



FILHOS DE IMPÉRIO E PÓS-MEMÓRIAS EUROPEIAS
CHILDREN OF EMPIRES AND EUROPEAN POSTMEMORIES
ENFANTS D'EMPIRES ET POSTMÉMOIRES EUROPÉENNES

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SILLY, SINISTER, SEASON: ON “THE RESPONSIBILITY OF INTELLECTUALS” (I)

Paulo de Medeiros

*Mais où sont passées les îles
Ont-elles coulé sous la mer (1)*

Summer is always over too soon. This year, however, its literal end and accompanying metaphorical continuation were felt even more rashly due to the intensified attacks on European democracies and any sort of future for a united, peaceful, Europe. Many causes can be adduced, yet I would like to



focus on a single one for the moment: the inability of many Europeans to accept Europe's postimperial condition and their wilful failure of memory. If summer traditionally can be viewed as the "silly season" – as traditionally both politics as well as other key sectors of society get put on hold or slowed down and news, subsequently, tend to be reduced to more trivial levels – then this year the United Kingdom's Prime Minister has made sure silly season is continued, seemingly forever, but with sinister overtones, until the much-promised dénouement on All Hallow's Eve, when the United Kingdom, as if by a magical spell, would break its ties with the European Union, "[do or die](#)".

At other times, one likes to think, it would have been unthinkable for a stable, developed country, with a long tradition of democratic values and a firm belief in the rule of law, to see the moves that have followed such a promise, which sounds more like a threat and not just for those discontented with the current situation. For Mr Johnson has proceeded ruthlessly to quash any form of dissent within his own Conservative party as well as provoke what most refer to as a constitutional crisis. Indeed, forcibly proroguing, that is, suspending, Parliament for five weeks on the early hours of 10 September 2019, has led to accusations of a "coup" and brought on several forms of legal action, notably the law cases brought against the government before the High Court for England and Wales, the High Court for Northern Ireland, and the Court of Session in Edinburgh, Scotland's highest court. In the first two instances it the courts found the matter to be outside of their scope. In Scotland, however, the court ruled that the Prime Minister's action had been unlawful. The matter was thus sent for adjudication by the Supreme Court. In other words, Mr Johnson has successfully extended silly season in more than one sense, as parliamentarians were sent on forced vacation and prevented from discussing one of the most momentous decisions in the country's history, as well as from scrutinizing the actions of a government that, for all effects, seems hell-bent on enforcing its own will even if at the cost of dismantling the country and inflicting substantial economic damage.

This month of September also saw other, and different, events of course. One that stands in contrast to the government's disregard for democratic procedure – even as it claims to be pushing on the "people's will" – was the publication of a book by University College London' Press, with the title of [The Responsibility of Intellectuals: Reflections by Noam Chomsky and others after 50 years](#). Organised by several academics from that University after a colloquium to celebrate and discuss the renewed actuality of Chomsky's original essay from 1967, this important volume makes us all reflect on questions that though directly applicable to the situation I have just sketched, also transcend it. After all, the



whole affair surrounding Brexit could even be considered as a localised, minor one, in the face of other, far more alarming issues such as the catastrophic climate conditions we created, were not for the fact that it also ties up together in its fierce denials of reality, in its attempts to destroy all safeguards for workers, including environmental ones through massive deregulation, and in its attack on democratic principles. Chomsky's essay, first published in 1967, was a direct intervention on the then most pressing issue, the war in Vietnam waged by the United States. Many of its points not only have not lost any of their acuity but also have, if anything, become more relevant.

What is Chomsky's view on the responsibility of intellectuals? His point is crystal clear: "[IT IS THE RESPONSIBILITY of intellectuals to speak the truth and to expose lies](#)". At the same time, Chomsky also knows, and works on, that such a view is not as simple as it appears because often the truth is a completely illusive element that more often than not gets completely abused and perverted by those in power. He also further specifies, reflecting on an earlier essay by Dwight Macdonald, which served as the starting point for his own:

With respect to the responsibility of intellectuals, there are still other, equally disturbing questions. Intellectuals are in a position to expose the lies of governments, to analyze actions according to their causes and motives and often hidden intentions. In the Western world, at least, they have the power that comes from political liberty, from access to information and freedom of expression. For a privileged minority, Western democracy provides the leisure, the facilities, and the training to seek the truth lying hidden behind the veil of distortion and misrepresentation, ideology and class interest, through which the events of current history are presented to us. The responsibilities of intellectuals, then, are much deeper than what Macdonald calls the "[responsibility of people](#)," given the unique privileges that intellectuals enjoy.

In this new book reflecting on Chomsky's 1967 essay, Neil Smith and Ahmal Smith refer to what they consider a "sardonic" classification by Chomsky of two types of intellectuals: "The contrast is between 'technocratic and policy-oriented intellectuals' (the 'good guys', in the eyes of the establishment, who merely serve external power) and the 'value-oriented intellectuals' (the 'bad guys', from an establishment perspective, who engage in critical analysis and 'delegitimation')" (2). This is not just a different reiteration of the important distinction made by Gramsci between traditional and organic intellectuals. Indeed, if anything, in a world such as today's where even seemingly stable concepts such



as “working-class” appear more blurred, the division between “technocratic” and “value-oriented” intellectuals might be more analytically useful. Yet, it too is not necessarily self-explanatory. In his comments on Smith and Smith’s essay, Chomsky both explains where he derived the distinction from and provides important context. His comments must be cited in full:

My description was indeed sardonic, but I cannot claim originality for the characterisation of the two categories of intellectuals, which in the original was anything but sardonic. It was dead serious, a fact of no slight importance and with considerable bearing on RI. I was quoting from a revealing document, the first – and I think most significant – publication of the Trilateral Commission, *The Crisis of Democracy* (3). The Commission consisted largely of liberal internationalists from the three centres of capitalist democracy: the US, Europe and Japan. Its general political orientation is illustrated by the fact that almost the entirety of the Carter administration – indeed Carter himself – was drawn from its ranks. The report of the Commission praises the “technocratic and policy-oriented intellectuals” as serious and honourable, fulfilling their responsibilities to design and implement policy soberly and responsibly (one concept of RI). It sharply criticises the “value-oriented intellectuals” who see their responsibility differently. In the eyes of the Commission, such intellectuals are sentimental and emotional (or with more insidious designs). They promote disorder and corrupt the youth, helping bring about the “crisis of democracy” (4).

Perhaps another way of seeing it would be to note that whereas “technocratic” intellectuals would constitute the necessary enablers of power, “value-oriented” intellectuals would be foremost engaged in a critique of power. This is a distinction also echoed by Jackie Walker, who draws on Chomsky to reflect on the current situation in the United Kingdom and especially when it comes to questions of racism from her position as a black, Jewish, woman. As she notes, “As the UK moves towards an unknown post-Brexit situation, pressure to get closer to Uncle Sam will increase, whoever its president is, however crazed he may seem. Attacks on minorities are increasing and Chomsky’s assertion that intellectuals have a responsibility to speak truth feels ever more like a clarion call, whatever the colour of our skin” (5). This is a question to be discussed subsequently. For the moment I would just like to refer to two recent incidents that, I would argue, amply, and tragically, highlight the political situation with a denial of the United Kingdom’s – and with it, of Europe’s – postimperial condition.



The first of these situations I would like to mention here is the recent decision to use the imagery of empire to suggest how Great Britain would flourish after leaving the European Union in a government sponsored campaign. Here is a brief description in the article about it published by [The Guardian](#): "The advertisement by the Department for Transport features ships such as fluyts, the East Indiaman and the steamship, which were used between the 16th and 19th centuries to establish the British Empire, transport slaves and indentured labourers across the Atlantic and bring hauls of valuable goods to Britain". Kim Wagner, a historian with Queen Mary, University of London, draws the [logical inference](#): "This is what happens when the historical memory is limited to a narrative in which we simply abolished slavery – it is remarkably tone-deaf, never mind historically illiterate".

The second is the continuing effort by the Home Office to have immigrants leave the United Kingdom by the use of a panoply of means that should raise grave concern and that have already had very costly and tragic consequences. I have [already reflected](#) briefly on the question of the so-called Windrush generation, and will want to return to it in more depth on another occasion still. But for now I want to refer to the practice of provoking people into committing self-deportation by extraordinary intimidation including the forceful confinement of fragile individuals in deportation centres. Amelia Gentleman, writing in [The Guardian](#) on 14 September 2019, makes very clear how high the cost of the Home Office's "hostile environment" is:

I found the scale of the misery devastating. One morning, I came into work to find 24 messages on my answerphone from desperate people, each convinced I could help. I wanted to cry at my desk when I opened a letter from the mother of a young woman who had arrived in Britain from Jamaica in 1974, aged one. In 2015, after being classified as an illegal immigrant and sent to Yarl's Wood detention centre, she had taken an overdose and died. "Without the time she spent in Yarl's Wood, which we understand was extremely unpleasant, and the threat of deportation, my daughter would be alive today," she wrote. The government had been aiming to bring down immigration at any cost, she continued. "One of the costs, as far as I am concerned, was my daughter's life".

There is ample reason to believe that the current situation in the UK, in which, to speak with Jackie Walker, "[w]e inhabit a world where politics increasingly appears like a fraud perpetrated by interest groups, backed by the power of an economic and political elite who control what is said and what you can say (...)", will not only be continued but exacerbated. Mr Johnson not only wrote to the Supreme Court and warned it that he considered his actions not to fall under the court's jurisdiction, but [several government sources](#) also indicated that although the government would abide by the Court's decision, Mr Johnson could suspend Parliament again.



In other words, respecting the rule of law has become something the government considers discretionary and arbitrary, depending on whether it suits its purposes and that though the judiciary might be respected in principle, still, in practice it might as well be seen as irrelevant. Coming from a country that is still a member of the European Union, and until recently was considered one of its main pillars, such moves constitute a threat not just to stability in the United Kingdom – especially when it comes to Northern Ireland of course – but also a direct threat to European democracy. Or, seen yet from another angle, Her Majesty's government at the moment is trying to extend silly season indefinitely, while making it increasingly sinister. The Supreme Court's ruling, announced on the morning of Tuesday, 24 September, that the Prime Minister's advice to the Queen to prorogue Parliament was unlawful and thus the suspension of Parliament was null and void could not be clearer and sharper and represents a [forceful form of resistance to the clear assault on democratic values](#). This is its concluding image, sober and majestic at once: "This means that when the Royal Commissioners walked into the House of Lords it was as if they walked in with a blank sheet of paper. The prorogation was also void and of no effect. Parliament has not been prorogued. This is the unanimous judgment of all 11 Justices" (6). Nonetheless, it is not cause for any less vigilance. In a sense, all seasons are turning silly at this rate and only one thing appears certain and that is that Winter is coming. The responsibility of intellectuals of speaking truth to power has never been clearer.

(1) Soha, 'Café Bleu', *D'ici et d'ailleurs*, Parlophone/Warner, 2008.

(2) 'Reflections on Chomsky's 'The Responsibility of Intellectuals' in *The Responsibility of Intellectuals: Reflections by Noam Chomsky and others after 50 years*, edited by Nicholas Allott, Chris Knight and Neil Smith (London: UCL Press, 2019), 8.

(3) Michel Crozier, Samuel Huntington and Joji Watanuki, *The Crisis of Democracy: Report on the Governability of Democracies to the Trilateral Commission* (New York: New York University Press, 1975).

(4) Noam Chomsky, 'Commentary on Smith and Smith', in *The Responsibility of Intellectuals: Reflections by Noam Chomsky and others after 50 years*, edited by Nicholas Allott, Chris Knight and Neil Smith (London: UCL Press, 2019), 76.

(5) Jackie Walker, "'I don't want no peace' – a black, Jewish activist's take on the responsibility of intellectuals' in *The Responsibility of Intellectuals: Reflections by Noam Chomsky and others after 50 years*, edited by Nicholas Allott, Chris Knight and Neil Smith (London: UCL Press, 2019), 27.

(6) See the official summary of the Supreme Court's verdict [here](#).



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