

Which Truth? Whose Power?:

Chomsky and Said on the Role of the Intellectual in the United States

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Not only do Noam Chomsky and Edward Said exemplify the category of “public intellectual”, they have also reflected on that category in their writings on politics and political engagement. Though Chomsky and Said have been allies on a range of political issues, notably the question of Palestine, they have made apparently contradictory statements concerning intellectuals and their public role in the United States. While Said appears to endorse the ideal of “speaking truth to power,” Chomsky has written that it is “not a particularly honorable vocation.” Moreover, while Chomsky tends to use the term “intellectual” disparagingly, Said deploys it as an honorific, for instance calling Gramsci a “model intellectual.”

Among the questions I will address in this paper are the following. What exactly is an “intellectual,” and why does it matter? Do intellectuals have a special moral obligation to confront or critique the actions of their governments? What do these obligations entail? Are the obligations of intellectuals in this regard any different from those of other citizens, and on what grounds? Moreover, does being a citizen of a superpower carry a special moral responsibility? Are the responsibilities of intellectuals in a society like the United States different from those of intellectuals in various societies in the Middle East, and if so, in what respect? What is it to “speak truth to power” and why does Said endorse this ideal, while Chomsky seems to critique it? By attending to these questions, I will try to explain the apparent disagreement between Chomsky and Said, as well as put forward some proposals concerning the role of intellectuals in disseminating truth and confronting power.