

# “DISSIDENT” IS A TERM TO BE USED UNIVERSALLY OR NOT AT ALL

Interview with Noam Chomsky,  
by Greg Evans\*

*Greg Evans met with linguist and political writer Noam Chomsky on February 5, 2019 in his office at the University of Arizona (Tucson, Arizona). They discussed his visit to Prague in 2014 and his attempt to place the activity of East-Central European dissent in global perspective, without forgetting the many dissidents active under US-backed regimes elsewhere in the world. Also participating was Valéria Wasserman Chomsky. Transcribed and edited by Greg Evans.*

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While discussing the hypocrisy of “enlightened” Western thinking in a 1991 article in *Z Magazine*,<sup>1</sup> you pointed out that, in the later stages of the Cold War, Eastern Bloc dissidents suffered less than the opponents of U.S.-backed Latin American regimes. This is a point that you have made many other times over the years, including during your visit to the Czech Republic in 2014. What did you make of the explosive reaction, what one newspaper called a “Chomskiad” of commentary and counter-commentary, that your statement generated there?

I expected it, though the comment is familiar. It’s not mine; I mean, you can read it anywhere, it’s standard scholarship, so in itself it’s nothing. Of course, it only applies to the post-Stalin period – the preceding period was quite different – but after about 1960 there’s simply no serious question that the fate of Latin American dissidents was incomparably worse than that of those in the Eastern Bloc. Firstly, their treatment was far worse, but there’s another aspect: the Eastern Bloc dissidents – who were treated very harshly, and punished harshly – had the unique advantage of being celebrated and supported elsewhere; in fact, in the most powerful parts of the world. That’s not true of dissidents elsewhere; nobody supports the Latin American dissidents. So I can ask you: do you know the names of any of the Latin American intellectuals, Jesuit priests, who were assassinated immediately after the fall of the Berlin Wall – along with their housekeeper and her daughter, to ensure that there would be no witnesses?

I know *of* them, but no, I can’t name any...

Nobody knows their names. But everyone knows the names of the East European dissidents. In fact it was particularly striking in the case of Václav Havel, because he visited the United States soon after this atrocity. An atrocity that was carried out by a battalion of the Salvadoran Army, armed and trained by United States special forces, with a hideous record of crimes, acting under the direct orders of the high command of the Salvadoran army that – of course – was in constant contact with the American embassy, which was basically running the country. And these were six leading Latin American intellectuals, including the rector of the main university, a well-known social psychologist, and others. And a few weeks after this Havel came to the United States and spoke before a joint session of Congress, where he got a standing ovation for praising the US as “the defenders of freedom.” Well yes, they were the defenders of freedom in Czechoslovakia, but not in the areas they were running. It was as if Father Ignacio Ellacuria, the most prominent of the group of assassinated Jesuit intellectuals, had gone to Russia and spoken before a joint session of the Duma and been wildly

<sup>1</sup> Noam Chomsky, “Force and Opinion,” *Z Magazine*, July–August 1991 (online at [https://chomsky.info/199107\\_\\_/](https://chomsky.info/199107__/) [accessed Dec. 9, 2019]).

applauded for calling Russia the defenders of freedom because they'd defended freedom in El Salvador. And this is very dramatic difference: Latin American intellectuals sympathized with and supported Eastern Bloc dissidents, but Eastern Bloc dissidents mostly didn't give a damn about their counterparts in US domains. It's very striking when you look at it, but it is also understandable because they were lionized – in fact the very word “dissident,” in ordinary use, applies to Eastern Europeans only, nobody talks about the Latin American intellectuals who were murdered as dissidents. Maybe as communists, Marxists, or something of the sort, but not as dissidents. These were practitioners of what was called Liberation theology, and the US Army officially – officially – takes credit for having helped to destroy Liberation theology. That means the assassination of Jesuit intellectuals, it means the assassination of Archbishop Romero, a whole string of religious martyrs, they take credit for it. So when Vaclav Havel comes and says “you're the Defenders of Freedom” and of course gets enormous applause for it across the political spectrum, how are we supposed to react to that? This isn't to imply that Havel wasn't treated badly – of course he was – but he didn't have his brains blown out. So yes, I expected exactly that reaction in Eastern Europe because they simply do not know. What they do “know” is that they were the only ones who suffered.

Do you think this has anything to do with the fact that, to a certain degree, the dissidents came to power? In the case of Czechoslovakia, a former dissident became president...

This happened in part because they had enormous support from the world's main power centers. That not only affects their status, but also their self-image. No one else has that picture of themselves. Can you think of dissidents in any country, aside from enemies of the United States, that anyone has ever heard of? Or who are lionized or treated as heroes? Look at our reaction to Nelson Mandela. He was on the US terrorist list until 2008, he had to have special dispensation to get into the country. And this is a man who was treated practically like a saint around the world. In fact in 1988, right at the end of the apartheid regime, the Pentagon had designated the African National Congress as “one of the world's more notorious terrorist groups”. That's the way people are treated elsewhere. The ones who are slaughtered, tortured, and murdered in our domains, they are never even heard of. Right here in Tucson activists are currently on trial for federal crimes because they left water in the desert to save the lives of people trying to cross the border. Where are these people coming from? They are fleeing from the effects of US terrorism, from Reagan's wars and their aftermath, which killed hundreds of thousands of people. The Reagan decade started with the assassination of an archbishop and ended with the assassination of intellectuals. And there were many in between: in the Mayan highlands of Guatemala maybe 150,000 people were killed. These people are still fleeing from the wreckage, and does anybody know? And we have to have a wall to keep them out because they are called rapists and murderers.

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Had you ever experienced a reaction like that anywhere else?

Every time I've been in Eastern Europe. You know, it's very common for former dissidents who are highly supportive of the United States to bitterly condemn people who criticize the US.

Even beyond the Czech Republic?

Well, I haven't been in Eastern Europe much. In fact, you might not know that I applied for a Czechoslovak visa in the aftermath of the Warsaw Pact invasion and was turned down...the point was, basically, for me and a couple of others to go and see Dubček and we were banned from entering because, I think, they thought we would cause some trouble. In fact, that is only one of two countries I have ever been banned from entering, the other was Israel.

[Valéria Chomsky:] And there was a third country that wouldn't let you in [*laughter*], Brazil.

[Noam Chomsky:] Oh yes, there is Brazil, but in that case it was because I'd forgotten my visa [*laughter*].

Although you have been vilified by some in the Czech press, even some of the vilifiers, so to speak, stated that you had triggered what the right-leaning newspaper *Lidové noviny* referred to as “a discussion that, in its intensity, has exceeded any other that has played out on the Czech public scene for a long time now.”<sup>2</sup>

I didn't know anything about that. Well, I think it's something they should think about. And incidentally, I also went to Turkey to insist on taking part as a co-defendant in the political trial of my publisher there who was being charged and was facing prison, and the Turkish authorities obviously didn't like that, and in fact, later on I was personally denounced by Erdoğan. So yes, you should go to places and tell them things they don't want to hear, there's no point in telling them they're wonderful.

I wanted to try and get your reaction to some of the specific comments that were made in the Czech press regarding your statement. I think you've already addressed the first one I'd wanted to bring up, made by Jiří Pehe,<sup>3</sup> a long-time advisor to Václav Havel,

<sup>2</sup> Jiří Peňás “Debata LN: Po chomskiádě nás čeká havliáda,” June 21, 2014, *Lidové noviny* (online at [https://www.lidovky.cz/nazory/penas-po-chomskiade-nas-ceka-havliada.A140621\\_153347\\_ln\\_nazory\\_sk](https://www.lidovky.cz/nazory/penas-po-chomskiade-nas-ceka-havliada.A140621_153347_ln_nazory_sk) [accessed Dec. 7, 2019]).

<sup>3</sup> Jiří Pehe, “Trapný spor o utrpení disidentů,” *Novinky.cz*, June 14, 2014 (online at <https://www.>

who wrote that we should compare the suffering endured in Latin America not with late Communism, but with early Communism, when Stalinism was in full swing. In the next, Roman Joch,<sup>4</sup> an advisor to the right-wing government of a few years ago, said that he thought that the reaction to your statement wasn't so much because of what you had said, but because you had never suffered from such oppression yourself and that if a Chilean victim of Pinochet had come here and said it, it would have been taken differently.

NC: Well, if he wants to know what the Chilean dissidents suffered, he should go through the Villa Grimaldi, as I did, the main torture chamber under Pinochet – who was of course strongly supported by the United States. I was taken through it by one of the very few people who survived it, Pedro Matta, who is a human rights activist in Chile. They've turned it into a memorial now. He took me through the stages, you go through stage after stage of torture, at each stage there is a doctor present to make sure you don't die, so that you can go to the next, harsher stage of torture, then you go through that, the doctor stops when you're at the brink of death, then you go to the next one, and finally when you've made it through all of them you get thrown into a tower where you die, very few people survived that. Did that happen in Czechoslovakia?

But Joch seemed to be saying that one had to be Chilean, to have suffered that actual fate, to...

In other words he's saying that you can't tell people the truth unless you yourself have been tortured? Well, I can understand that reaction, but I don't accept it. If somebody comes to the United States who has never suffered what goes on at the border and condemns the sending of children to concentration camps, separated from their parents, I wouldn't respond by saying: “Well, you were never sent to a concentration camp as a child.” That's not an appropriate response.

The philosopher Václav Bělohradský wrote a long essay<sup>5</sup> in the left-leaning daily *Pravo* in the wake of your visit, entitled “The Dissident – An Attempt at a Definition.” In it, he differentiates between the true dissident and the merely apparent dissident who is, in fact, an opponent of one system of government but a supporter and an apologist for another system...

novinky.cz/komentare/clanek/komentar-trapny-spor-o-utrpeni-disidentu-jiri-pehe-231450 [accessed Dec. 10, 2019]).

<sup>4</sup> Peñás, “Debata LN.”

<sup>5</sup> Václav Bělohradský, “Disidenti – pokus o definici,” *Právo*, July 1, 2014 (online at <https://www.novinky.cz/kultura/salon/clanek/vaclav-belohradsky-disidenti-pokus-o-definici-37514> [accessed Dec. 10, 2019]).

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Like Václav Havel, for example. Did he give that example? Because if he didn't, he should have. How else can you describe a person who comes to the United States immediately after the slaughter of six of his counterparts in Latin America and praises the government at a joint session of congress as the defender of freedom. Does that fit his description? I think it does. Havel even said, within the context of one of the United States' invasions, that the United States was the first country to be acting on the basis of principles and not interests. Can you go beyond that as a supporter and apologist for another system?

I will check later to see whether Bělohradský included Havel in this or not.<sup>6</sup> But Bělohradský then goes on to define what he considers to be an actual dissident, namely somebody who tries to open up a space for an “anti-apologist” consciousnesses that is critical of all such systems, even the one he or she might actually believe in...

Yes, that's exactly right. That's what real critics of violence do. I don't know who he mentioned, but yes, of course, we condemn the crimes of our official enemies and others, and our own governments; of course, our own are the much more important ones, because those are the ones that we can influence. Like when I write statements defending Iranian dissidents, does that have any effect? No. When you do it to your own, it has an effect.

Belohradsky also, as I recall it, likened it at one point to “bearing witness”, from the Christian tradition of...

No, it's not a matter of bearing witness. You're not talking to God; you're trying to help people.

I think this was a secular version of it, that you see a better reality, in which things work better...

I have good friends among the Catholic Left who think that they're bearing witness, but I don't think that's the right attitude. You're trying to have a positive effect, and your relationship to God has nothing to do with this.

Isn't there a need in this discussion to clarify some of the confusion in the terminology? In Olomouc, you spoke of “intellectuals” in the tradition of the Dreyfusards, and you said in your interview on Czech Television, as you have said here, that the term “dissident” wouldn't generally be applied to you or other critics of the system in the United States. In fact, in the preface you recently wrote to the new edition of your 1967

<sup>6</sup> Interviewer's note: I did check, and Bělohradský did include Havel in this category in his essay.

essay,<sup>7</sup> “The Responsibility of Intellectuals,” you discuss how even the term “wild men in the wings” has been used in the United States...

Yes, that we’re “wild men in the wings,” not dissidents. But, as I said, the term “dissident” in English is used for East Europeans, it is almost never used for anyone else, as a category.

Do you consider yourself to be a dissident, or do you use the term?

Whatever the term is supposed to mean, sure. Somebody who is a critical analyst of policies and ideologies is a dissident, typically. And notice the way that dissidents are treated. Take the Dreyfusards, who you mentioned. How were they treated? Viciously. Émile Zola had to flee France; they were condemned by the great intellectuals of the *Académie française* as being ridiculous, grotesque people – these writers who are daring to criticize France’s sacred institutions, the army and the state, what do they know? Right after this came the First World War. What happened at that time was very interesting. On every side, the overwhelming majority of intellectuals came out passionately in support of their own state; there were maybe a scattering of people who refused, like Bertrand Russell, who was in jail; Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg, in jail; Eugene Debs, in jail. That’s what happens to people who break from the mainstream tradition. It goes all the way back to who it was that drank the hemlock in Athens. It was the guy who was corrupting the youth by asking too many questions. So it’s been there all throughout history.

So maybe “dissident” should be applied more universally...

Either use the term universally or not at all.

Well, I can say that a recent collection of your writings that was published in the Czech Republic was entitled “Noam Chomsky: A Dissident of the West.”<sup>8</sup>

Well, okay, that’s fine if they used the word there. That’s the proper way to use it.

I might also add that I’ve actually been in jail repeatedly, and I was up for a long jail sentence in a federal trial for resistance, but it was called off, almost by accident. I was a co-conspirator in one trial, a primary target in the next one, but they called off the trial after the Tet offensive.

<sup>7</sup> Noam Chomsky, *The Responsibility of Intellectuals* (New York: The New Press, 2017), preface.

<sup>8</sup> Noam Chomsky, *Dissident Západy* (Prague: Karolinum, 2014).

Actually, that's news to me...

Well, I don't advertise it [*laughter*]. But also, of course, just being in jail for civil disobedience is not like being imprisoned.

The next question, continuing with the theme of dissidents, is about the fact that the fate of former dissidents entering into government often hasn't been a satisfying one. We have seen this most recently with Aung San Suu Kyi's inaction regarding the ethnic cleansing of the Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar. Why do you think this might be?

Well, I should say that I did have a picture of her on my wall at one point, but I took it down. What she is doing is pretty awful, but you can understand it. She's treading a very dangerous path – if she doesn't accommodate herself to the military, she's finished. It's not a pleasant place to be in. I think you can explain but not justify her position by the fact that, if she did take an honorable and courageous position, she'd be back in jail. So it's easy to criticize, but we should also try to understand.

What conditions would have to be met for you to enter government as, for example, an advisor, and cease in your role as a public intellectual and critic? Or, in a better world, would the two have to be incompatible?

The two are not incompatible. I haven't been an advisor to the government, but I have testified before the Senate, to Senate committees, so you testify as a critic, and you don't tell them how wonderful you are, you tell them what they're doing wrong.

Was there ever a question of your being appointed to some governmental capacity or the other? To a commission investigating something, for example, or...

Virtually inconceivable. I have been offered positions writing for major newspapers, but I didn't take them because I knew that they would last about a week [*laughter*].

Is there a question of a return to those days when dissidents, opponents, and reformers have to live dangerously once again? I'm thinking of the rise to power of Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil, who celebrates torture, Elliot Abrams returning to the State Department, as well as the increasing repression of political opposition in parts of Europe such as Poland, Hungary, and Russia.

Well, let's take Brazil. The last time Valéria and I were there, a couple of months ago, we went to visit the most important political prisoner in the world, but somebody whose fate is virtually unknown in the US. Try to read an article in the Western press refer-



ring to Lula’s imprisonment.<sup>9</sup> He was in a position to win the 2018 election, the polls indicated that he would, and the right wing had to silence him. They put him in prison on charges of having been offered an apartment that he never lived in and had no key to, which, even if you believe them, are so totally disproportionate to the sentence that you can’t even take them seriously; and, in comparison with the people who made the charges, he looks like a saint. So he was put in jail just before the election, in solitary confinement, not allowed access to printed material, had one fixed television channel, and was not allowed to make a statement. Murderers on death row are permitted to make statements, but he’s not permitted to do so because that might affect public opinion. He gets very restricted visiting rights, and now they’ve been restricted even further. Does that count as a definition of a political prisoner? Can you think of a more important one in the world? But have you seen a word about it anywhere?

Not in the mainstream press, no.

Not in the *New York Times*, not in the *Washington Post*, not anywhere. Nor in Europe, including the *Guardian*, as far as I’m aware.<sup>10</sup> A possible exception would be in *Le Monde diplomatique*. In fact, most people wouldn’t even know who he is. But if anything like that had happened in an enemy country, we’d know about it.

I wanted to make my linguist friends happy by harkening back to another celebrated linguist caught up in politically unsettled times and ask, as my final question: You were both a student and a colleague of Roman Jakobson, as well as being his friend. Did he ever speak to you about his days in inter-war Czechoslovakia, specifically the cultural scene there, not to mention the politics? And finally about his narrow escape(s) from the advancing Nazis?

Oh sure, we spoke about that quite a lot. The Prague Circle was a major – in many ways the major – center of linguistics. *Travaux*, the journal of the Prague Circle, was one of the major linguistic journals and Roman was, of course, a leading figure. And he did just make it out in time, to Sweden.

Did he ever talk about his days in Prague? About Holešovice...

It was a very exciting period, and intellectually so, in the inter-war period. There was, for example, Futurism...

<sup>9</sup> That is, former Brazilian president Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva

<sup>10</sup> This interview, as noted above, was conducted in February 2019. Since then the mainstream press has reported, to a limited extent, on more recent developments in Lula’s case.

And he also had a connection with the surrealists?

Yes, he did, but he was also one of the leading formalists. He was a leading figure, first in Russia and then in Czech and Central European intellectual life. When he came to the United States he was treated pretty badly, he couldn't get a job at first because the American linguists didn't want him to be appointed. Thanks to the mediation of two leading linguists, one of them being Zellig Harris, my teacher and friend, he was able to get a job at the Yiddish Research Institute,<sup>11</sup> and then he finally got an academic job. But the American intellectuals in general were very hostile to the European intellectuals. In part they were afraid of them. These were huge figures; and remember that the United States had been an intellectual backwater until the Second World War. There is this famous story, I presume true, about a great mathematician, the French mathematician Jacques Hadamard, who came to the United States as a refugee in I think 1946. He went to Georgetown University looking for a job and they turned him down; as he was walking out he noticed that they had a photograph of him on the wall as one of the great mathematicians. The New School of Social Research was set up in New York primarily to take in European refugees who were not given positions. It wasn't a pretty period, but Roman did finally make it.

[Valéria Chomsky:] You should tell him the anecdote about going to Jakobson's class and...

[Noam Chomsky:] Yes, when I was a grad student at Harvard he was there and he wanted me to take a graduate course he was giving, so I said "Well, you're lecturing in Russian, and I don't know any Russian," and he said "Well, try to understand." He found it hard to believe that anybody wouldn't be able to understand Russian. [*laughter*]. He was a wonderful guy.

<sup>11</sup> The Yidisher Visnshaftlekher Institut, better known by its acronym YIVO.