hatred?

N.C.: It's easy to rattle off the usual answers: education, exploring and addressing the sources of the malady, joining together in common enterprises —

labor struggles have been an important case — and so on. The answers are right, and have achieved a lot. Racism is far from eradicated, but it is not what it was not very long ago, thanks to such efforts. It's a long, hard road. No magic wand, as far as I know.

This interview was conducted by email and edited. Previous interviews in this series (with Linda Martin Alcoff, Judith Butler, Joy James, Charles Mills, Falguni A. Sheth, Shannon Sullivan and Naomi Zack) can be found [here](#).

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