

# The radical intellectual

## Some personal reflections

*Noam Chomsky*

*Professor Chomsky kindly gave The Spokesman permission to publish his talk, which was first given on 8 April 2010 in Madison, Wisconsin, at the Havens Center for the Study of Social Structure and Social Change in the Sociology Department at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. His new book is called Hopes and Prospects (Hamish Hamilton, £18.99).*

I don't have to say how pleased and grateful I am for this honour, which also offers an occasion to look back over the years. What comes to mind with particular salience is the earliest years, perhaps because I've been thinking a lot about them lately, for other reasons. They were, of course, formative years for me personally, but I think the significance unfortunately goes beyond.

I'm just old enough to have memories of Hitler's speeches on the radio 75 years ago. I didn't understand the words, but couldn't fail to grasp the menace of the tone and the cheering mobs. The first political article I wrote was in February 1939, right after the fall of Barcelona. I'm sure it was nothing memorable. I can recall a little of it, but much more clearly the mood of fear and foreboding. The article opened with the words: 'Austria falls, Czechoslovakia falls, and now Barcelona falls' – and Spain with it, a few months later. The words have always stayed in my mind, along with the dread, the sense of the dark clouds of fascism gathering over Germany and then Europe and perhaps beyond, a growing force of unimaginable horror. Though no one could foresee the Holocaust, *Kristallnacht* had taken place just a few weeks before and the desperate flight of refugees had been building up for years, many of them unable to believe what was happening.

In those years I also had my first experience with radical intellectuals – though they wouldn't be called 'intellectuals' as the term is standardly used, applying to people with status and privilege who are in a position to reach the public with thoughts about human affairs and concerns. And since privilege confers

responsibility, the question always arises as to how they are using that responsibility, topics very much alive in those years in work by Erich Fromm, Russell and Dewey, Orwell, Dwight MacDonald, and others, which I soon came to know. But the radical intellectuals of my childhood were different. They were my working-class relatives in New York, mostly unemployed during the Depression, though one uncle, with a disability, had a newsstand thanks to New Deal measures and so was able to help support much of the family. My parents could, too, in a small way. As Hebrew teachers in Philadelphia, they had that rare gift of employment, so we had a stream of aunts and cousins staying with us periodically.

My New York relatives mostly had limited formal education. My uncle, who ran the newsstand and was an enormous influence on my early life, had never gone beyond fourth grade. But it was one of the most lively intellectual circles I have ever been part of, at least on the periphery as a child. There were constant discussions about the latest performance of the Budapest String Quartet, the controversies between Stekel and Freud, radical politics and activism, which was then reaching impressive peaks. Particularly significant were the sit-down strikes, just a step short of workers taking over factories and radically changing the society – ideas that should be very much alive today.

Along with being a major factor in New Deal measures, the rising labour activism aroused great concern in the business world. Its leading figures warned about ‘the hazard facing industrialists [with] the rising political power of the masses’, and the need to intensify ‘the everlasting battle for the minds of men’, and instituted programmes to overcome this threat to order and discipline, put aside during the war, but taken up afterward with extreme dedication and scale. The United States is unusual among industrial societies in its highly class-conscious business community, relentlessly fighting a bitter class war, in earlier years with unusual levels of violence, more recently through massive propaganda offensives.

Some of my relatives were close to the Communist Party, others were bitterly anti-Communist from the left; and some, like my uncle, were anti-Bolshevik, from farther left. Among those close to the Party, while there was ritual obeisance to Russia, I had the feeling that for most the focus was right here: the civil rights and labour movements, welfare reform and badly needed social change. The Party was a force that did not anticipate quick victories, but was always present, ready, persistent, dedicated to moving from temporary defeat to the next struggle, something that we really lack today. It was also connected with a broader movement of workers’ education and associations and, not least, an opportunity for my unemployed

seamstress aunts to spend a week in the country at an International Ladies Garment Workers' Union resort and other escapes from what should have been a very grim world, though I remember it from my own personal experiences – limited of course – as a time that was full of hope, quite unlike today under circumstances that are objectively much less severe.

By 1941, I was spending as much time as I could in downtown Manhattan, gravitating to another group of radical intellectuals in the small bookstores on 4<sup>th</sup> Avenue run by anarchist refugees from the Spanish revolution of 1936, or the office of the Anarchist *Freie Arbeiter Stimme* in Union Square nearby. They, too, didn't fit the standard formula for intellectuals. But if by the term we mean people who think seriously about life and society, their problems and possible solutions, against a background of knowledge and understanding, then they were indeed intellectuals, impressive ones. They were quite happy to spend time with a young kid who was fascinated with the 1936 anarchist revolution, which I thought then, and still think, was one of the high points of Western civilization and in some ways a beacon for a better future. I picked up a lot of material that I used 30 years later when writing about the topic, most of it not then in print.

Among the most memorable of these materials is a collection of primary documents about collectivization, published in 1937 by the CNT, the anarcho-syndicalist union that is celebrating its centenary this year. One contribution has resonated in my mind ever since, by peasants of the village of Membrilla. I would like to quote parts of it:

'In [the] miserable huts [of Membrilla] live the poor inhabitants of a poor province; eight thousand people, but the streets are not paved, the town has no newspaper, no cinema, neither a café nor a library ... Food, clothing and tools were distributed equitably to the whole population. Money was abolished, work collectivized, all goods passed to the community, consumption was socialized. It was, however, not a socialization of wealth but of poverty ... The whole population lived as in a large family; functionaries, delegates, the secretary of the syndicates, the members of the municipal council, all elected, acted as heads of a family. But they were controlled, because special privilege or corruption would not be tolerated. Membrilla is perhaps the poorest village of Spain, but it is the most just.'

These words, by some of the most impoverished peasants in the country, capture with rare eloquence the achievements and promise of the anarchist revolution. The achievements did not, of course, spring up from nothing. They were the outcome of many decades of struggle, experiment, brutal repression – and learning. The concept of how a just society should be organized was in the minds of the population when the opportunity arose.

The experiment in creating a world of freedom and justice was crushed all too soon by the combined forces of fascism, Stalinism and liberal democracy. Global power centres understood very well that they must unite to destroy this dangerous threat to subordination and discipline before turning to the secondary task of dividing up the spoils.

In later years, I have sometimes been able to see first-hand at least a little of the lives of poor people suffering brutal repression and violence – in the miserable slums of Haiti at the peak of the terror in the early 1990s, supported by Washington though the facts are still suppressed and highly relevant to today's tragedies. Or in refugee camps in Laos, where tens of thousands of people were huddled, driven from their homes by a CIA mercenary army after years of trying to survive in caves under relentless bombing that had nothing to do with the war in Vietnam, one of the gravest atrocities of modern history, still largely unknown and still killing many people because the land is saturated with unexploded ordnance. Or in Palestine and south-eastern Turkey and many other places. Among them, particularly important to me for personal reasons, is southern Colombia, where *campesinos*, indigenous people and Afro-Colombians are being driven from their devastated lands by terror and chemical warfare, called here 'fumigation', as if we somehow have the right to destroy other countries on pretexts that we manufacture – people capable of the most miraculous sympathy and humanity, despite the awful suffering in which we play a major role, while looking the other way – though not in Madison, thanks to the work of the Colombia support group here.

One of the things I learned in the anarchist bookstores and offices 70 years ago was that I had been wrong in taking the fall of Barcelona in 1939 to be the death knell for freedom in Spain. It rang two years earlier, in May 1937, when the industrial working class was crushed by the Communist-led repression and Communist armies swept through the countryside destroying the collectives, with the assistance of the liberal democracies and with Hitler and Mussolini waiting in the wings – an immense tragedy for Spain, even though not quite the victory that the predators had anticipated.

A few years later, I left home for graduate studies at Harvard, where I had my first extensive experience with the élite intellectual world. On arrival, I went to the standard faculty-run party for incoming students and was regaled by a very distinguished philosopher with an account of the Depression – which, he assured me, had not taken place. It was a liberal fabrication. There were no rag-pickers coming to our door in desperation in the early 1930s, no women workers being beaten by security forces while on strike at a textile factory that I passed on a trolley with my mother

when I was about five, none of my unemployed working class relatives. A few businessmen might have suffered, but there was nothing beyond that.

I was soon to learn that this was far from an exception, but I don't want to suggest that this was typical of Harvard intellectuals. Most were Stevenson liberals, people who applauded when Stevenson said at the UN that we have to defend Vietnam from 'internal aggression', from the 'assault from within', as President Kennedy put it. Words that we hear again today, for example, last Sunday, in *The New York Times*, where we read that after the conquest of Marja in Helmand Province, the Marines have collided with a Taliban identity so dominant that the movement appears more akin to the only political organization in a one-party town, with an influence that touches everyone. 'We've got to re-evaluate our definition of the word "enemy",' said Brig. Gen. Larry Nicholson, commander of the Marine expeditionary brigade in Helmand Province. 'Most people here identify themselves as Taliban ... We have to readjust our thinking so we're not trying to chase the Taliban out of Marja, we're trying to chase the enemy out,' he said.

A problem that has always bedeviled conquerors, very familiar to the United States from Vietnam, where the leading US government scholar in a widely praised book lamented that the enemy within was the only 'truly mass-based political party in South Vietnam' and any effort of ours to compete with it politically would be like a conflict between a minnow and a whale, so we had to overcome their political force by using our comparative advantage, violence – as we did. Others have faced similar problems: for example, the Russians in Afghanistan in the 1980s, an invasion that also elicited the outrage that we muster up for the crimes of enemies. Middle East specialist William Polk reminds us that the Russians 'won many military victories and through their civic action programs they actually won over many of the villages' – and in fact, as we know from reliable sources, created substantial freedom in Kabul, particularly for women. But, to go on with Polk, 'over the decade of their involvement, the Russians won almost every battle and occupied at one time or another virtually every inch of the country, but they lost ... the war. When they gave up and left, the Afghans resumed their traditional way of life.'

The dilemmas faced by Obama and McChrystal are not quite the same. The enemy whom the Marines are trying to chase out of their villages have virtually no outside support. The Russian invaders, in sharp contrast, were facing a resistance that received vital support from the US, Saudi Arabia and Pakistan, who were rounding up the most extreme radical Islamic fundamentalists they could find – including those terrorizing women in

Kabul – and were arming them with advanced weapons, while also carrying forward the programme of radical Islamization of Pakistan, yet another one of Reagan’s gifts to the world, along with Pakistan’s nuclear weapons. The goal of these US operations was not to defend Afghanistan. It was explained frankly by the CIA station chief in Islamabad, who was running the operations. The goal was to ‘kill Soviet Soldiers’. He boasted that he ‘loved’ this ‘noble goal’, making it very clear, in his words, that ‘the mission was not to liberate Afghanistan’, which he didn’t care about. You’re familiar I’m sure with Zbigniew Brzezinski’s somewhat similar boasts.

By the early 1960s, I was deeply engaged in antiwar activities. I won’t go into the details, though they tell us a lot about the intellectual climate, particularly in liberal Boston. By 1966, my own involvement was deep enough so that my wife went back to college to get a degree after 17 years because of the likelihood of a long prison sentence – which came very close. The trial was already announced, but cancelled after the Tet offensive, which convinced the business community that the war was becoming too costly and, in any event, the major war aims had been achieved – another long story I won’t go into. After the Tet offensive and the shift in official policy, it suddenly turned out that everyone had been a long-term opponent of the war – in deep silence. Kennedy memoirists rewrote their accounts to present their hero as a dove – untroubled by the radical revisions or by the extensive documentary evidence showing that JFK would consider withdrawal from a war he knew to be domestically unpopular only after victory was assured.

Even before the Tet offensive there were growing doubts in these circles, not about the sentimental notions of right and wrong that we reserve for the crimes of enemies, but about the likelihood of success in beating back the ‘assault from within’. Perhaps, a paradigm was Arthur Schlesinger’s reflections when he was beginning to be concerned that victory might not be so easily at hand. As he put it, ‘we all pray’ that the hawks will be right and that the surge of the day will bring victory. And if it does, we will be praising the ‘wisdom and statesmanship’ of the US government in gaining military victory while leaving ‘the tragic country gutted and devastated by bombs, burned by napalm, turned into a wasteland by chemical defoliation, a land of ruin and wreck’, with its ‘political and institutional fabric’ pulverized. But escalation probably won’t succeed and will prove to be too costly for ourselves, so perhaps strategy should be rethought.

Little has changed today when Obama is hailed as a leading opponent

of the Iraq invasion because it was a 'strategic blunder', words that one could also have read in *Pravda* by the mid-1980s. The imperial mentality is very deeply rooted.

It is sad to say, but not false, that within the dominant spectrum the liberal imperialists are 'the good guys'. A likely alternative is revealed by the most recent polls. Almost half of voters say that the average Tea Party member is closer to their views than President Obama, whom fewer prefer. There's an interesting breakdown. Eighty-seven per cent of those in the so-called 'Political Class' say their views are closer to Obama's. Sixty-three per cent of what are called 'Mainstream Americans' say their views are closer to the Tea Party. On virtually all issues, Republicans are trusted by the electorate more than Democrats, in many cases by double digits. Other evidence suggests that these polls are recording distrust rather than trust. The level of anger and fear in the country is like nothing I can recall in my lifetime. And since the Democrats are in power, the revulsion over the current social-economic-political world attaches to them.

Unfortunately, these attitudes are understandable. For over 30 years, real incomes for the majority of the population have stagnated or declined, social indicators have steadily deteriorated since the mid-1970s after closely tracking growth in earlier years, work hours and insecurity have increased along with debt. Wealth has accumulated, but into very few pockets, leading to probably record inequality. These are, in large part, consequences of the financialization of the economy since the 1970s and the corresponding hollowing out of domestic production. What people see before their eyes is that the bankers who are primarily responsible for the current crisis and who were saved from bankruptcy by the public are now revelling in record profits and huge bonuses, while official unemployment stays at about 10 per cent and in manufacturing is at depression levels, one in six, with good jobs unlikely to return. People rightly want answers and they are not getting them, except from voices that tell tales that have some internal coherence, but only if you suspend disbelief and enter into their world of irrationality and deceit. Ridiculing Tea Party shenanigans is a serious error, I think. It would be far more appropriate to understand what lies behind them and to ask ourselves why justly angry people are being mobilized by the extreme right and not by forces like those that did so in my childhood, in the days of formation of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) and other constructive activism.

To take just one illustration of the operation of really existing market democracy, Obama's primary constituency was financial institutions, which have gained such dominance in the economy that their share of



corporate profits rose from a few per cent in the 1970s to almost one-third today. They preferred Obama to McCain and largely bought the election for him. They expected to be rewarded and were. But a few months ago, responding to rising public anger, Obama began to criticize the ‘greedy bankers’ who had been rescued by the public and even proposed some measures to constrain them. Punishment for his deviation was swift. The major banks announced prominently that they would shift funding to Republicans if Obama persisted with his offensive rhetoric.

Obama heard the message. Within days, he informed the business press that bankers are fine ‘guys’. He singled out for special praise the chairs of two leading beneficiaries of public largess, JP Morgan Chase and Goldman Sachs and assured the business world that, ‘I, like most of the American people, don’t begrudge people success or wealth’ – such as the bonuses and profits that are infuriating the public. ‘That’s part of the free market system,’ Obama continued, not inaccurately, as the concept ‘free market’ is interpreted in state capitalist doctrine.

This should not be a great surprise. That incorrigible radical Adam Smith, speaking of England, observed that the principal architects of power were the owners of the society, in his day the merchants and manufacturers, and they made sure that policy would attend scrupulously to their interests, however ‘grievous’ the impact on the people of England, and, worse, the victims of ‘the savage injustice of the Europeans’ abroad. British crimes in India were a primary concern of an old-fashioned conservative with moral values, a category that a Diogenes might search for today.

A modern and more sophisticated version of Smith’s maxim is political economist Thomas Ferguson’s ‘investment theory of politics’, which takes elections to be occasions when groups of investors coalesce to invest to control the state by selecting the architects of policies who will serve their interests. It turns out to be a very good predictor of policy over long periods. That should hardly be surprising. Concentrations of economic power will naturally seek to extend their sway over any political process. It happens to be extreme in the United States, as I mentioned.

There is much fevered discussion these days about whether, or when, the United States is going to lose its dominant position in global affairs to China and India, the rising world powers. There is an element of truth to these laments. But apart from misconceptions about debt, deficits and the actual state of China and India, the discussions are based on a serious misconception of the nature of power and its exercise. In scholarship and public discourse, it is common to take the actors in international affairs to



be states that pursue some mysterious goal called ‘the national interest’, divorced from the internal distribution of power. Adam Smith had a sharper eye and his radical truism provides a useful corrective. Bearing it in mind, we can see that there is indeed a global shift of power, though not the one that occupies centre stage: a further shift from the global workforce to transnational capital, sharply escalating during the neoliberal years. The cost is substantial, including working people in the United States, starving peasants in India and millions of protesting workers in China, where labour share in national income is declining even more rapidly than in most of the world.

Political economist Martin Hart-Landsberg observes that China does play a leading role in the real global shift of power, having become largely an assembly plant for a regional production system. Japan, Taiwan, and other advanced Asian economies export parts and components to China and provide most of the sophisticated technology. Chinese labour assembles it and exports it. To illustrate, a Sloan Foundation study estimated that for a \$150 iPod exported from China, about 3 percent of value added is by China, but it is counted as a Chinese export. Much concern has been aroused by the growing US trade deficit with China, but less noticed is the fact that the trade deficit with Japan and rest of Asia has sharply declined as the new regional production system takes shape. A *Wall Street Journal* report concluded that if value added were properly calculated, the real US-China trade deficit would decline by as much as 30 per cent, while the US trade deficit with Japan would rise by 25 per cent. US manufacturers are following the same course, providing parts and components for China to assemble and export, mostly back to the United States. For the financial institutions, retail giants, ownership and management of manufacturing industries and sectors closely related to this nexus of power, all of this is heavenly. Not for American workers, but as Smith pointed out, their fate is not the concern of the ‘principal architects of policy’.

It’s true that there is nothing fundamentally new in the process of deindustrialization. Owners and managers naturally seek the lowest labour costs; efforts to do otherwise, famously by Henry Ford, were struck down by the courts, so now it is a legal obligation. One means is shifting production. In earlier days, the shift was mostly internal, especially to the southern states, where labour could be more harshly repressed. Major corporations, like the US steel corporation of the sainted philanthropist Andrew Carnegie, could also profit from the new slave-labour force created by the criminalization of black life after the end of Reconstruction

in 1877, a core component of the American industrial revolution, continuing until World War Two. It is being reproduced in part during the recent neoliberal period, with the drug war used as a pretext to drive the superfluous population, mostly black, back to the prisons, also providing a new supply of prison labour in state or private prisons, much of it in violation of international labour conventions. For many African-Americans, since they were exported to the colonies, life has scarcely escaped the bonds of slavery, or sometimes worse. More recently the shift is mostly abroad.

Returning to the charges against ‘greedy bankers’, in fairness, we should concede that they have a valid defence. Their task is to maximize profit and market share; in fact, that’s their legal obligation. If they don’t do it, they’ll be replaced by someone who will. These are institutional facts, as are the inherent market inefficiencies that require them to ignore systemic risk: the likelihood that transactions they enter into will harm the economy generally. They know full well that these policies are likely to tank the economy, but these externalities, as they are called, are not their business, and cannot be, not because they are bad people, but for institutional reasons. It is also unfair to accuse them of ‘irrational exuberance’, to borrow Alan Greenspan’s brief recognition of reality during the artificial tech boom of the late 1990s. Their exuberance and risk taking was quite rational, in the knowledge that when it all collapses, they can flee to the shelter of the nanny state, clutching their copies of Hayek, Friedman and Rand. The government insurance policy is one of many perverse incentives that magnify the inherent market inefficiencies.

In brief, ignoring systemic risk is an inherent institutional property and perverse incentives are an application of Smith’s maxim. Again, no great insight.

After the latest disaster occurred, it has been agreed by leading economists that an ‘emerging consensus’ has developed ‘on the need for macroprudential supervision’ of financial markets, that is, ‘paying attention to the stability of the financial system as a whole and not just its individual parts’ (Barry Eichengreen, one of the most respected analysts and historians of the financial system). Two prominent international economists add that, ‘There is growing recognition that our financial system is running a doomsday cycle’. Whenever it fails, we rely on lax money and fiscal policies to bail it out. This response teaches the financial sector: take large gambles to get paid handsomely and don’t worry about the costs – they will be paid by taxpayers through bailouts and other devices and the financial system ‘is thus resurrected to gamble again – and to fail again’. The system is a ‘doom loop’, in the words of the official of

the Bank of England responsible for financial stability.

Basically the same logic applies elsewhere. A year ago, the business world recognized that the insurance companies and big Pharma, in sharp defiance of the public will, had succeeded in destroying the possibility of serious health reform – a very serious matter, not only for the people who suffer from the dysfunctional health system, but even on narrow economic grounds. About half of the deficit that we are instructed to deplore is attributable to unprecedented military expenditures, rising under Obama, and most of the rest to the increasing costs of the virtually unregulated privatized health care system, unique in the industrial world, also unique in its gifts to drug companies – opposed by a mere 85 per cent of the population. Last August, *Business Week* had a cover story celebrating the victory of the health insurance industries. Of course, no victory is enough, so they persisted in the struggle, gaining more, also against the will of the large majority of the public, another interesting story I'll have to put aside.

Observing this victory, the American Petroleum Institute, backed by the Chamber of Commerce and the other great business lobbies, announced that they are going to use the model of the health industry campaigns to intensify their massive propaganda efforts to convince the public to dismiss concerns about anthropogenic global warming. That has been done with great success; those who believe in this liberal hoax have reduced to barely a third of the population. The executives dedicated to this task know as well as the rest of us that the liberal hoax is real and the prospects grim. But they are fulfilling their institutional role. The fate of the species is an externality that they must ignore, to the extent that market systems prevail.

One of the clearest and most moving articulations of the public mood that I have seen was written by Joseph Andrew Stack, who crashed his small plane into an office building in Austin, Texas, a few weeks ago, committing suicide. He left a manifesto explaining his actions. It was mostly ridiculed, but it deserves much better, I think.

Stack's manifesto traces the life history that led him to this final desperate act. The story begins when he was a teenage student living on a pittance in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, near the heart of what was once a great industrial centre. His neighbour was a woman in her 80s, surviving on cat food, the 'widowed wife of a retired steel worker. Her husband had worked all his life in the steel mills of central Pennsylvania with promises from big business and the union that, for his 30 years of service, he would have a pension and medical care to look forward to in his retirement. Instead he was one of the thousands who got nothing because the incompetent mill management and corrupt union (not to mention the

government) raided their pension funds and stole their retirement. All she had was social security to live on' (quoting); and Stack could have added that there have been concerted and continuing efforts by the super rich and their political allies to take even that away on spurious grounds. Stack decided then that he couldn't trust big business and would strike out on his own, only to discover that he couldn't trust a government that cared nothing about people like him, but only about the rich and privileged, or a legal system in which, in his words, 'there are two "interpretations" for every law, one for the very rich and one for the rest of us'. Or a government that leaves us with 'the joke we call the American medical system, including the drug and insurance companies [that] are murdering tens of thousands of people a year', with care rationed largely by wealth, not need. All in a social order in which 'a handful of thugs and plunderers can commit unthinkable atrocities ... and when it's time for their gravy train to crash under the weight of their gluttony and overwhelming stupidity, the force of the full federal government has no difficulty coming to their aid within days if not hours'. And much more.

Stack tells us that his desperate final act was an effort to show that there are people willing to die for their freedom, in the hope of awakening others from their torpor. It wouldn't surprise me if he had in mind the premature death of the steel worker that taught him about the real world as a teenager. That steel worker didn't literally commit suicide after having been discarded to the trash heap, but it's far from an isolated case; we can add his and many similar cases to the colossal toll of the institutional crimes of state capitalism.

There are poignant studies of the indignation and rage of those who have been cast aside as the state-corporate programmes of financialization and deindustrialization have closed plants and destroyed families and communities. They reveal the sense of acute betrayal on the part of working people who believed they had fulfilled their duty to society in a moral compact with business and government, only to discover that they had been only instruments for profit and power, truisms from which they had been carefully protected by doctrinal institutions.

Reading Joe Stack's manifesto and a great deal more like it, I find myself recovering childhood memories and much more that I did not then understand. The Weimar Republic was the peak of western civilization in the sciences and the arts, also regarded as a model of democracy. Through the 1920s, the traditional liberal and conservative parties entered into inexorable decline, well before the process was intensified by the Great Depression. The coalition that elected General Hindenburg in 1925 was

not very different from the mass base that swept Hitler into office eight years later, compelling the aristocratic Hindenburg to select as chancellor the ‘little corporal’ he despised. As late as 1928, the Nazis had less than 3 per cent of the vote. Two years later, the most respectable Berlin press was lamenting the sight of the many millions in this ‘highly civilized country’ who had ‘given their vote to the commonest, hollowest and crudest charlatanism’. The public was becoming disgusted with the incessant wrangling of Weimar politics, the service of the traditional parties to powerful interests and their failure to deal with popular grievances. They were drawn to forces dedicated to upholding the greatness of the nation and defending it against invented threats in a revitalized, armed and unified state, marching to a glorious future, led by the charismatic figure who was carrying out ‘the will of eternal Providence, the Creator of the universe’, as he orated to the mesmerized masses. By May 1933, the Nazis had largely destroyed not only the traditional ruling parties, but even the huge working-class parties, the Social Democrats and Communists, along with their very powerful associations. The Nazis declared May Day 1933 to be a workers’ holiday, something the left parties had never been able to achieve. Many working people took part in the enormous patriotic demonstrations, with more than a million people at the heart of Red Berlin, joining farmers, artisans, shopkeepers, paramilitary forces, Christian organizations, athletic and riflery clubs, and the rest of the coalition that was taking shape as the centre collapsed. By the onset of the war, perhaps 90 per cent of Germans were marching with the brown shirts.

As I mentioned, I am just old enough to remember those chilling and ominous days of Germany’s descent from decency to Nazi barbarism, to borrow the words of the distinguished scholar of German history Fritz Stern. He tells us that he has the future of the United States in mind when he reviews ‘a historic process in which resentment against a disenchanting secular world found deliverance in the ecstatic escape of unreason’.

The world is too complex for history to repeat, but there are nevertheless lessons to keep in mind. There is no shortage of tasks for those who choose the vocation of critical intellectuals, whatever their station in life. They can seek to sweep away the mists of carefully contrived illusion and reveal the stark reality. They can become directly engaged in popular struggles, helping to organize the countless Joe Stacks who are destroying themselves and maybe the world and to join them in leading the way to a better future.