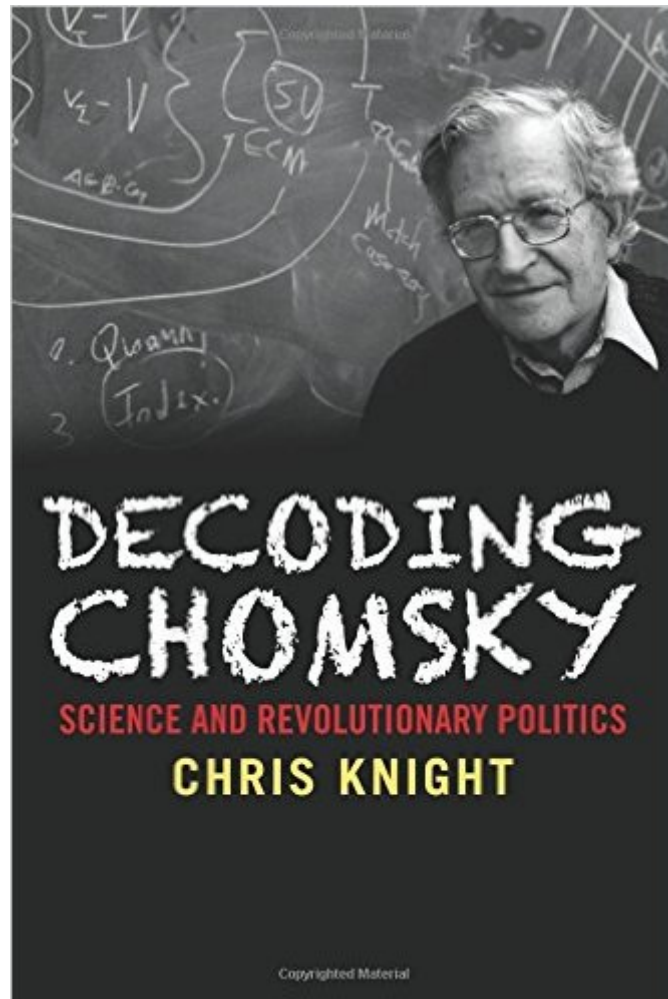


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Decoding Chomsky: Science And Revolutionary Politics



Synopsis

A fresh and fascinating look at the philosophies, politics, and intellectual legacy of one of the twentieth century's most influential and controversial minds. Occupying a pivotal position in postwar thought, Noam Chomsky is both the founder of modern linguistics and the world's most prominent political dissident. Chris Knight adopts an anthropologist's perspective on the twin output of this intellectual giant, acclaimed as much for his denunciations of US foreign policy as for his theories about language and mind. Knight explores the social and institutional context of Chomsky's thinking, showing how the tension between military funding and his role as linchpin of the political left pressured him to establish a disconnect between science on the one hand and politics on the other, deepening a split between mind and body characteristic of Western philosophy since the Enlightenment. Provocative, fearless, and engaging, this remarkable study explains the enigma of one of the greatest intellectuals of our time.

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Customer Reviews

It seems Noam Chomsky has been living a lie. He has twisted his whole being into separating his beliefs from his work. He worked for the Pentagon at MIT, while claiming nothing he produced could, would or should help them in their murderous quest. Because Noam Chomsky despises the Pentagon and the military-industrial complex. So to live within and from it, he created a new science out of whole cloth: universal, transformational and generative grammars, a wholly natural science, independent of "well, humanity. Totally divorced from everyday communication, his rules are purely scientific and abstract. As a whole, it makes no sense to anyone, unless you look at him as

having two brains. This is the essence of *Decoding Chomsky*, a totally engrossing roller coaster ride (Chris Knight's own term) to rationalize what Noam Chomsky has wrought. Chomsky singlehandedly caused a cognitive revolution, inspiring linguistics departments worldwide to include new directions in their teachings and research. And psychology, biology and sociology. That no one could actually make it work did not deter Chomsky. He became strident and critical, insisting he was right and everyone else just didn't get it. His (linguistics) books were incomprehensible "it wasn't just me. He defended them with bluster, vitriol and personal attacks. He attacked his own supporters as needed, as well as his inspirations and mentors. He changed history at will. Every decade he posited new, bizarre theories and said they could not be tested. You just had to accept them as he stated them. There was no possible explanation other than his. Because he was Noam Chomsky, the whole world bought in. I personally always had trouble with the linguistics side of Noam Chomsky, and I told him so. He told me not to worry "a lot of people did. I much prefer his political side, where he has opened eyes and minds to deeper meaning in current events, journalism and politics worldwide. For that, he is the most respected American in the world. Knight spends the entire book piling on evidence that Chomsky has the unique ability to split his brain into two diametrically opposed buffers: Pentagon science and social activism, separated by a firewall. But I don't need Knight's bizarre physiological theory. It's all very clear and consistent to me now. Chomsky actively misdirected and subverted the entire field of linguistics to delay its use by his military employers, and thereby remain true to himself. He screwed the Pentagon. He took their money, kept his job, and gave them nothing real to work with. The rest of us were just collateral damage. We paid the price for his personal mission. He manufactured consent by bullying. It is his own Command & Control program. Knight has been swept up by the madness. He takes the theories seriously. He spends endless pages refuting Chomsky and displaying plausible alternate scenarios. Not once does he employ the word "fraud". I think he is too close to it to see the nugget of truth at the center. Regardless, his book is riveting and revealing, and gives badly needed perspective to an American icon. And by the way, Noam Chomsky read this book prior to publication, and denies none of it. David Wineberg

I re-read anthropologist Christ Knight's riveting dissection of Chomsky after having listened to Tom Wolfe's hilarious but wrong-headed, take-down of same in his *Kingdom of Speech*. *Decoding Chomsky* is by far the better book, an authoritative, deeply thoughtful and very well written (if of course not nearly so zany) analysis of Chomsky's intellectual pretensions, evasions and contradictions. The actual story is just so much richer than even Wolfe imagines.

Knight's revelatory investigation helps me understand at last why for so many decades I could never make sense of Chomsky's various (and often contradictory) pronouncements about the evolution of language. Re-reading Knight, it occurred to me that Chomsky might have been deliberately subverting his military sponsors. But that's just too wildly implausible to be true! Or is it? I note that after reading Knight's book, David Wineberg (in the review above) comes to a similar conclusion. In any event, thanks and kudos to Chris Knight for shedding light on a hitherto incomprehensible tangle.

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